

Getting a Good Start to the School Year

It's that time of year again. With about nine months of school looming right around the corner, it's time to help your teen develop a plan for the academic year before everyone is busy with homework, tests, papers, sports, clubs, and, of course, a social life. So, take some time now while you can still catch your breath to have a discussion about goals, expectations, rules, and schedules.

The very fact that you will talk about goals with your teen is a good lesson because many teens operate naturally on a day-to-day basis and don't think much beyond what they are doing that night. You can help them start thinking ahead and planning how their actions today will influence them several months down the road. It's a good idea to get their ideas first before you outline yours. Questions you might ask include:

"What changes do you want to make this year in school about how and when you study?"

"What do you want to accomplish this year?"

"What activities do you want to pursue?"

"What grades do you want to achieve?"

"What do you think the rules should be about TV, computer, and telephone use?"

Listen first, consider your teen's opinions and suggestions, and then discuss your own. Whenever possible, compromise on issues that are negotiable. Be clear about your expectations about grades, homework completion, and study time, but make sure that they are realistic based on your teen's courseload and ability. Set up a structure about time for other activities like the TV and telephone, and make sure that the rules for computer use are understood.

Discuss priorities with your teen. While this will be an ongoing issue throughout the year, the beginning of school is a natural time to start the dialogue. Social events may seem crucial to your teen while the big test that week will be more important to you. Set up some guidelines in advance to help your teen manage time and decide what's important. For example, can your teen go to a party and still have enough time to study? Should he or she study first and then go, or is it necessary to skip the party altogether because there is a lot to learn for the test? Asking these kind of questions to help your child sort through priorities will help with developing good judgment and decision-making.

Delaying fun is hard for many adults but it is much harder for teens, so the more practice they have, the better off they will be.

The beginning of the school year is also a good time to be in touch with any teachers, guidance counselors, or administrators about any concerns so that a plan of action can be put into place before there are any problems. At the same time you can make sure that your teen knows who to go to in school if any problems arise. This is another instance of teaching your child to look ahead and deal with an issue early on when it is small instead of waiting until it becomes a crisis.

As the year progresses, set aside time for ongoing discussions about how the rules are working, what needs to be readjusted, what can stay the same, and whether goals are being met. Have these kinds of talks when there is uninterrupted time available, and when everyone is in a good mood. They should be done in the spirit of information-sharing and evaluation which will yield more cooperation than heavy-handed lectures. There are plenty of other times when you must 'lay down the law', but if you start off with this attitude, your teen is likely to get defensive and angry and you won't accomplish your task.

So, keep listening and observing, and adjust as you go along and you will be off to a good start that you and your teen can build on as the year progresses.

This information was adapted from materials that originally appeared on the Tips on Teens Web site authored by Susan Panzarine, PhD and Elaine Rubenstein, PhD, LCSW-C. Dr. Panzarine is the author of *A Parent's Guide to the Teen Years: Raising Your 11- to 14-year-old in the Age of Chat Rooms and Navel Rings*, published in 2000 by Checkmark Books. Dr. Rubenstein maintains an active private practice, working with teenagers and their families.

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