



the smart mom's back-to-school survival guide

make this your year to master the kids' schedules & conquer paper pileups.

When fall rolls around with its hectic school (and after-school) schedules, just getting out the door on time can feel like an Olympic event. So how do you keep up? It all starts with a great coach—you!

SET UP COMMAND CENTRAL Start by setting up a family communications center in a highly visible place, such as the kitchen or entryway. It can be as simple as a calendar that notes every vacation day, half day of classes, and teacher-workshop day. Add commitments such as music lessons, volunteer activities, soccer practices, and orthodontist appointments. Use pens color-coded for each family member, if necessary. Hang the calendar on your fridge with magnetized clips or find room for it on a bulletin board.

Kelly Canady of Aiken, South Carolina, uses three calendars to stay

in the know: a monthly dry-erase board, an electronic version on her computer, and a paper planner she updates every morning before work. Together, they help her track appointments for herself, her husband, and their sons—ages 12 and 13—whether she's at home, at the office, or somewhere in between.

A week-at-a-glance dry-erase board is the tool of choice for Clare Mallen of Lake Park, Florida. "Every Sunday night we write down everybody's activities for the week," she says. "It's perfect, and everybody can look at it."

PUT PAPER IN ITS PLACE Don't let something as simple as paper be your undoing. Arm yourself with folders, baskets, and bins to organize the weekly pileup. Color-code file folders or slots in an accordion file, labeling them by family member or activity (such as scouts, soccer, or youth group). Also keep a separate file for each child for frequently requested information such as immunization records, physician phone numbers, medical details, and emergency contacts.

Mallen assigns each of her three children, ages 6 to 14, a magnetized clip on the refrigerator door. Her kids

Get binders and file folders ready to catch—and organize—the waves of school and activity schedules; they'll make information easy to find.

use the clips to collect and post everything from T-ball schedules and field-trip slips to school menus and party invitations.

ESTABLISH NIGHTLY ROUTINES Go through your kids' backpacks every night to make sure nothing important is missed; older children can do this for themselves. Designate a spot for forms that require immediate attention and for lunch money.

Before bed, make sure clothes are laid out for the next day to prevent last-minute laundry crises (such as a child wearing a hamper-rumpled shirt because "nothing I like is clean!"). Ask kids to put backpacks, instruments, science projects, and other items they'll need in a convenient holding area so everything is easy to find and ready to go out the door in the morning.

Preparing for the next day—and making that preparation part of your family's nightly routine—goes beyond avoiding the morning rat race. It sets the stage for a good day, a calmer evening, and a more successful school year. ■

