

Back-to-school health checklist

To help your child get a smart start on the academic year, send them back to school in tip-top health

Immunizations

Be sure to schedule an annual well-child exam and review any missed or new immunizations. The American Academy of Pediatrics website (aap.org) explains childhood vaccinations, advising which ones are needed at what age. All children attending school in Alaska, including preschool, must be immunized against certain diseases. For specific immunization information in Alaska, visit epi.alaska.gov/id/immune.stm.

Vision tests

As much as 80 percent of learning is visual, so ensuring children can see properly will help them reach their full potential in the classroom. And while eyesight plays an essential role in learning, many children have a vision problem and aren't aware of it (such as eye coordination, lazy eye, and near or farsightedness). Have your child's vision tested before he starts kindergarten (ideally by age 3) and annually until age 18. Invest in one-piece wrap-around polycarbonate sports frames for protection if your child will participate in contact sports.

Hearing/Speech screening

If you suspect your child may have a hearing or speech problem, check with your doctor for a referral to an audiologist and/or speech specialist. An undetected problem could interfere with your child's learning.

Dental checkup

More than 40 percent of kids have some form of tooth decay by the time they start kindergarten, according to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. Regular dental checkups should begin by age 3. A yearly checkup before school starts is a good way to detect and prevent dental problems.

Medication & health conditions

Make sure the school has up-to-date information about any physical impairments or medical conditions your child may have (asthma, allergies, etc.). Does your child take medicines on a regular basis for a chronic problem? If so, be sure to tell the school nurse and his teacher about any ongoing health problems, especially if they're the people who will need to administer the medicine. Speak with them before school begins and create an emergency action plan in case of a problem.

Emergency contacts

Make sure the school has up-to-date emergency numbers, including contact information for parents, physicians, etc. If you move, or change or add a number, update the school's records the next day.

Back on sleep track

For many kids, going back to school also means earlier bedtimes and earlier mornings. Start gradually easing into an earlier bed time and an earlier wake-up time – even just 10 minutes earlier each night – one to two weeks before school starts to have kids rested and ready to go on the first school morning. (To be at their best, preschoolers typically need about 11 to 13 hours of sleep a night, kids up to 12 years old need 10 to 11 hours, and teens need about 8.5 to 9.25 hours, according to the National Sleep Foundation.)

Plan healthy meals

Give your children the fuel to make it through the day with healthy and balanced meals. At home, keep quick, healthy options on hand to ensure breakfast time goes smoothly. If you pack your child's lunch, make sure to use whole grain bread for sandwiches, lean meats like turkey and easy-to-carry veggies and fruits.

Backpack basics

Avoid strapping a jumbo backpack on your child. American Academy of Pediatrics currently recommends that children's backpacks weigh no more than 10 to 20 percent of their body weight, to reduce the chance of back pain or injury. Make sure the backpack has wide straps for support and that your child puts the pack over both shoulders.

Reduce first-day anxiety

Many kids, especially those entering school for the first time and those switching schools, experience some anxiety about the first day of school. Parents can help ease this by talking about what to expect on the first day. Attend an open house or take a tour of the school prior to the first day to add familiarity to what's to come. Remind your child that he is not the only student who is uneasy about the first day of school. Give your child the first few weeks of school to settle in. If worries aren't gradually decreasing, or they are interfering with other areas of life (such as a sudden clinginess, trouble sleeping, etc.), talk to your child's teacher, family doctor or a mental health professional.

