

Countdown to School Success

U.S. Department of Education

A **month-by-month** guide filled with the advice, tools, and online resources you'll need to help your children have a school year packed with fun and learning.

Join Us! Pledge to have your child read 20 minutes daily.

The start of school is the most exciting time of the year for students!

They want to meet their teachers, catch up with their friends, and begin exploring a whole new world of knowledge. As exciting as these first weeks of school are, your children can't do this on their own. They need your help to get ready—now and every day. You need to read aloud to young children to reinforce the importance of literacy. You have to be ready to help them when they're stuck on homework. You should make sure they have a nutritious lunch every day. You need to build relationships with their teachers so you're all working together to provide your children the best learning experience possible. Helping your children with school is one of your most important jobs as a parent. That's why the U.S. Department of Education, National PTA, and Parenting have teamed up to bring you *Countdown to School Success*. This booklet takes you step-by-step through the typical school-year calendar, explaining how you can help your children at home, support them in the classroom, and assist their teachers as they address each of your children's unique abilities. We hope your whole family enjoys following this road map to the exciting year ahead.

Arne Duncan

U.S. Secretary of Education

Betsy Landers

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September

1. **Reach out to your kids' teachers** Attend meet-the teacher night, orientation, or other welcome events, but don't stop there. Make a point of introducing yourself and learning about class activities and expectations for the year. Find out how each teacher prefers to communicate.

Many use e-mail as the main form of contact, but phone calls and conferences (make an appointment first) are usually welcome, too. For more advice on building a parent-teacher relationship that will last the entire year, as well as links to all the websites featured in this guide, go to parenting.com/success.

2. **Get in the groove** Establish healthy at-home routines for school days, such as consistent waking times and getting-ready patterns. Decide on a regular homework time, and create a comfortable, quiet work space. Set bedtimes that allow elementary-age kids to get 10 to 12 hours of sleep; teens should get 8½ to 9½ hours.

3. **Time things right** Stay on top of everyone's school, activity, and work schedules with a free online calendar or a smartphone app.
4. **Pack smart** Make sure your child's backpack never weighs more than 10 to 20 percent of his body weight; heavy packs can strain developing muscles and joints. Encourage your child to use both straps, and tighten them so the pack hangs close to the body, about two inches above your child's waist.
5. **Commit to volunteering** With help from parents like you, your school can offer many more programs and services for your kids. Join your school's PTA and ask about volunteer opportunities in the school community and your children's classrooms. National PTA's "Three for Me" campaign encourages parents to pledge to volunteer at least three hours during the school year. Go to three4me.com for more information.

October

1. **Fuel up** Children who eat a healthy breakfast each day have more energy available for learning. Try simple, protein-loaded options like homemade scrambled-egg-and-cheese breakfast burritos, waffles smeared with nut butter, or yogurt-and-fruit smoothies.
2. **Become a class parent** You'll develop a closer relationship with the teacher and will get an inside look into what goes on in the classroom, usually without having to commit a ton of time. Class parents organize other parent volunteers for parties and events, may help the teacher create a newsletter, or might document the school year in photos. Ask the teacher what his or her specific needs will likely be this year.
3. **Connect with your kids' teachers** Many schools schedule parent-teacher conferences in October and November. Attending this meeting should be a priority for all parents and guardians. This is your chance to see how things are going with your children and to partner with their teachers on improving performance. Ask: "What could we be doing at home to practice what they're learning?" National PTA has created grade by-grade Parent Guides that can be a resource for what to discuss at conferences. Find out more at pta.org/parentsguide.
4. **Seek extra help** Does it seem your child is going to have trouble keeping up? Ask the teacher about school-provided tutoring programs and resources to help reinforce his or her learning outside of class. Many also offer extra help during office hours before or after school.

November

1. **Review that report card** Pay careful attention to all progress reports, but particularly the first one—it will be coming soon if your child hasn't received it yet. You want to get help for any problem areas before your child falls too far behind. Ask your child's teacher how grades are determined and for suggestions on how your student can improve. Review grades and the teacher's comments with your child—always starting with something she's doing well, then pointing out areas that need attention, and ending with something positive again.
2. **Encourage creativity** Urge your children to enter the National PTA Reflections arts contest. They can submit works of art in six categories: visual arts (such as painting, drawing, or collage), literature, musical composition, photography, film production, and dance

choreography. This year's theme is “Diversity Means...” Contact your local PTA for additional details or go to pta.org.

3. **Make over your meals** November is National PTA's Healthy Lifestyles Month, so think carefully about what your kids are eating at home and in school. Ask your school lunch director for nutritional information if it isn't available. Work with your PTA and school district to improve the menu if necessary. For more healthy eating and lunch-packing tips, go to pta.org/goodchoices and choosemyplate.gov/kids.
4. **Be a good citizen** Your child will be learning about the importance of voting and how elections work, and she'll be thrilled to go with you when you cast your ballot on November 8. Go to free.ed.gov to learn more about how government works.
5. **Give thanks** This month's Thanksgiving holiday is the perfect time to talk with your children about all the freedoms the United States has to offer its citizens. Help your children explore what life was like here during the first Thanksgiving at the Library of Congress website: loc.gov/families.

December

1. **Get ready for flu season** Amp up the reminders about washing hands frequently—particularly when kids get home from school, sports, and other activities. Pay attention to school websites and newsletters for alerts about flu or other illness outbreaks. Check the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website (cdc.gov) for up-to-date information and the latest prevention advice. And be sure your family gets flu shots.
2. **Help end bullying** Take the time to talk with your children about any bullying behavior they may have seen going on at school. Before you begin the conversation, go to pta.org/bullying and stopbullying.gov to learn what you can do as a parent to instill an attitude of acceptance in your children and get help with bullying behavior if your family needs it.
3. **Remember the teacher** A simple holiday token is nice if you can swing it. Teachers particularly appreciate cards from their students, and gift cards for their favorite book, crafts, or office-supply stores. Teachers often replenish classroom supplies out of their own pay, so gift cards help cut the cost.
4. **Practice cyber safety** If your children will be spending more time online during the winter break, or if they get a new laptop or smartphone as a gift, be sure to review family rules and online behavior.

January

1. **Make a winter-weather plan** Have an advance plan for snow days or sick days. Can another family member or neighbor care for your kids while you work? Make sure you have a safety kit in case of power outages; have your children help assemble it so they get a lesson in emergency preparation, too. Get more tips at ready.gov.
2. **Be a meteorologist** Winter months are a great time to introduce budding minds to the science behind weather patterns and how to predict them. You'll find plenty of weather resources for kids in the “Earth Sciences” section of free.ed.gov.

3. **Dream big** Celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day on January 16 by encouraging your kids to complete the sentence “I have a dream that...” and then e-mail, tweet, or post on Facebook their own hopes for the future.

February

1. **Connect with other families** National PTA's Take Your Family to School Week is February 12 to 18. Help out at events such as family reading night, parenting workshops, or educational family activities. National PTA offers grants to help fund especially deserving school programs. Help your school apply for next year at pta.org/familytoschool.
2. **Celebrate African American History Month** Your school, local museums, and libraries will have special events. You and your children can also go to africanamerican historymonth.gov for online exhibits and activities.
3. **Honor Presidents' Day** Search online for activities you can do with your kids, such as matching presidential portraits with their names or doing word searches about them. Older students will enjoy learning about the four presidents carved into Mount Rushmore at nps.gov/moru.
4. **Schedule a midyear check-in with the teacher** Discuss your children's progress and how homework is going. And always reach out to teachers when important changes are happening in your family's life, such as the death of a relative, a move to a new home, or anything that might affect your children's behavior or performance at school—so the school staff can offer support as well.

March

1. **Get ready for test day** Many schools will begin standardized testing this month or next. Make a note of the schedule on your family calendar so you can be sure your children get a good night's sleep and eat a healthy breakfast on test days.
2. **Read some more** National Read Across America Day is March 2. Take time at home to read aloud on this day with your kids, and have them take turns reading to you. Encourage older children to read on their own and to their younger siblings. Anything that interests them—from comic books to the classics—counts! And if you haven't taken the pledge to have your kids read at least 20 minutes a day, go to parenting.com/pledge and make the promise now!
3. **Get art smart** Exposure to art and music can help your children excel in math, problem solving, and reading, and help them develop teamwork skills and self-esteem. Check out the resources on free.ed.gov, and then do your part at home. Replenish your arts-and-crafts supplies. Let your kids experiment with inexpensive music-makers like a harmonica, a recorder, or an old guitar. Check out child-friendly music CDs and art books from your library. Urge older siblings to join their school's choir, band, or drama program.
4. **Plant a school garden** Kids learn firsthand about weather, plant life cycles, and nutrition when they help grow their own garden. Get started at schoolgardenwizard.org.

April

1. **Get schooled in math** April is Math Awareness Month. Ask your children's teachers for suggestions on math games and online activities. Another resource: Check out the website of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics: nctm.org/resources/families.aspx.
2. **Go a little greener** Commemorate Earth Day on April 22 by planning an activity for your entire family, such as joining a local park's litter-cleanup team or planting a tree on your block. Check out your school-district website to see what they have on tap for students and their families.
3. **Share your career** Lots of parents and kids will participate in Take Your Child to Work Day on April 26, but why not teach your child's entire class about your job? Offer to visit and talk about your career, and encourage other parents in the class to do the same.
4. **Thank your school staff** These overlooked helpers are often the ones who keep things working smoothly for your children, so take time to recognize school office staff during the week of April 22 to 28, which is Administrative Professionals Week. Join with other parents to give a gift card or flowers, or have your kids make a card of their own.

May

1. **Get a move on** It's National Physical Fitness & Sports Month, and your child may soon be taking the annual President's Challenge physical fitness test as part of gym class. Prep your child for it—as well as your school's field day, a favorite spring event with kids everywhere—with some family recreation activities. Take walks after dinner, go on a weekend bike ride, or have chin-up contests on the monkey bars at a nearby playground. For more fitness ideas, check out letsmove.gov, fitness.gov, and presidentschallenge.org.
2. **Keep kids safe** The weather has warmed up and school's almost out for the summer, which means kids will be spending more time outdoors on their own. Give them a refresher course in safety whether they're bike riding, swimming, or playing indoors on game systems. For more tips, go to pta.org and click on “Topics: Child Safety.”
3. **Give props to your children's teachers** As the school year winds down, encourage your children to write thank-you notes to their current teachers. Prompt younger kids with suggestions like “Something new I learned this year was...” or “My favorite part of this school year was....” Work with your PTA to bring in coffee, baked goods, or lunch items during Teacher Appreciation Week, May 7 to 11.

June

1. **Challenge your children to a readathon** See who can read the most books this summer, with each one slightly more challenging than the last. Make it happen by setting a designated family reading time, when the whole gang curls up with a good book, parents included.
2. **Minimize summer brain drain** Look for fun ways to keep your children's academic skills sharp during the warm weather ahead. Consider signing them up for camps, and visit nature centers, museums, and libraries as a family.

Source: <https://www.ed.gov/parents/countdown-success>