

Off on the right foot

St. Louis counselor shares advice for families as kids go back to school.

By [Lynn Israel](#), Friday, August 20, 2010



Photo by Gerik Parmele

Russell Hyken gives advice about helping children adjust to the school year during a recent visit to Columbia.

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Russell Hyken specializes in working with troubled teens and the learning-disabled.

He founded Educational and Psychotherapy Services, which specializes in educational evaluations, ADHD assessments and educational therapy.

He also works with therapeutic boarding schools and residential treatment centers across the nation.

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Russell Hyken, an educational diagnostician in St. Louis, one of only about 200 in the country, is offering some timely advice for parents who are trying to calm the nerves of children as they head back to school this week.

Learn more

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On the web:

Hyken's website, www.ed-psy.com/blog offers advice for parents.

Visiting the Mid-Missouri region last week, Hyken — who has more than 15 years of experience in education as a teacher, school counselor, psychological examiner and school administrator — deals with children who are having more serious problems than just the jitters about the return of classes, but he believes fostering the success of all kids comes from having a solid support system.

“Is that child able to go to school ready to learn?” Hyken asked. He said today's schools are providing an educational learning environment and fostering character development, but parents can't let teachers carry all the water.

“We still need to be doing all that at home, as well as making sure they start their homework every day at a certain time,” said Hyken, giving an example of how parents should set rules.

Hyken said one of the big keys to success is organization achieved through parental direction and parents serving as role models.

“We need to teach our kids how to be organized,” said the father of two boys, ages 7 and 9. “And that covers everything.”

He said parents should emphasize planning, but they should also keep parent-child activities related to school fun.

Returning to school also can create stress, but Hyken said stress is not necessarily a bad thing.

“Everyone needs to experience stress. There’s good stress and bad stress, good anxiety and bad anxiety,” he said. “The first thing I would say is you just need to listen to your kids ... don’t necessarily try to solve their problems for them because, especially for those teenagers, they just want someone to listen and” for you to “say ‘Huh, yeah, I get that, I understand school sounds pretty stressful for you.’ ” Parents, he said, should throw leading questions back to the kids and ask them what solutions they have about such issues.

Parents also need to be flexible and understanding.

“School is tough; school is hard,” Hyken said.

Some ways to have a successful start to the school year

Below are some of Hyken’s tips for helping families survive the back-to-school baptism of fire intact. Parents need to prepare well, stay organized and set clear boundaries to ensure a successful start to the school year:

Eating: Prepare healthier foods and start back with family meals.

Homework: Discuss homework rules and schedules to avoid arguing. Know what time kids should start working and predetermine consequences when these goals are not met.

Extracurriculars and after-school programs: Collaborate with kids about what they will do after school to assist with sign-up, tryout schedules and time management.

Calendar dates: Review the school calendar and know important dates and times such as parent conferences and important tests such as the ACT and SAT.

Positive attitudes: While some students are excited about the return to school, others have anxiety. Reinforce the good things such as seeing old friends, doing a favorite sport or activity and starting fresh. Don’t remind kids of last year’s pitfalls.

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