Getting Ready for the First Day of School  
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School age children all around the country are preparing for the first day of school. Some children are entering school for the first time or are moving to another school. The first day jitters can be hard on children. The American Academy of Pediatrics has some health and safety back to school suggestions that can be helpful.

When choosing a backpack for your child, be sure it has wide, padded shoulder straps. Heavier items should be packed in the center of the backpack and the total weight should not be more than 10% – 20% of the child’s body weight. For example, if your child weighs 50 pounds, their backpack weight should be no more than 5 to 10 pounds. Heavy backpacks can strain shoulder muscles and cause the spine to curve. Backpacks should be worn over both shoulders and not just slung over one.

Obesity is an increasing concern for our children these days. Watch for menus to be sent home by your child’s school. If your child takes their lunch to school or they choose to eat the school’s lunch, be sure the meal is healthy and contains many fresh fruits, low-fat dairy products, water and 100% fruit juice. Vending machines should be stocked with appropriate healthy choices. Teach your child to read labels and encourage them to choose healthy options. Did you know that one can of soft drink contains as much as 10 teaspoons of sugar and approximately 150 calories? Drinking one soft drink a day can increase your child’s chance of obesity by 60%! Encourage your child to choose low-fat milk, 100% juice, or water as an alternative. Model this behavior for your child and watch how they follow your lead.

Transportation to and from school is a great issue for many families. The choice of riding the bus, walking to school, riding a bicycle, or riding in a car is a decision each family will have to make. Whatever mode of transportation is best for your family, be sure to observe some safety guidelines.

Teach your children that if they are riding the bus, to wait for the bus to completely stop before entering the street. Always be sure your child can see the driver so the driver can see them. Review your schools safety rules that apply to the bus ride with your child.

Walking to school provides a great opportunity to add extra exercise into your day. If your child is walking to school, do they have a walking buddy or do you walk them? Is the route to school and back home safe? Are there adult crossing guards? Be sure your child has bright colored clothing or coats so motorists can see them clearly. Some school systems have identified safe routes to school. To find out more about the Safe Routes program and if your school is participating, visit their website, at: http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/.

Your child may ride their bicycle to school and, if so, a helmet is a must! Teach your child they are to ride on the same side of the street as the cars are traveling. Children must be taught the hand signals when riding a bicycle in order for drivers in vehicles to know when the child is turning or changing direction. Bicycle riders must obey all traffic signs and signals.

If children are traveling to school in a car, seat belts must be worn. In Kentucky, that is the law for any passenger in a moving vehicle. Your child may still require a booster seat if they do not meet certain guidelines. Many children in elementary school should still be in a booster seat due to their weight and
height. The shoulder strap should lie across the chest and shoulders, not the neck or throat. The lap belt should be snug and over the thighs and not the stomach and the child should be tall enough to sit in the back seat with their back against the seat with legs bent and feet hanging down. All children less than 13 years old should sit in the rear seat of all vehicles. To learn more, see our article about Kentucky’s booster seat law at: http://www.wku.edu/ccrr-wku/heathsafety.htm

These are just a few health and safety tips to get you prepared for that first day of school, whether it is truly the first day of kindergarten or the first day of fifth grade. Keep your child healthy and safe and the school year will be a good one!

For more information on back to school tips, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics at www.aap.org.

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