

FAMILY MATTERS

Answers to your questions . . .

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

Celebrating Focus on the Family Bulletin's 30th Anniversary!

We have four children—and we try so hard to treat each child exactly the same. But I don't think I'm doing a good job of it. Do you have any advice for parents of big families like ours?

ANSWER:

Yes—stop doing what you're doing. You can't treat each child exactly the same way. You need to treat each one differently.

I once listened to four adult siblings talk among themselves after the funeral of one of their parents. Each child eagerly recounted all that the deceased parent had done with him or her individually. Each had secretly thought his or her relationship with that parent was the most special in the family. All were shocked to discover that their brothers and sisters had the same thought. What a wonderful gift and legacy that parent left to each child!

There's no such thing as one-size-fits-all parenting, so don't even try. Every child is unique, and that means your relationship with each child is unique and uniquely suited to your personalities.

Some kids learn character best by verbal instruction; some learn by tactile involvement; others learn by seeing an example. Some are incredibly sensitive and need only an eyebrow raised in discipline (like our daughter Carmen, who would never even take an extra cookie out of the cookie jar without confessing to her mother). Others need a firmer approach (like her sister Morgan, who could be a poster child for Dr. Dobson's book *The Strong-Willed Child*).

Kids thrive on the special connections that grow from your unique relationship with them. When Hannah and Lauren were younger, I called them by their nicknames. Lauren was "my little muffin,"

and Hannah was "my little peanut." They ate up this "muffin" and "peanut" talk, because for each of them, it created a unique connection with me.

I must have gotten my food groups mixed up one day, though. In a disastrous slip of the tongue, I called Lauren "my little peanut" and Hannah "my little muffin." Boy, did they ever make me eat those words! I found out just how passionately they held to their special distinctions. In their minds, the mix-up was a great betrayal, like forgetting an anniversary or the details of a first date with a spouse.

To my kids, and to yours, those customized connections are markers of intimacy, so form them, and use them, with great care.

(Adapted from *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman.)



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Schools in Session!

NEW HABITS FOR A NEW SCHOOL YEAR

BY VICKI CARUANA

YOUR CHILD'S BACK-TO-SCHOOL TRANSITION IS MORE THAN just a one-day event; it's about the formation of new habits. And forming new habits also includes the breaking of old ones. Getting up early after three months of sleeping late requires both the dismantling of the old sleep pattern *and* the creation of the new pattern. A consistent bedtime and rise time will help him to embrace routine as he transitions to the structured environment of a traditional school day.

Habits are patterns of behavior built on prior experiences. How a child responds to a difficult teacher, a difficult classmate or a difficult learning experience is often a habitual response. If your child has had a challenging or traumatic experience at school, it's crucial that you acknowledge this issue and help your child separate the past from the present. Help your child understand that hurtful memories need not define her view of current experiences. Just because she felt ill-equipped to deal with difficult personalities last year doesn't mean she can't learn to deal with them this year. Stressful classroom situations are opportunities for our children to practice—with our support and supervision—the life skills needed to get along in this world. School is a great place to prepare for life!

TOUGH QUESTIONS FROM KIDS

ANSWER:

Some subjects are difficult at first—not everyone gets everything right away. Most teachers encourage their students to ask for help when they need it. Your parents will also be happy to help you. Subjects that are difficult will help you learn to think and to figure things out.

Tough Questions from Kids

I'm struggling in some of my new classes. What can I do?



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FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

'I DID IT!'

My daughter Kara was excited to start a morning school program. Unfortunately, that excitement faded as I struggled to get her and her younger sister out the door each day. To encourage Kara's independence, I made a "Good Morning Chart."

I took photos of Kara doing each of her morning tasks, such as making her bed, washing her face and getting dressed. I made the photos into tags and hung them from two sticky hooks I affixed to colorful poster board. I put the words "I did it!" above the second hook.

Now Kara goes to her chart each morning, looks at a picture of herself brushing her teeth and heads to the sink. She beams with a sense of accomplishment as she moves the tag from the first hook to the "I did it!" hook and then moves on to her next task.

—Tonya Wilhelm

SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

There are certain milestones that freeze-frame in a parent's memory: the first time a baby sleeps through the night, the first tooth, the first word, the first step.

School transitions are especially important milestones, often bringing mixed feelings of excitement and apprehension. Maybe your child is now in kindergarten, has moved up to middle school or has started high school. Are you feeling overwhelmed?

Take comfort in the words of Paul: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

As you trust God to lead your family, be sure to celebrate each school transition and the significant accomplishment it represents.

—Pam Woody

On Oct. 4, thousands of students across the country will celebrate religious freedom by doing something simple, yet powerful: They'll bring their Bibles to school and express their belief in the truth of God's Word—and do so in a loving, respectful way. Learn more about this student-led movement by visiting BringYourBible.org.



ASSIGNMENT: TEAMWORK



Every year, the back-to-school season can be a frantic time for moms as we vow, "This year will be different. We will get the homework done, stay on top of chores and keep everyone's schedule organized." But I've found that charging full-speed ahead without involving my husband can backfire. Our kids benefit far more

from witnessing teamwork than they do from seeing a stressed-out mom and an aggravated dad.

To maintain a unified team, consider asking your husband:

What's most important to you? I inadvertently overlooked my husband's priorities when I did all the back-to-school planning. Now I ask my husband, Keith, a simple question: "What are your non-negotiables this year?" Usually, we focus on four: a family night once a week; meals together at least three times a week; one day a month for Keith's hobby; and couple time at least every two weeks.

How can we keep each other informed? Keith was aggravated because he was finding things out when my frustration level was sky-high. Keeping each other in the loop should be a main goal of the back-to-school adjustment. Keith and I have learned to sync our Google calendars, to use a giant planner on our fridge and to talk every night about the schedule—and the stresses—the next day may bring.

What should our kids be responsible for? We use this time of year to reassess what responsibilities the kids can handle, and together we make the new assignments. Because Keith is better at sticking to the plan than I am, he's become the go-to guy for keeping the girls on top of their chores.

I used to think I was doing Keith a favor by organizing our family schedule without him. I realize now that carving him out of the picture only increased the tension in our house, and it ultimately deprived Keith of the opportunity to help. Since we've embraced more of a teamwork approach, I am far less likely to have panic attacks during the school year, and Keith feels indispensable. It's a back-to-school plan that's good for our parenting *and* our marriage.

—Sheila Gregoire