

Back to School!

A New School Year: Starting Off Healthy

As parents know, the beginning of a new school year requires a great deal of advance work, but there is more to it than buying new supplies and clothing. Preparing for students' health needs is an important part of the process.

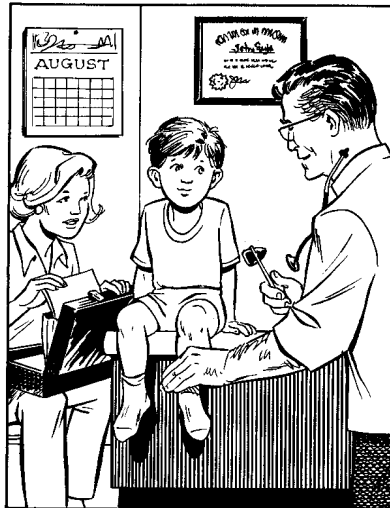
"Children need to feel their best in order to learn, and schools need to be able to provide for students' daily health issues as well as special needs, accidents and emergencies," says Louis Z. Cooper, MD, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). "So it is well worth the time it takes to make sure each child's health and medical requirements are anticipated and covered for the upcoming school year."

Most schools provide one or more health forms that need to be updated each year, and these are a good starting point for parents. They should be completed promptly. Of course, this may require scheduling a well-child visit with the family's pediatrician that includes any immunizations required for school entry, as well as a sport physical if one is needed.

Parents and pediatricians in some parts of the country have encountered shortages of certain vaccines. Fortunately, public health officials anticipate that the vast majority of these will be resolved in time for the start of school this year.

In case of accidents or crisis situations, emergency information must be kept up-to-date. Most schools provide appropriate forms for basic contact information. But some children have conditions and special needs that require additional communication with school health personnel. A form designed for this purpose is available at <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/blankform.pdf>

In addition, children with chronic illnesses may require a written, individual health plan that the school should follow, based on directions



from the child's parent and pediatrician. This will ensure that proper steps are taken if the child develops symptoms while at school, and that his or her activities are not restricted unnecessarily.

"Sometimes a child's health changes from one school year to the next, and these changes might affect his or her school day," says pediatrician Howard Taras, MD, chair of the AAP Committee on School Health. "It is important for parents and school staff to discuss any new medications, allergies or other concerns to be sure they agree on how these will be handled." Dr. Taras also reminds parents to ensure arrangements have been made on or before the first day of classes for the school to have in stock any medication the student needs.

Once the school bell rings on that first day of classes, children will be spending many hours each week "on campus." Discussing health issues before the start of the year helps children, parents and school staff to ensure students' health and safety all year long.

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Having a Safe School Year

As soon as children set out for school this year, whether by bus, on foot, or otherwise, they will encounter many potential dangers, both large and small. The nation's pediatricians advise parents to make a back-to-school safety plan with their children.

"The positive excitement about the start of the school year needs to be balanced by important safety messages," says Louis Cooper, MD, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). "From discomfort caused by overloaded backpacks to the threats of angry bullies, there are many things children should be reminded of before they go back to school. A little information and preparation can help kids to have happy and healthy first days at school."

AAP has the following tips for back-to-school safety:

Transportation:

- Find another child in the neighborhood with whom your youngster can walk to school or ride the bus.

- Review bus safety rules with your child: wait for the bus to stop before approaching the curb; do not move around on the bus; check for oncoming traffic before crossing; and avoid bending down in front of the bus to tie shoes, pick up objects, etc., as the driver may not see him or her before starting to move again.

- If your child is biking to school, review the school rules for bicycles, as well as safety precautions regarding traffic and strangers.

Security at School:

- If your child is anxious about whether he or she will be safe while at school, discuss with him or her the plans that have been established at your school to protect students' security, and to respond to emergencies and disasters.

Bullies:

- Arm your child with some strategies for coping with bullies: don't give in to the other child's demands, but simply walk away or tell the bully to stop.



- Don't cry or get upset, as bullies like nothing better.

- If a bullying situation persists and becomes a real problem, parents should talk to the teacher.

After School:

- Be sure your child knows where to go after school (e.g., home, babysitter), and how to get there.

- If your child will be at home alone after school, be sure he or she knows who will be responsible for him or her, what the rules are, and how to get help in an emergency.

Backpacks:

- Remind children to carry the minimum load in their backpacks, and to pack heavier items closer to the back. Packs should be picked up with knees bent, using the legs to lift. Both straps should be worn so weight is distributed evenly. As an alternative, wheeled backpacks can keep weight off the back altogether.

- The backpack should never weigh more than 10 to 20 percent of the student's total body weight.

The start of a new school year inspires a mixture of dread and anticipation in most children. Talking with them about their safety lets them know that everything possible is being done to ensure that they have a good year.