



Neighborhood
Parents Network

BACK TO SCHOOL ISSUE

PARENT TO PARENT

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Kid's Backpack?PAGE 5*

*How to Deal with Back-to-School
Separation AnxietyPAGE 7*

*"How Was Your Day?" Getting
Kids to Talk!PAGE 11*

*PLUS: Back-to-School
Photos!PAGE 14*





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Parent to Parent contains articles and information straight from our NPN member community. For information about editorial submissions, email newsletter@nnpnparents.org; for advertising, email ellie@nnpnparents.org. We look forward to hearing from you!

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**From the
Executive Director**

Dear Members,

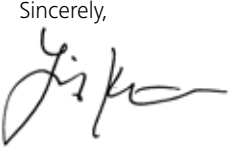
It's an honor to introduce myself as your new executive director! Having worked for membership-based nonprofits for more than 13 years now, I'm thrilled to be given the opportunity to guide the next phase of NPN as part of a dedicated team of staff already working to serve your needs.

In addition to the fact that this is an exciting career move, I feel beyond fortunate to work for an organization with a mission I personally embrace. My husband and I recently bought a home on the North Side, committing ourselves to a city we love, but one that can present challenges when it comes to raising kids. Which is exactly why we embraced the community and support NPN provides back before the first of our two daughters had even been born.

Since then there have been countless times NPN has provided guidance or expertise — and sometimes just simply the comforting fact that other people know what we're going through! And as our oldest approaches kindergarten, I know I'll be looking to NPN to help us navigate finding a school that's best for her and for us.

Over the next few months I look forward to meeting as many of you as I can, and will always welcome your involvement and ideas for NPN's future. Thank you for being a member of NPN!

Sincerely,


Liz Knutson




Photo courtesy Liz Knutson



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FIRST WORDS

What’s new with NPN and our members



WHAT’S IN MY KID’S BACKPACK

Dylan Jack, 10 years-old, 4th grade
Submitted by Leah Dugan, mom

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| 2 spiral notebooks | 1 pair spy glasses |
| 1 Manila folder (empty) | 2 mechanical pencils |
| 2 art assignments | 1 assigned reading book (pilfered) |
| 9 random informational handouts (now moot) | 1 Minecraft book |
| 7 loose Starbursts (dirty) | 1 Star Wars book |
| 1 half bag of Big League Chew | 1 sonic screwdriver (broken) |
| 1 large bouncy ball | 1 Post-it with mom’s phone number |
| 1 black glove | |
| 1 pair sunglasses | |



Overheard on the forum

What’s your most embarrassing school pick-up/drop-off moment?

“I bought a sundress at Old Navy that was very flimsy, like a nightgown. I tried it on in the dressing room and made the mistake of convincing myself that it was cute and appropriate. I wore it to pick up my three-year-old son from preschool, standing on the playground with all of the other waiting adults. As soon as my son saw me he walked up to me and loudly said, ‘Why are you wearing THAT?’ Later that same year, at school pick-up, he walked to the center of the playground where all of the kids were playing and everyone could see, dropped his pants all the way to his ankles and peed in a puddle.”

“Does dropping your kid off on a school holiday count? We rushed to get to school on time only to find an empty parking lot and closed school for Columbus Day.”

In response to the above: “We had the exact opposite happen this year. Had a nice leisurely family day only to get a call from DS’s teacher asking if he was OK and scolding us for not alerting her to his absence.”

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Jen Bauer, NPN member since 2009
Attorney Moms Group Chair
Working Moms Group Member
NPN Executive Board Member



What are your favorite NPN events and why? My favorite events are the free play dates at Bubbles and Little Beans. The kids are entertained and I am able to meet other parents.

What’s your most memorable incident involving your child’s school? My son’s classroom had an activity called “green shelf” where the kids would give packaging

materials a second life. From everyday objects that would have otherwise been landfill-bound, my son made so many interesting creations including a train, a mouse, a frog, a parachute, and a clubhouse that he could actually sit in.

What does back-to-school season mean in your household? The kids love shopping for new school supplies. Nothing is more fun than a new box of crayons and some white paper. The possibilities are endless.

What’s the best thing about school starting again? The worst? The best part is seeing old friends and hearing about everybody’s exciting summer vacations. The worst part is waking up early.

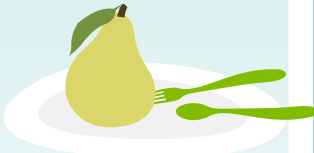
UPCOMING EVENTS

Visit nnpnparents.org/calendar for more great events!

SEPTEMBER	South Side Preschool & Elementary School Fair
10	Hyde Park Neighborhood Club, 5480 S. Kenwood Ave., Chicago This expo-style event features 60+ public and private preschools, elementary schools and enrichment programs from around the city. FREE and open to the public!
OCTOBER	Annual Preschool & Elementary School Fair
16	Grossinger Autoplex, 1530 N. Dayton St., Chicago The only Chicago school fair that brings together more than 150 public and private schools, enrichment programs and related services in one location at one time. Free for NPN members, \$25 for non-members.
OCTOBER	Fright-Free Halloween Fest
29	Lil’ Kickers, 1911 W. Lake St., Chicago This is the perfect way to burn off some pre-bedtime steam, celebrate with your kids, and give your ghoul and boy another chance to wear those costumes. Be prepared for lots of fun, no frights!
DECEMBER	New Year Family Celebration
31	Lil’ Kickers, 2640 B. W. Bradley Pl., Chicago Kids and parents can play soccer games, dance to the latest tunes, ring in the New Year with countdowns & balloon drops, and party with NPN families.

FIRST WORDS

We asked the discussion forum:
What do you pack in your kid's lunchbox?



PIRATE'S BOOTY LEFTOVERS
WATER BOTTLE
RAW CARROTS
KIWI BERRIES PB&J MILK
TURKEY SANDWICH
FRIDAY TREAT EDAMAME

POP QUIZ

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR SCHOOL ACRONYMS?
ANSWERS BELOW.

1. PTO
2. IEP
3. LSC
4. CIWP
5. CBOE
6. SEES
7. SEHS
8. OAE

1. Parent Teacher Organization; 2. Individualized Education Plan; 3. Local School Council; 4. Continuous Improvement Work Plan; 5. Chicago Board of Education; 6. Selective Enrollment Elementary School; 7. Selective Enrollment High School; 8. Office of Access and Enrollment



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HOW TO DEAL BACK TO SCHOOL TRANSITIONS & SEPARATION ANXIETY

By Julie Safranski, NPN member since 2015

LET THEM KNOW IT IS OK TO FEEL A MIXTURE OF FEELINGS ABOUT STARTING SCHOOL.

As a kid, I loved buying supplies for the new school year, picking out my outfit for the first day and wondering what my new teacher would be like. Not all children feel the same way as I did (including my own) and many start feeling worried about the transition. Whether your child is starting school for the first time or is just one of those kids who struggles with new routines, here are some suggestions for how to make the back-to-school transition go a little more smoothly.

Talk about it. Bring up a conversation about starting school and hear their concerns. As parents, we often want to fix the problem for them so we can make them feel better (and ourselves, too). But kids sometimes just want to know someone is listening to what they have to say. If they are having a hard time opening up, remark about an observation you have made to get them to talk ("I noticed that you keep changing the subject when we mention school. Is there anything you want to talk about?"). Or, ask them a question that might get to the cause of what is bothering them, such as worries about who they will sit with at lunch, or concerns as to what their teacher might be like. Lastly, let them know it is OK to feel a mixture of feelings such as being excited, nervous, curious, scared, etc., about starting school. It's a way to validate that what they are going through is normal.



Photo courtesy Julie Safranski

Plan a visit. For my son, we did a lot of drive-bys of the school so the building became a familiar sight. Depending on the grade level, this could also mean going to the school playground to become acquainted (or reacquainted) and learn what door they will be entering into the building. For students entering middle or high school, most schools have a new student orientation. If they don't, considering asking the principal/counselor to see if you can get a tour of the building beforehand.

Read about it. If your child is going to preschool or kindergarten, reading a book about school anxiety is a great way to help manage their fears. Some of our family's favorites are *The Kissing Hand*, *I Am Too Absolutely Small for School*, and *It's Hard to Be Five*. For older elementary school kids, other books about general anxiety such as *Wilma Jean the Worry Machine* or *What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety* could be helpful.

Plan for it. For younger kids going full-day for the first time, having a photo in their backpack of your family could ease the transition (just knowing it was there was helpful for my son). For older kids, help them find ways to get together with those friends they didn't get to see over summer break, so they are excited about starting the new school year together. If you know your child has a difficult time with transitions, send their teacher an email a few days before school starts to let them know, so they are aware.

Despite its challenges, I love this stressful, fun, playful age. I hope these techniques will help bring you a little more joy through the meltdown phase. They do say it's a phase, right?

.....
Julie Safranski, MSW, LCSW has a background as a school social worker and is a licensed therapist who enjoys working with children, adolescents and their families. She lives in Albany Park with her husband and son.

HOW TO DEAL ATTENDING A DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOL

By **Nidhi Kukreja**, NPN member since 2013

I WAS WORRIED ABOUT FEELING LIKE AN OUTSIDER, BUT THE WARMTH WITH WHICH THE PRINCIPAL AND TEACHERS APPROACH THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES DIFFUSES THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL.

We are a Hindu Indian-American family with two boys attending a Jewish preschool, and we couldn't be happier with our decision. When I tell people this, I get quite a few quizzical looks, and sometimes I half-joke that I will send them to a Catholic grade school. And why not? I attended a Catholic preschool in India and a Jesuit university and medical school here.

Although I wasn't the same as everyone else, I didn't mind being different. I don't mind my children being different from others in their setting because it forces us to question our perceived differences, pushes us to understand our own heritage, and take our place in our community. While their preschool is actually quite diverse, I am pretty sure they are the only Hindus in their classes, and two of a handful in their school.

I love that it's brought up questions. My older one (after two years of learning the traditions of Hanukkah and weekly Shabbats) often asks why we don't practice those at home, and why we practice some others. He has asked why the school only allows kosher foods, while our home is beef-free and why I'm vegetarian. The biggest question of all, of course, is why we have so many "gods" while our Jewish friends just have one. And while the answers aren't always easy to muster up, the bottom line is that differences are OK — and, in fact, good — since we can learn so much from each other and, despite our differences, be friends and playmates.

At first I was worried about my ability to answer their questions. Not being Jewish, I figured I would have a hard time explaining Jewish traditions, but I have found it's not about that. During Hanukkah, my kids come home with beautiful representative drawings of light and dark; during Passover, there are stories of "good guys" and "bad guys." What I have found is that the stories gel with the questions running through their minds; at 4 and 5 years-old, their world is black and white, and their little minds are working hard to categorize things as such.

The kids love the stories, making it easier for us to talk about how they apply to life. I try to weave in a story from our own tradition, for example talking about how Diwali is



Photo courtesy Nidhi Kukreja

also about light overcoming darkness, and they love this. The Passover stories about helping people escape terrible oppression are not too different from the story of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita (our holy book) doing the right thing despite it being a difficult choice. I truly believe it's not coincidental that Diwali, Christmas, and Hanukkah all occur as the weather turns cold and use light as a symbol of truth.

Attending a Jewish preschool is actually forcing us to evaluate and understand our own heritage a bit more. The best part of my kids attending a Jewish preschool is the sense of community. I was worried about this because we lived in a different community and were of a different faith; we knew only one or two people coming into the school. I was worried about feeling like an outsider, but the warmth with which the principal and teachers approach the students and families diffuses throughout the school. Every day my kids ask for chips (or whatever treat the school secretary puts out in the office), we usually chat with her a bit, and on the days she is not there, we feel a void. I can only hope that the void we might feel when my boys leave this school will be filled by another great grade-school community, wherever that might be!

Nidhi Kukreja is a board-certified pediatrician and full-time mom to two young boys. She practiced on the southwest side of Chicago for several years until becoming a stay-at-home mom. She writes at thegrowingparent.org where she shares her insights on raising somewhat sane kids in this somewhat insane world we live in!

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ASK AN EXPERT

TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT SCHOOL

By Nilmari Donate, NPN member since 2016

Kids are back to school, and with that comes the infamous question: "How was school today?" Count yourself lucky if you get an "OK" or "fine." As parents, we all want to know: Are they having fun? Are they playing nicely with others? Are they nurturing healthy relationships with their friends and peers? And the one that worries us the most, are they eating lunch? Every day, tons of us suffer from not being able to communicate effectively with our children. As a mother of three and a parent educator, I've had to learn how to communicate with young age children especially after school. Here are some tips and examples to get the communication between you and your child started.

Be mindful. Know that they have been sitting for most of the day (at least six hours!), and some days they may be frustrated about the day and not ready to talk. Bite your tongue and resist the urge to wear your FBI hat. Do not interrogate them. You may want to wait until dinner or bedtime to ask. In the meantime, concentrate in making the time fun and relaxing by asking easy questions, e.g., example "What would you like to eat for dinner?"

Ask open-ended questions and be specific: "Tell me about something new you learned in Math today." "Where is the coolest place in the school? Why?" "Who is the funniest person in your class? Why?"

Share something about your day and ask about theirs: "I had a tuna sandwich for lunch. What about you?" "I am getting ready for a meeting tomorrow and need to create an agenda. When is your next exam and what is it going to include?"

AS PARENTS, WE ALL WANT TO KNOW: ARE THEY HAVING FUN? ARE THEY PLAYING NICELY WITH OTHERS? ARE THEY NURTURING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR FRIENDS AND PEERS?

Use their artwork as a conversation starter: "Which technique did you use here?" "What were you feeling when you drew this?"

Ask silly/fun questions: "Tell me something that made you laugh today." "If you could be the teacher tomorrow, what would you teach and how would you teach it?"

Know the school schedule: "Today is Thursday: Tell me about the new song you are learning in music class today."

Don't forget the not-so-nice questions: "Tell me about something that made you sad today." "Is there someone in your class that needs a time-out? Why?" "What can you do when you feel sad or frustrated in school?"

Finally, listen. As soon as your child gets in the car, stop whatever you are doing and be present in the moment. Let them be the first to say anything and do not come up with conclusions before you hear the entire story. Children gain confidence as they relate their day and you affirm them. Be aware of signs. Your child may be showing off more than just having a bad day. Remember to stay in constant communication with the teacher. Teaming with the teacher helps the child be successful because after all, it takes a village!

Nilmari Donate is the founder of HKC Parenting and School Consulting Services. She holds a BA in Public Health and a MA in Parenting Education and Support from DePaul University. She is the mother of three young bilingual and multicultural children.



Photo courtesy Nilmari Donate

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#REAL TALK

THE PROS & CONS OF MOVING TO THE SUBURBS FOR SCHOOLS

By Sitaara Jones, NPN member since 2016

AS WIFE TO A POLICE OFFICER, SAFETY WAS A HUGE PERK WHEN MOVING TO THE SUBURBS FOR SCHOOL.

While preparing to write this, I took a second to define suburb and city. I was interested in how these words would be used in a sentence. Check out what I found under city: "The city is working to make the streets safer," and "A lawsuit against the city." For suburb: "She left the city and moved to the suburbs."

Seriously. Is Merriam-Webster a living, breathing person walking among us?

Full disclosure, I recently moved from Chicago to Orland Park, a south suburb. I'm parent to a 6th grader and a former Chicago Public Schools educator. Now that you know the lense I'm peeking through, here's my take on the pros and cons of moving to the suburbs for schools.

Choice of Schools

Pro: Looking for a home was much easier than it was in the city simply because high-performing public schools are more prevalent in the 'burbs. Gone were the fears of our kid being stuck in some dumpy neighborhood school that may or may not be open next year. Buh-bye, worries about lottery systems. Adios, GoFundMe page for help raising private school tuition. Arrivederci, school applications. You catch my drift here?

Con: While few and far between, the great Chicago schools are really great schools. Speciality schools (STEM schools, Montessori schools, etc.) are also primarily based in the city. Plus, if you have multiple K-8 kids, you may like the idea of having them all in the same building.

Spending

Pro: Do I even need to mention the budget crisis looming over Chicago schools right now? As unfair as it is, Chicago budget cuts means students in schools outside of the city receive more state funding per pupil. That's more money to put towards school buses (more on that later), curriculum, professional development for teachers, technology, and school upkeep.

Con: I'm totally struggling to think of a con here.

Safety

Pro: As wife to a police officer, safety was a huge perk when moving to the suburbs for school. I can walk my son to school without worrying about playing dodgeball with bullets. In the winter, guess what? There's a bus stop right across the street from our home. Speaking of buses, BUSES! No public transportation for us. I can't be the only one who's said a silent prayer for the kids on the CTA bus or 'L' in hopes that they make it to school safely.

Con: You can't beat safety. I guess if I forced myself to come up with a con, I could mention that not all schools in the city are in neighborhoods that have these issues. When we lived in the city, we were residents of the West Loop and my son went to a school that was within walking distance. But how many of us can comfortably afford to live in the neighborhoods in which our students attend school?

So what's the verdict? Would you move to the 'burbs for school, or are you staying in the city?

Sitaara Jones is a Chicago native and a work-from-home mom and wife. A former third-grader teacher, Sitaara enjoys making the lives of teachers and students healthier through movement and also works as a fitness instructor.



Photo courtesy Sitaara Jones

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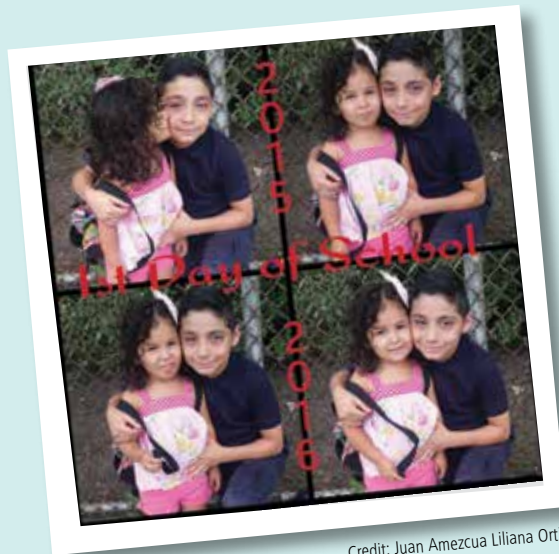
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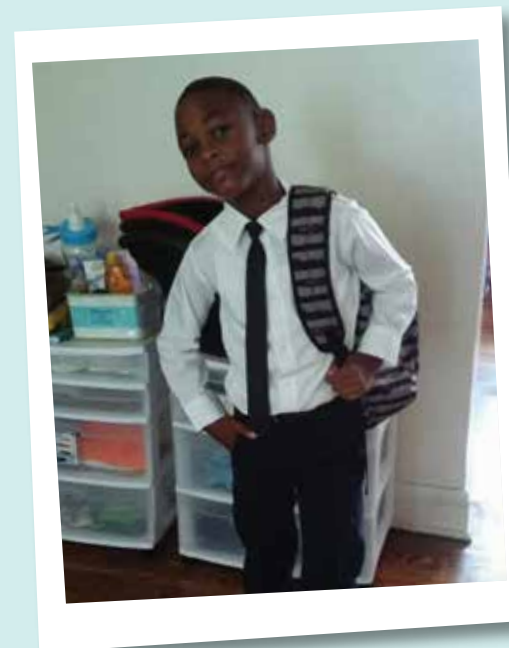
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FEATURE

HOW I GOT INVOLVED IN MY KID'S SCHOOL WITHOUT LOSING MY DAY JOB

By **Katy Mickelson**, NPN member since 2010

MY CHILDREN KNOW THAT "MOM WORKS" TO HELP FINANCE A LIFESTYLE WHERE MORE THINGS ARE POSSIBLE THAN NOT, AND I KNOW THEY LOVE ME FOR THAT.

As a mom of a rambunctious 3½-year-old girl and ever-active 6-year-old boy and working full-time as a partner in family law, I'm often told that I "do it all." The seemingly praiseworthy concept, while flattering, in no way rids me of mother's guilt that plagues many of us who work outside the home.

At all hours of the day, thoughts of *What experience did I miss out on today?* will creep across my desk, like when my son tells me about a class celebration that I had to miss due to a client meeting or court. That being said, my children know that "mom works" to help finance a lifestyle where more things are possible than not, and I know they love me for that.

So, how to strike a balance? Here are some things I have done to ensure that I'm as involved as I can be without risking my day job.

Take charge of the classroom. While this seems counter-intuitive, being a room parent is not as labor intensive as one may think. I send class emails from my work email (many of which are just forwarded requests from other parents or school organizations) so I can be on top of events and needs at any point of the day. We created a classroom website on Shutterfly which makes it easy to communicate with the other parents. Not only has this kept me involved and aware, it's allowed for me to get to know the other parents, which is key to staying connected.

Look for special one-time opportunities to come to class and commit the time to your calendar. My son's kindergarten class had "mystery readers" every Friday. Knowing the one day I could come and surprise my son by reading to his classmates way in advance allowed for me to schedule court and meetings around that one hour.

Don't overcommit. While I want to be a part of every parent organization and fundraising effort for my son's school (a sign of my Type A personality), that's entirely unrealistic. Just as you can't donate to every philanthropic organization that comes your way, pick one volunteer organization with your kid's school to get involved with, maybe during a time of year when you know your job may be slower. That way, you can feel connected but not worried that you aren't getting your work completed.

Katy Mickelson, her husband Kory and their two children live in Roscoe Village, a community they love and are proud to be a part of. Katy is a partner in the divorce and family law group at Beermann Pritikin Mirabelli Swerdlove LLP, where she has been practicing law since 2005.



Photo courtesy Katy Mickelson

FEATURE

MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PARENTS

By Ruth Mallery, NPN member since 2016

SOMETIMES A PARENT IS WILLING TO LET THE DREAM UNFOLD OR CHANGE; OTHER PARENTS INSIST THAT THEIR CHILD FULFILL THE DREAM STARTING FROM DAY ONE OF LIFE.

I have an only child, and we seek out places where he can find children to play with beyond his playgroup. One day we headed over to the library. It's a pleasant place to spend a hot day, with children to meet, and perhaps even adult conversation. Once there, my preschool-aged son joined three brothers at the train table. The train table is a mixed blessing; there are seldom enough train cars to match the number of children at the table.

The three brothers, all near my son's age, eyed him warily as he approached the train table. The brothers clutched all available train cars tightly, as he approached, eager to join them. They were silent, not offering to share a single train car with him. My preschooler looked to me for guidance. He has a speech delay. I stepped in to model how he could use his words to ask for a train. Each boy reluctantly shared a train, until every child at the table had some train cars. Then they began to play together.

From a distance, the boys' mom called out, "You only have to share the trains if a child asks you for one," with a glare in my direction. I simply smiled, saying nothing, thinking, "The rules may be different if a child is unable to ask." I continued to focus on my son, and his needs.

Welcome to the challenge of teaching your child how to be a person in the world, and of dealing with other parents as you each teach your child the lessons that seem most important to you. Whether your child is starting Mandarin or soccer lessons, whether she is entering preschool or daycare, or whether he is starting kindergarten or joining other homeschoolers, you will be meeting and developing relationships with other parents.

As an older mom, I envisioned meeting fellow parents whose concerns included non-sexist play, questioning the wisdom of war toys, eating whole grains, and limiting screen time. As I meet other parents, I've learned that every parent has a dream for each of his or her children.



Photo courtesy Ruth Mallery

Sometimes that dream is locked tightly inside; the parent may not be able to understand it yet. Sometimes a parent is willing to let the dream unfold or change; other parents insist that their child fulfill the dream starting from day one of life. Each of us is a parent, and each of us is unique.

Parenting is a tough job. We each seek to balance work, personal, and family needs. Our children are searching for down-time, working on the three Rs, and, hopefully, learning to climb a tree and gaze into the night sky. I've realized that listening more than I talk, observing before speaking, and saying, "How can I help?" are some of my best choices when I encounter other parents. Oh, and to find a kindred BFF, to weather the tough times.

Ruth Mallery and her husband first made the city-to-suburbs transition; later she made the shift from lawyer to stay-at-home mom. She's into reading, researching, and writing; exploring nature with her son; watching *Dr. Who* with her husband; peace churches; the family guinea pig; and Dove chocolate.

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FEATURE

GETTING INTO HARVARD DOESN'T NEED TO START IN PRESCHOOL

By Grace Lee Sawin, NPN member since 2003

THE BIGGEST PREDICTOR OF STUDENT SUCCESS IS ENGAGED, INVOLVED PARENTS VERSUS A HEFTY TUITION BILL OR A STORIED, EXCLUSIVE SCHOOL.

Parenting a toddler can be hard enough without the pressures of finding that “perfect” school for your curious, inquisitive, rambunctious and eager little one. You’ve heard the rumors before: “Get into the right school now so that your path to Harvard is assured. If you miss your window, you’ve missed your chance!” But is that really true? Is there even such a thing as a “golden ticket” to those coveted universities? Are we doomed to let go of those lofty dreams if we send our child to the up-and-coming school down the street? Does it really all start with preschool?!

Rest assured that the biggest predictor of student success is engaged, involved parents versus a hefty tuition bill or a storied, exclusive school. As parents, our main job is to make sure our child is thriving, growing, staying inquisitive and learning how to get along with others in whatever environment they find themselves.

While rumors abound among new parents (especially from the exclusive and pricey enclaves of New York City) that a child’s path to educational nirvana starts with the right brand-name preschool, the real skinny is that it simply isn’t true. Here in Chicago, we are lucky to have a breadth of school options that can all spark a lifelong quest for knowledge. Plus, the diversity of our city makes for a rich educational experience in its own right.

Angst-ridden nights worrying about how and when to get into the “right” preschool become unnecessary when parents realize that not only do kids at “top” high schools

come from all pathways (public, private, well known, under the radar, selective, traditional, etc.), but the coveted colleges only accept a small number of students from each high school, no matter the caliber of students. In the end, the goal for parents is to find schools that allow your child to unleash their potential and develop their self-confidence, no matter the name on the school’s door.

But what about entry years and getting into a certain school? Is it worth the anxiety? While it’s true that more spots can be available if you apply when a program starts, there is always attrition and families can and do make school changes based on a child’s evolving needs and desires as he/she grows. The array of Chicago school choices means that finding a great school fit at any time along your child’s school journey is possible.

From the play-based preschool to the Reggio-inspired elementary to the international baccalaureate high school, all experiences shape each child’s unique skills, interests and goals, which combine into the thoughtful, empathetic and well-rounded high schooler that the coveted universities are looking for.

Research different types of school options at NPN’s School Fairs on September 10th (South Side) or October 16th (NPN Annual) to learn about the many preschool and elementary school offerings in and around Chicago. Remember: If a child begins his/her early education at a school that feels right for your family but isn’t necessarily a “big name” draw, don’t fret or feel pressured to make a change. That “happy fit” preschool is creating the spark that will go on to shape the innate curiosity and interests of your future college-bound child, wherever they ultimately attend!

Grace Lee Sawin attended her first NPN School Fair over a decade ago and still vividly recalls the sense of confusion and uncertainty involved in finding a great school fit for her family. After years of research and a few different schools for her daughters (now 17 and 13), she founded Chicago School GPS to help other families calmly strategize their search and successfully navigate to their Chicago school destinations.



Photo courtesy Grace Lee Sawin

FEATURE

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CROSSTOWN-COMMUTING CPS MOM

By Didi Lewis, NPN member since 2013

Ever wonder what a “typical” day is like for a mom with two school-aged kids attending two different schools in two vastly different neighborhoods? We are a family in the South Loop, with a first-grader and preschooler. When our son received an offer to attend a highly-regarded CPS Selective Enrollment Elementary School on the far South Side last year, we were ecstatic about his opportunity but also had to give much consideration to how accepting that spot would turn our daily routine upside down. It meant swapping our 4-block walk to our neighborhood school for a 17-mile drive (34 miles round trip). The morning school bus, with a 6:25am pickup time, was not a viable option for us (much too early for a 6-year-old), but it was doable for getting home after school. There were many other trade-offs to consider, but the new school’s promise of an appropriately challenging curriculum, smaller class sizes, and intimate yet diverse community made the other sacrifices acceptable. We were also fortunate that my part-time job allowed us the flexibility to manage all of the necessary driving ourselves.

Here’s a peek into our crazy weekday lives, from September to June:

5:30am Wake up, shower, make coffee, pack breakfasts (to be eaten on the drive to school) and lunches. Check my calendar for the day, breathe, and enjoy the silence.

6:30am Wake kids, get them washed up, dressed and ready for school.

7:00am Corral everyone into the car. Quick scan for backpacks, lunch bags, breakfast bags and anything else that needs to go to school because there will be no time to come back for anything forgotten. Must pull out of garage by 7:05am.

7:05–7:35am Southbound commute on the Dan Ryan. Thank goodness for a reverse, typically traffic-free commute on the first leg of our morning drive. KidzBop on the radio. Some mornings, I embrace it and sing along happily with the kids. Other mornings, I want to put earplugs in.

7:35am First drop-off at my son’s school (Keller RGC) in Mount Greenwood. School starts at 7:45am. If we’re running late, we do curbside drop-off. Otherwise, he insists that I walk him in.

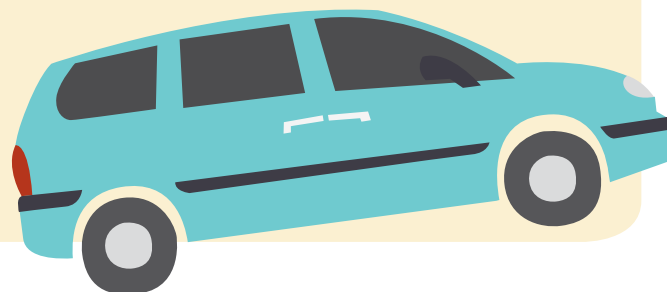


Photo courtesy Didi Lewis

7:45am Back on the road for the slow commute back downtown on the Dan Ryan. Disney tunes on the radio.

8:30–8:40am Second drop-off at my daughter’s preschool (Daystar School) in the South Loop, after she has been sitting in the car for 90 minutes. School starts at 8:30am; we are often last to arrive or late, depending on traffic.

8:45am As I’m driving back home (by now, I’ve been in car for 1hr 40min), receive phone call from my son’s school, alerting me that he is having a mild allergic reaction to something he ate in the school breakfast (this would be breakfast #2 for him; I have already reviewed the breakfast options to ensure there is nothing on the menu he is allergic to). I give permission for school staff to administer his allergy medicine, but he gets on the phone and asks me to come.



8:50am Stop at Starbucks for venti coffee before getting back on the road to Mount Greenwood.

9:20am Arrive at my son’s school, his allergy medication has kicked in and now he is fine. Ask him what he ate; nothing he mentions falls into his food allergy categories. Give him a hug and kiss, thank his teacher for calling me, get back in car.

9:35am Back on the road again for Dan Ryan commute into downtown. Listen to news radio, podcasts — anything but KidzBop and Disney Radio.

10:05–10:15am Arrive back home, 3 hours after I first left. Now, finally, my day can begin.

10:00am–2:00pm Work from home. Work breaks consist of whatever is at top of home to-do list for the day (throw load of laundry into washer/dryer, quick trip to grocery store, etc.).

2:00pm Go for a run or take a yoga class. Or, more typically, use the time to run an errand I didn’t have time for earlier.

3:20–3:30pm Pick up my daughter from preschool; drive to my son’s school bus stop at our neighborhood public school.

3:55–4:05pm Meet school bus for my son’s afternoon drop-off. We are the last stop, and my son has been on the bus for at least 1 hour. Thankfully, he uses some of that time to do his homework, which leaves more time for playing before dinner and bedtime.

Of course, our day doesn’t end at 4:00pm. There are still afterschool activities and team sports that both children are involved in, depending on the day of the week. Dinner happens anywhere between 6:30-7:30pm, bedtime between 8:00-9:00pm. After catching up with my husband after work, tidying up around the house, and finishing up any work tasks from the day, I finally go to bed somewhere around midnight (maybe 11pm on a good night). And then we start over again. If you’re reading this and thinking, “That’s crazy!” yes, indeed, it sort of is. But the key for us has been keeping focused on our family’s priorities and remembering the old adage, “The days are long, but the years are short.”

.....
Didi and her husband Rod grew up on opposite ends of the city and love being able to share and enjoy Chicago with their two kids, RJ and Rio. When not serving as family chauffeur and domestic goddess, Didi serves as NPN’s Program Manager, helping to bring a diverse array of parent education opportunities to young families across the city.



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FEATURE

HANDLING HOMEWORK THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ANXIOUS CHILD

By Ritamaria Laird, MA, LCPC, NPN member since 2015

I ENCOURAGE CAREGIVERS TO LOOK AT HOMEWORK AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT AND SPEND TIME WITH THEIR CHILD.

Children are receiving homework as young as the kindergarten age, and some students report spending up to six hours a night on it. Many kids learn how to cope and manage the homework load, but what about children with anxiety? Anxiety negatively impacts concentration, inhibits learning and can make it difficult for an anxious child to display her true knowledge and grasp of material. Following are a few anxiety-ridden scenarios and how to help.

ANXIETY: "My logical, problem-solving brain won't work and I feel stupid." When children are operating from an anxious brain, their logical, problem-solving, executive functioning brain is out of reach. Can you imagine trying to complete a math problem without the ability to use logic?! In addition, anxiety creates added stress, which interrupts the ability to sustain focus. A child may be able to demonstrate her true knowledge when she is operating from a calmer state, but can't recall the information during an anxious moment. In this anxious state, 30 minutes of homework takes 3 hours, frustration rises, exhaustion enters, and your child ends up feeling stupid.

HOW TO HELP If anxiety is impacting your child's ability to demonstrate knowledge, is causing your child to spend more time on homework than his peers, or is adding significant stress after school, you may ask your teacher for some accommodations to support your child. Homework may be shortened or broken down into smaller parts, a time limit may be implemented on how much time a child may spend on homework, and in some cases, homework can be completely waived.

ANXIETY: "I worry so much about turning in a perfect paper that I end up procrastinating." Children and teens will often cope with their fears of inadequacy or making mistakes with procrastination. Parents and teachers may inaccurately label these kids as lazy or tell them to try harder. This only puts more focus on the child's struggles and shines light on the child's need to seek external achievements and rewards to gain self-confidence.

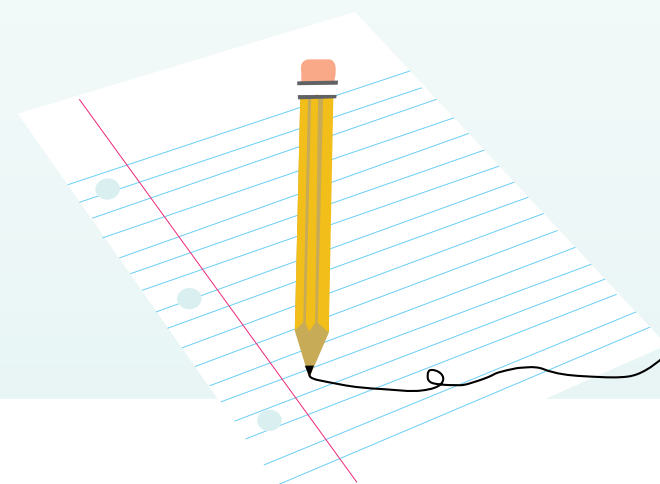
HOW TO HELP Use your relationship to notice what you see. Say, "I notice you have a hard time finishing your homework. What's the hardest part?" or "I wonder if you worry so much about being perfect, it's hard for you to get started." By opening up a nonjudgmental conversation, you may help your child gain some insight into their anxious response to homework.



Photo courtesy Rita Laird, MA, LCPC

ANXIETY: "Homework takes away from my play, and I need play to learn, relax, and reduce my anxiety." Children learn through play. If your child compromises her free time for homework, then your child is at risk for increased anxiety, stress, learning challenges and health issues. A relaxed and rested brain is a brain that is open and ready to learn.

HOW TO HELP Create a routine in which your child is able to relax his mind, body, and burn off energy he may have had to hold onto during the school day. Discover a homework routine that works best for your child. Your child



may need to get some physical exercise immediately after school before diving into homework. Alternatively, your child may need to start homework immediately, but utilize sensory supports such as fidgeting, music, or bouncing on an exercise ball while working. Break homework up into small parts and allow frequent breaks. Never sacrifice a child's after-school play or relaxation time for homework.

Be the support network. Homework is mistakenly thought of to be an independent time of study. I encourage caregivers to look at homework as an opportunity to connect and spend time with their child. An anxious child's brain will calm with your presence and support. You will also discover exactly what parts of homework are difficult for your child and in turn help your child more. You will have the opportunity to teach your child the skills she is lacking and help develop positive coping tools to deal with.

Ritamaria Laird was raised in Cincinnati. She moved to Chicago in 2009 and graduated with a degree in clinical counseling from Roosevelt University. She now works as a pediatric therapist and Clinical Director at Individual and Family Connection in Roscoe Village. She is a proud mother to her 1-year-old daughter, Penelope.

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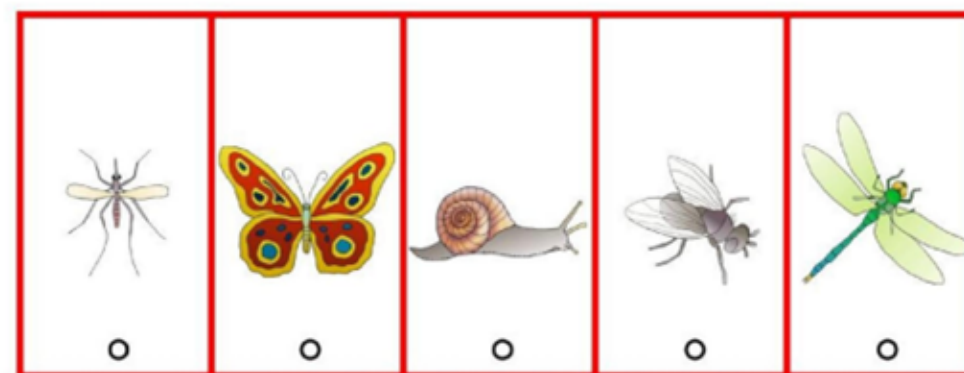
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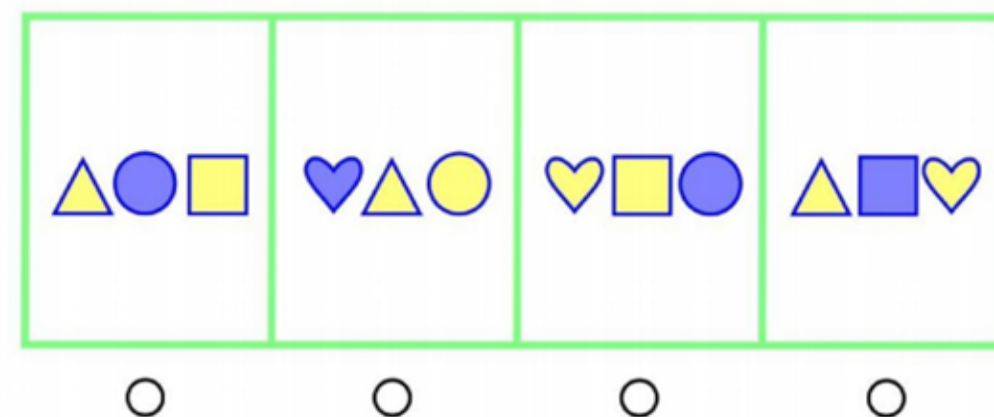
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Answers | 1) Box #3 (snail does not have wings) | 2) Box #4

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