

Send 'em back healthy

Clothes and supplies aren't kids' only needs for returning to school

BY ANNE BURKLEY • For The Patriot-News

It's early August, and that means it's time to start preparing for a new school year. Kids and parents alike tend to focus primarily on shopping for new clothes, notebooks and folders, but local experts say that the most important thing parents can send their children back to school with is health.

"Your emotional and physical health allow you to achieve the greatest part of your potential," said Dr. Sandra Ratliff, pediatrician with JDC Pediatrics in Mechanicsburg.

Families can get a healthy start to a new school year by focusing on these five areas:

Physical exams and immunizations

It's not just a good idea to have a wellness check and physical exam before the new school year, for certain grades it's the law. Children are required to get a physical before the start of kindergarten, sixth and 11th grades and a dental exam is required before kindergarten, third and seventh grades.

A physical exam and wellness check before kindergarten is required by law for several reasons. It reassures parents and educators that all immunizations are in place for school. This exam also helps identify any disability, whether it's a chronic disease or a language delay, that would require the school to provide special care or services.

"The 11- and 12-year-old range is a good time to evaluate for a number of physical things as well as emotional issues," Ratliff said. Immunizations are scheduled to coordinate with this exam. A physical before 11th grade could detect the start of adult diseases such as hypertension and kidney disease.

This year, parents need to be aware of changes in the immunization schedule, said Kathy Pollock, health services coordinator for Cumberland Valley School District. For attendance in all grades in 2011, children will be required to have a second dose of the chickenpox vaccine. Additionally, students entering seventh grade will need a tetanus booster if it's been five years since the last tetanus shot and a meningitis vaccination.

If parents haven't done so already, they should send in forms requesting student health updates and emergency contact information.

Emotional health

Going back to school can be a time of great anxiety for children and teens. Parents can unwittingly contribute to this anxiety by waiting until the last minute to shop for supplies, not re-establishing school-time routines and even by down-

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playing children's feelings.

"Don't worry about it," is one of the worst things you can say," said Dr. David Lillenstein, director of psychological services for Derry Twp. School District.

"As a parent it's really important that we listen to them, because we are part of the solution," he said. Instead of saying that there is nothing to worry about, parents should remain calm and positive and listen to their child's concerns and reinforce their ability to use successful coping strategies and handle stress.

"If a child had a hard time in the past, remind them how they overcame it," Lillenstein said.

To lower back-to-school related stress, parents can do several things to ease the transition. Purchase supplies ahead of time, go over schedules, re-establish sleep and waking routines in advance and talk to children to see how they are feeling. Take advantage of school open houses so that kids can see where their classes will be located, meet the teachers and talk with other students.

Healthy lifestyle

Parents should encourage and model healthy eating, exercise habits and appropriate behavior.

"An unhealthy child cannot learn," Pollock said. Eating a nutritious diet does much more than keep weight in check, it allows the body and mind to operate at peak performance.

One of the best ways to teach healthy habits is to

New immunization requirements

TO ENTER SCHOOL, children in all grades need:

- 4 doses of tetanus (1 dose on or after fourth birthday)
- 4 doses of diphtheria (1 dose on or after fourth birthday)
- 3 doses of polio
- 2 doses of measles
- 2 doses of mumps
- 1 dose of rubella
- 3 doses of hepatitis B
- 2 doses of varicella vaccine or history of disease

CHILDREN ENTERING SEVENTH GRADE also must have:

- 1 dose of tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis (Tdap) (if 5 years has elapsed since last tetanus immunization)
- 1 dose of meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV)

SOURCE: Pennsylvania Department of Health

live them. Kids who see their parents eating healthy and being active are more likely to value those things. Likewise, parents who model positive thinking, tolerance, respect and appropriate ways to deal with stress and express feelings are more likely to see their kids behave accordingly.

And it starts with a good breakfast. According to the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, which summarized the results of 47 studies examining the association between breakfast, academic performance, body weight and nutritional adequacy, "Evidence suggests that breakfast consumption may improve cognitive function related to memory, test grades, and school attendance."

Morning shouldn't be overlooked as a good time to spend together as a family, Ratliff said. Often, it's the one time of the day that everyone is in the house at the same time. Set the alarm 20 minutes early and

eat breakfast together. It's a great time to catch up and share plans for the day.

A good night's sleep

Lack of sleep does more than make kids grumpy, it has been shown to have a negative impact on both learning and behavior. Studies have linked sleep deprivation in school-age children and teens to being overweight, depressed and to exhibiting disruptive behavior, such as bullying.

"Sleep can have a significant impact on your ability to concentrate and on grades as well," Ratliff said. She said kids ages 5 to 12 need 10 to 12 hours of sleep per night and that teens need eight to 10 hours per night or more.

No matter what a child's age is, cutting caffeine intake throughout the day and limiting the use of electronics before bedtime will help promote better sleep. Parents should help children establish a routine

leading up to a set bedtime. Be sure that bedrooms are free of electronics and are cool, quiet and dark.

Good hygiene

Wash your hands, don't pick your nose, keep your hands away from your eyes and cover your mouth when you cough. These are the first hygiene habits taught to kids and they really have an impact on health. Proper hand washing — lather for at least 15 seconds — is one of the most effective ways to stop the spread of germs.

Most children know they shouldn't share silverware, drinks or makeup, but also teach them not to share hats, combs and brushes, which can spread lice.

"Trust me," Pollock said, "no parent wants the lice call."

Personal hygiene habits — showering, brushing teeth, using deodorant, wearing clean clothes and being well-groomed (even if the desired result is to look un-groomed!) are as important as the basics. Parents need to provide guidance in this area, Pollock said. If a child is practicing proper hygiene, but still perspires heavily, or takes good care of their skin but cannot control acne, a medical problem may be to blame.

As children ease back into the school year, reinforce their success, Lillenstein said. If they were nervous, point out the specific strategies that helped them cope. Also, it never hurts to give them heartfelt reminders that they are valued. "We leave notes in our daughter's lunch bag," Lillenstein said. It is a nice way to let a child know that they are important and accepted at home.