



What *not* to do on the first day of school

Think you're supremely unprepared for the fall grind? Think again. Chances are you've got some competition from the Mayhem family. Check out our expert tips to avoid your own back-to-school nightmare.

By Missie Mayhem

The Sunday before Day One at our twin sons' new middle school, we caught a morning flight from Miami to San Francisco. My husband wanted to save money with a redeye flight, but I put my foot down. The kids need to get ready for school, I told him. I thought my plan would give us time to get home for frozen pizza, hose the sand out of their hair, and buy two of those new Munch Boxes with self-cooling thermology they'd been nagging me for.

As it turns out, the plane was late, so we had to skip the family dinner and school supply shopping. But that's why God invented fast-food takeout and paper bags, right?

Five tips for a stress-free first day of school

Teacher Otis Kriegel's [video](#) explains how a little bit of preparation can help kids be their best for back to school.

After 20 consecutive days at the beach, Sammy started whining about not wanting to go to sixth grade. I tried to brace him: "Honey, you're not going back to elementary school, so you better get used to it." My wise counsel didn't have the intended effect. Somewhere over the Rockies, he began whimpering, and when he saw the silhouette of San Francisco in the sunset, hyperventilation took hold.

"I'm ... *not* ... going," he said between gasps.

"Do you know how many deprived kids around the world would happily eat their shoes to attend your school?" I pointed out.

"Then *let* them!" Sweat appeared on his upper lip.

I started to panic too. "You need to get a hold of yourself," I said through gritted teeth. "I have to go back to work tomorrow." The flight crew was giving us the eye. "I'll give you a new iPod if you can just calm down."

Jacob wasn't complaining, so I assumed he was ready for his new life in middle school. Granted, he'd been playing video games 24/7 until blisters appeared on his thumbs. When he was asked to put away his Game Boy at takeoff, the nervous energy had to go somewhere. His legs began jiggling with maniacal intensity, and I tried to distract him by suggesting he do the math problems he'd been asked to complete over the summer.

"Not now, Mom!"

"It's only 10 pages. You're so smart — you'll finish it in no time!"

Nothing worked until my husband threatened to take away his Game Boy. That roused his inner Einstein.

By the time we got home, both kids were complaining that they wanted a treat for the last day of summer. I

let them stay up until 11:30 watching *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith*.

The next morning was like Mr. Toad's Wild Ride to hell and back. We slept in. I surprised the boys with matching school outfits their grandmother had sent. They burst into tears. I explained they had no choice but to wear them anyway because nothing else was clean.

There wasn't enough cereal for breakfast, so I announced a special treat: an Egg McMuffin morning! On the way to school, the boys were supposed to brush their hair, but Sammy spilled his orange juice on the brush, and Jacob retaliated by "accidentally" dropping his milk on Sammy's backpack. It was inevitable both boys would arrive on their first day smelling and looking like they'd crawled out of a compost heap. By the time Jacob realized he'd forgotten his math homework and Sammy informed me that he would be requesting that the principal fail him retroactively so he could go back to fifth grade, I began wondering where I had gone wrong.

When I finally double-parked in front of their new school, swarming with 2,000-plus kids, the boys just stared out the window like they were being pushed out of a shuttle over the moon. Again, I tried to calm their fears. "Look at these thousands of nice kids. Think about all your great classes — like trigonometry."

"That's high school math, Mom," said Jacob.

"You know what I mean. Now have a great day!"

As I pulled away, I realized their lunches were still in the back seat — kids these days.

Avoiding back-to-school disasters

Don't want to follow in the Mayhem family's footsteps? Child and education experts weigh in on how to prep kids for a drama-free first day:

- "Talk positively about the pending school experience. Parents' emotions are easily read by children who pick up on parental fears, sadness about separation, or concerns about their child's adjustment. Drive by or visit the school to build familiarity. Shop together for school supplies or clothes. Treat going to school as a wonderful new adventure. — Kay Neff, founder of the Dearborn Heights Montessori Center in Michigan
- "Start getting them back on their school-time schedule slowly — about a week ahead of the first day. For example, put them to bed 10 minutes earlier and wake them up 10 minutes earlier." — Heidi Waterfield, educational consultant
- "The night before, prepare lunches and snacks and set out clothes and backpacks. If you're unsure of the school's snack policy, send extra food with your child just in case." — Julie Rebboah, president of Lightning Bug Learning Corporation
- "Many parents like to accompany their child to school on the first day, but that is not always possible. If this is a big issue for you *and* your child, you could certainly slip a note in a lunch box or backpack or in with some new school supplies. It's a little way of being there without being there." — Aviva Pflock, coauthor of *Mommy Guilt: Learn to Worry Less, Focus on What Matters Most, and Raise Happier Kids*
- "If you have allowed screen time privileges to increase over the summer, begin to curtail them (at least two weeks) prior to the start of school. Establish TV, video, and computer use rules before the first day of school, and stick to them." — Connie Hammer, certified parent coach

- “Do not drop off your child and leave. Your job is to make sure all the child's concerns have been addressed before you leave them anywhere! No matter how ridiculous you think the concern is, pay attention to it and walk them through it.” — Doris Jeanette, child psychologist
- “If your child is anxious about going to school, don't freak out if your child's anxiety escalates into screaming and crying, ‘I won't go!’ Remain calm, cool, and collected. Your steadiness will calm your child. Don't say, ‘You have to handle it alone.’ Anxiety makes kids feel frightened and isolated. Instead, tell your child that you are a team. Say, ‘You're not alone, and together we're going to solve this problem and help you feel better.’” — Diane Peters Mayer, author of [Overcoming School Anxiety](#)

Missie Mayhem lives on a cul-de-sac of the American dream with her devoted husband and two tween boys. She never reads GreatSchools articles but occasionally contributes her parental torments and traumas to make the rest of us feel better.