

Get them ready for school!

Give your kids a head start in the new school year by making sure they're as healthy and well-equipped as possible. Here are some tips

THE end of the holidays is in sight and with it comes a big change for the kids. Soon the days of staying up late, eating take-aways and carefree living will be replaced by the routine that school brings.

But this doesn't have to be a daunting prospect. As the start of the school year approaches, here are ways you can help your kids prepare for, and cope with, the demands of going to school.

GOOD SLEEP IS VITAL

In the week before school starts, get your kids back into a regular sleep routine. It's vital they get enough sleep every night to ensure they're alert at school. Here's a guide to how much sleep your child needs:

- * three to six years old: 10 to 12 hours per day.
- * seven to 12 years old: 10 to 11 hours per day.
- * 13 to 18 years old: eight to nine hours per day.

LESSEN THEIR STRESS

The start of a new year can be stressful for kids: a new teacher, perhaps new classmates and a heavier workload.

One clear sign that kids are feeling stressed is constant headaches, says SA Headache Society chairman Dr Elliot Shevel, so watch out for this, particularly in the first few weeks of school. A common cause of headaches is muscle tension, he says, which is triggered by stress.

If your child's stressed about going back to school, Dr Shevel suggests easing her mind by reminding her she's not the only one feeling uneasy about it.

To help your kids cope with stress during the year, ask them about their day even if the typical response is "it was okay". It will help them just to know that you're available to talk if they need to.

WATCH THEIR BACKS

Choose a backpack with wide, padded shoulder straps and a padded back, suggests Dr Shevel. A padded back prevents sharp objects digging into your child's back and perhaps altering their posture.

Your child's backpack should weigh no



more than 10 to 20 per cent of his body weight when filled.

Tell your child to use both shoulder straps as slinging a backpack over one shoulder can lead to muscle tension and bad posture. If her book load is heavy, consider getting a bag that's on wheels and can be pulled along rather than carried.

KEEP THEIR FEET HAPPY

Kids spend a lot of time in school shoes, so their feet should be comfortable. Follow these tips when buying their shoes:

- * Make sure there's about 10 mm extra room in the front of the shoe for your child's toes to wiggle around.
- * Choose shoes with built-in arch support and a broad heel for stability.

STOCK UP ON BRAIN FOOD

What your child eats plays a huge role in her health, ability to concentrate and energy levels during the day. Follow these tips to ensure your child is eating well:

- * Make sure they have a healthy, well-

rounded breakfast every morning. Choose two or three of these:

Whole-grain roll or cereal, bran muffins, crackers or melba toast.

Low-fat protein: boiled egg, peanut butter, lean meat, poultry, fish.

Low-fat dairy: skim milk, low-fat yoghurt, low-fat cheeses.

Fruit.

* A good school lunchbox should include a combination of: whole-grain sandwich with lean meats or low-fat cheese, fresh or dried fruit, vegetable pieces, nuts and low-fat yoghurt.

* Give fruit or pretzels as lunchbox treats instead of chocolate and chips. Keep chocolates for weekend treats, and even then opt for smaller ones with a biscuit wafer rather than solid chocolate.

* Make sure they drink mostly water and diluted fruit juice.

PROTECT THEIR EYES

The bulk of what a child learns – about 80 per cent, in fact – occurs through visual input. So the eyes are vitally important. Yet the Vision Centre at a US children's hospital has found that approximately one in four school-age children have some type of vision problem.

Today's kids spend a lot of time in front of computer and TV screens, which puts strain on their eyes, so they should have regular eye examinations (once a year or so). Parents should also ensure their kids spend no more than 10 hours a week in front of a screen. □

ADDITIONAL SOURCES: WWW.HEALTH24.COM, WWW.WEBMD.COM, WWW.KIDSHEALTH.ORG, WWW.PEDIATRICS.ABOUT.COM

WHEN USING A COMPUTER...

Here are some tips to help your kids avoid other computer-related problems, such as bad posture, sore neck and wrists and eye strain. They should:

- * sit with their feet touching the ground or resting on a stool;
- * keep an upright posture;
- * ensure their eyes are level with the screen
- * ensure their forearms are parallel to the floor;
- * relax their shoulders and eyes by looking away from the screen as often as possible;
- * take a break at least every 20 minutes.

SOURCE: AMERICAN PHYSICAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION