

# Kids are great

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

*As a responsible parent, you're there to direct them when necessary, help set limits and teach them right from wrong – something they can and should take with them into their adult lives*

I'm not sure just how great you think your children are after a long hot summer and with school not yet back in session. I thoroughly enjoy listening to the children that come into my office. I love to hear how they think and what they have to say. They're bright, creative, sweet and sensitive. Most love to talk and are typically good listeners. They're usually open and honest, trusting and trustworthy. Hopefully my office is a safe place for them, but I'm often saddened when they share something with me that they feel unable to share with their parents.

I've said previously in this column that you should be able to say anything to anyone. How you say it determines how it gets heard. I believe that you can talk to your children about anything and that they, too, should always be able to talk with you. If not, there's a problem, which if not corrected can continue throughout their lives and into other relationships. Children learn so much from your behavior. Your goal as a parent is not to be your child's best friend. Rather, as a responsible parent, you're there to direct them when necessary, help set limits, and teach them right from wrong. This is something important that they can and should take with them into their adult life.

So as they soon head back to school – after having had the summer off, with little or no routine, and followed by a month full of holidays – your No.1 job is to be consistent. Reining them in after endless hours of screen time isn't easy. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Set a special time for a one-on-one date and be completely available. Make time to go out, sit down together, give them your undivided attention, chat and model being a respectful and interested listener. Check out how they feel about heading back to school. What are they looking forward to? What concerns them? Ask them how you can be helpful. Make a mental note to follow up on it with another date in the near future so that you can see how they're making the transition to the next grade, catching any concerns early.

2. Check in daily with your child to hear what their day was like. This may happen as you chauffeur them from place to place, as you tuck them into bed at night or any time in between. It's up to you to make it happen.

3. Make time to have fun. Sometimes a change of routine is good. Plan a surprise trip to the beach, a museum or something else unexpected that sets the scene for future memories.

4. Check out their sleep routine. Today's the day to start with an earlier bedtime. If your child's

been going to bed after midnight, he won't be able to switch and suddenly go to bed at 10 p.m. This should be a gradual process: dropping back a small amount every few days. If their day and night schedules are almost reversed, as happens with some adolescents, work together to shift back their sleep cycle as quickly as possible.

5. Make time to read with and to your child. How about bedtime? Picking out and reading a good book together is a treasure they'll remember forever and can be an important part of a bedtime routine.

6. Screen time: decide how much screen time you're prepared to give them over the course of a day and week and what has to be accomplished in order to receive it. Screen time should be a reward and not an expectation. So whether it's that certain chores need to be done (and they should be expected to help out) and homework or school completed, with outside or exercise time also factored in, unless you clearly and consistently set the rules with appropriate and consistent time limits, you may be quite unhappy.

Beyond a hefty dose of love, consistency is the key when parenting. Present a unified response between the two of you, and if you do change your mind, make sure that it's because you've chosen to and not because you've given in to their whining. After the summer with perhaps unlimited screen time, you'll have to be very clear in terms of screen rules (e.g. screen-free at least one hour before bed, no screens including phones in the bedroom or at the dinner table, and a day a week kept screen-free and face-to-face).

7. Transitions can be hard. It's not easy to come home from school and move into homework or to stop television watching to get into the bathtub. Give advance warning, discuss what your expectations are and reward their ability to switch tasks with something special the next day.

8. Pick your issues. Everything can't need improvement. Work together on the bigger challenges, problem-solve and find a solution – whether with working on homework or getting off to school on time. If they are part of the solution, they are more likely to follow through on their own.

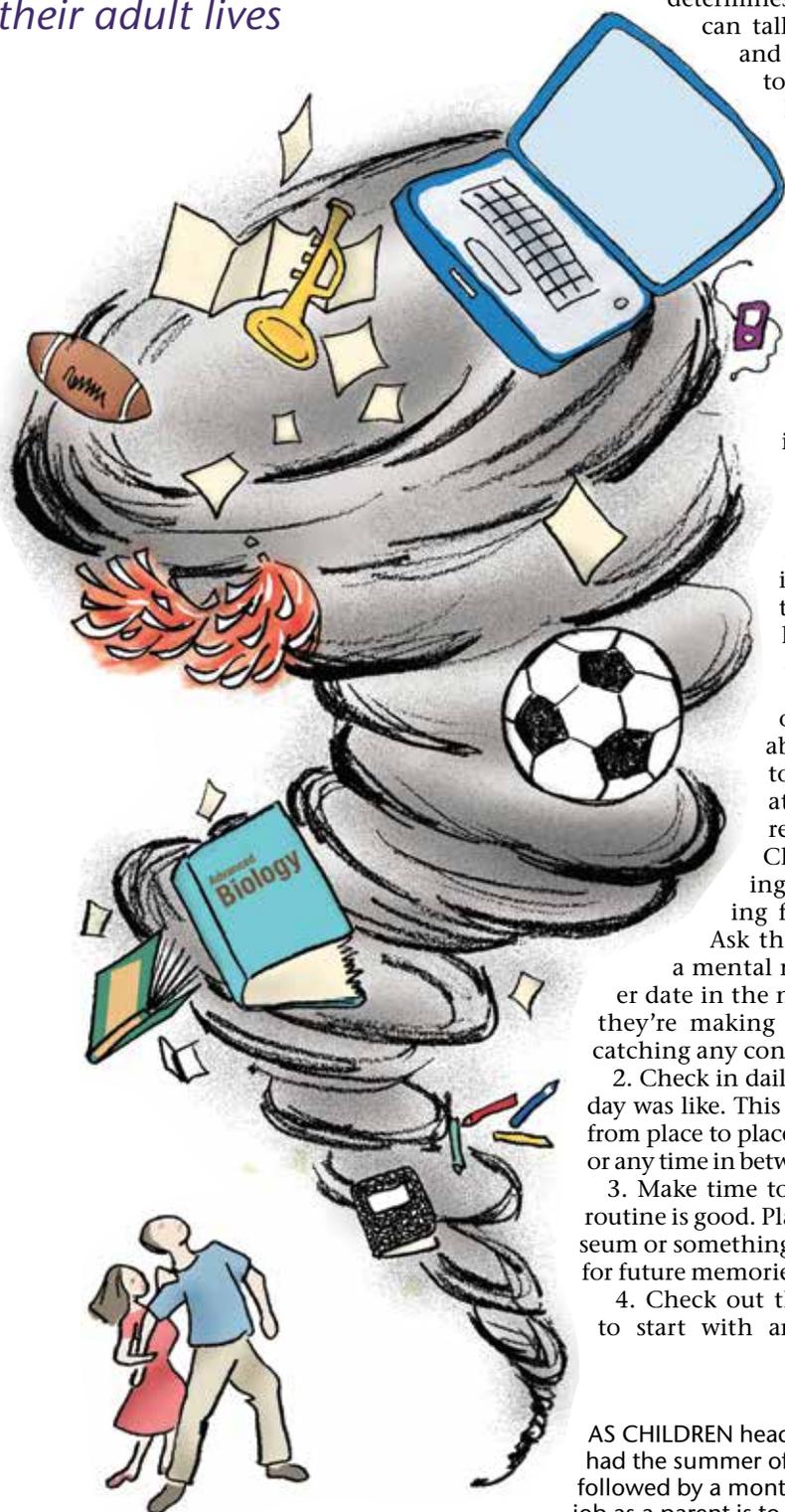
9. Set up the homework environment for success with a quiet, uncluttered, well-illuminated and user-friendly space in which to work. Respect the work area and study time and keep them interruption-free.

10. Make sure that the social scene is how you'd all like it. Ensure that your child has friends, that the first day of school will be a good one and that play dates actually happen if your child is young and needs help having them arranged. Outside-school activities can be wonderful, but don't over-schedule your child. Leave time to relax and play at home.

As a parent, you are an incredibly powerful role model. You teach your children so much through your behaviors, actions, thoughts and value system. Sometimes you do this directly, but often it is indirectly. Far more important than what you say is what you do and how you interact with others. They don't miss a trick, so if you are kind, caring and appreciative of others, whether a family member or the stranger on the street, they, too, will learn to be.

If you notice that your child is having difficulties or has a change in mood or behavior, make sure that he or she gets help. There are also times when parenting is very stressful and it becomes hard to go with the flow. If you need a break or additional support, find the way to achieve it. Set the scene, this school year, for success. There is nothing more important than a healthy family. ■

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