

Get ready for the new year

Parents, schools can help with the transition

By Jeanné McCartin

It's August, the height of the heat, days at the beach, and looming school days.

Kids will return to school in weeks, many earlier than usual, and others for the first time. It's hard to think knee-highs, notebooks and eye tests, but now is the time if you want to help your child ease into the school year stress free and confident.

For first-time students, or kids heading to a new school, "It can feel like a black hole," says Bob Pavlik, Families First parent group facilitator. "And there's a lot of anxiety on the parent side."

"What I'd like most parents to know is schools are really good at handling this now, especially (for) kindergarten and preschool when there's a lot of anxiety. The teachers are really in tune to what the kids need."

Today, teachers strive to create safe, comfortable environments, and a class community and find and work with a child's strength. But there are things parents can do to help the child adjust to school, or return after a few months of freedom.

Familiarizing a child with the new environment helps alleviate anxiety, Pavlik says. Contact the school and see if there are open house summer events. If not, ask to take your child for a tour and, if possible, meet the teacher before opening day.

It's likely there's a playground on the property of early grades. Visit it with younger children. It certainly helps plant a positive association.

An older child might like checking the school out on its Web site.

Communication with a child is paramount, Pavlik says. Discuss the coming

school year in a positive and casual manner. Really listen to what a child has to say and help him or her work through any anxiety.

"Ask (young ones) 'what do you think it will be like' or 'what colors do you think the walls are?' Just make sure the process is going on, but not constant."

Younger children may have difficulty discerning time and worry about when school actually starts, Pavlik says. "You can help them be better prepared by counting down days with some sort of visual cue," he says.

Simply mark off days on a calendar, or blow up a week's worth of numbered balloons and pop one daily till school starts. "It builds excitement and prepares them."

"Parents know their kids better than anyone else, so just be in tune with your kids' needs. That might mean talking about how they feel, and it might mean just observing

and getting a handle on their strengths."

Begin transitioning all ages into the school routine weeks before they occur.

"Many kids don't do well with change, so if you can make it gradual and as minimal as possible it will encourage success."

Serve snacks and meals at "school times." Institute school-season wake-up and sleep hours. You can start with just a few days a week, graduating to the full switch before it is necessary.

Once school starts be mindful of changes. If your child seems upset, check in; it could be the bus ride, or a sense of being overwhelmed. Communication is key.

Children, of all ages are often tired the first few days or weeks of school. Consider quiet times or adjust sleep patterns, he says. "And try to help them enjoy the process as much as possible."

There is also the physical to tend to, buying clothes, school supplies and, in some cases, getting a health check.

Many adults still carry memories of the "annual" shots. We'd get all scrubbed up, head to the doctors, say ahh and take a few to the arm.

It doesn't work that way today, says Capucine Lyons, Families First's well-child coordinator. There are still requirements, but the schedule is very different, and the late summer ritual is all but gone.

"It depends on a child's last visit now," she says. "If they went in March, that's when they go."

Furthermore, by the time they're in school many of the requirements are met.

The state of New Hampshire requirements are two doses of chicken pox vaccination, the MMR "or measles, mumps and rubella,

two doses," she says. The child has generally received these at age 1 and 4.

The diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis vaccine is most often received the first year of life. The Tdap, for tetanus, a continuation of the DTap, is given once every 10 years.

Polio shots are administered at six months and age 4, "or when they go to kindergarten, generally at 5," says Lyons. "Not all kids come in for their fourth-year appointment."

Hepatitis B is also given by six months.

"So many vaccinations are given as babies. So by the time kids go to school they've pretty much had them all except the DTap," she says. "But there are others, not required by law, but highly recommended."

These include a vaccine for Hepatitis A and the MCV4, or meningococcal conjugate vaccine, at age 11 or 12 for meningitis and to some extent pneumonia.

"The reason we give it to them - one dose at 11 and again at the end of high school 17 to 19, is that meningitis is easily spread through saliva," says Lyons. "When it hits a school it can hit a lot of kids at one time and it can be fatal. When there's an outbreak, it can be very serious."

The CDC recommend the HPV or human papillomavirus vaccine for teens. "It protects boys and girls from the herpes virus."

"The important thing about this is it's the only vaccine that essentially prevents cancer: ... Can you catch cancer? It's common knowledge you can't - but for this. This one does start with a virus."

Women exposed to the virus can develop cervical cancer and both sexes are at risk for anal and other forms.

Beyond the shots it's always wise to consider a child's eyesight and hearing. If

they've illustrated signs of change - sitting too close to the TV, headaches, holding books too close for example, it's advisable to have them checked before classes start.

Finally, be sure to inform the school if a child has any special medical issues or needs.

"Tell the school about any chronic health condition, asthma, diabetes, food allergies, if they take meds during school hours. They need to know," Lyons says. "There are protocols in place to help the child."

Finally create a supportive, encouraging home environment, Lyons says. "I think it adds richness to the whole classroom experience."

