

CHICAGO DEFENDER



Back to School Tips

Community

Back to School Tips for Fathers

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Defender Guest Writer

With a new school year just around the corner, it's worth taking a moment to reflect on the significance of a child's first day in a new classroom. There is not only the excitement of a fresh start, but also the anxiousness that comes from a new environment and new school work. The start of the school year offers parents an opportunity to demonstrate that they are unified in the goal of advancing their children's education, even though they may live apart.

My advocacy on behalf of divorced fathers has shown me the importance of cooperation between parents with back-to-school matters and with classroom activities throughout the year. There are four important areas of emphasis: 1) sharing the cost of school supplies, 2) sharing responsibility for supporting your child's school schedule, 3) sharing responsibility for involvement in the child's activities, both in and out of the classroom, and 4) maintaining a unified message regarding academic expectations.

Parents can lay the groundwork for a successful school year weeks before the first day of school. The annual rite of buying school sup-

plies is one that many parents dread. Rather than burden one parent with the costs, parents should team up, coordinating the shopping and splitting the costs (unless it's agreed that one parent is in a position to pay more). If a big-ticket item needs to be purchased, such as a laptop or an expensive calculator, the child should understand that both parents were responsible for providing it.

The next obstacle to navigate is the school calendar. Your children's teachers and the school administrators should be made aware of your co-parenting arrangements, and both parents should be on the school's and teachers' email lists. Parents should be in communication to coordinate attendance of important events, such as parent-teacher conferences, athletic events, and school performances. It is human nature that one parent tends to manage scheduling more than the other, but both parents should make sure they are aware of what's coming up to avoid misunderstanding and resentment. No one should end up saying, "You didn't tell me this was happening."

When the school year begins, parents should strive to be as physically present as possible. Both parents should take the child to school on the first day, if they

can. This will send a message to teachers that both parents will be involved with decisions regarding the child's education. Similarly, parents should strive to attend all parent-teacher conferences. If this is not practical, then perhaps one parent can be available by phone, while the other appears in person. Parents should also make a point of attending as many of their children's school activities as possible. Both parents will likely be juggling work-life and parenting responsibilities without a second adult in the house, which severely limits flexibility. However, children will often view a parent's lack of attendance as a consequence of divorce or separation. Therefore, having parents in the audience will always be welcome. After all, if parents don't get along, they don't have to sit together. It's your attendance that's key.

Finally, when it comes to keeping children on track in their school work, both parents should be willing to play good cop and bad cop. For fathers who aren't living with their children, matters of discipline around school performance can be tricky. If a father feels the child is not maintaining his or her potential, he may want to be clear with the child about expectations. Similarly, there can also be strong



incentive to be the good guy, especially when the amount of time spent with the child is limited. Studies have shown that children of divorce commonly suffer from low self-esteem but a strong performance in school can help offset such feelings. A strong start to the school year can set a family on a

smooth course for the entire year. Cooperation among co-parents in the summer can set a positive tone for fall, spring, and beyond.

Jeffrey Leving is an attorney and founder of the Fathers' Rights Movement. For more information, visit: dadsrights.com