

• back to school •

Common back-to-school dilemmas and how to handle them

BY CATHEREN KANN

The stores are already filling with fresh notebooks, pencils, and must-have back packs. "Back to School!" conjures up those first crisp fall mornings, children's excitement, and some feelings of dread. How can you help your child navigate through those exciting but rocky first days of September? We surveyed a group of parents of elementary-age children and came up with a list of some top back to school dilemmas coupled with sound advice on how to handle them.

1. YOUR CHILD GETS THE TEACHER NO ONE RECOMMENDS.

Remember that in spite of any negative comments you may have heard, the school system hired this teacher because s/he has certain strengths. Parents unanimously said the key to managing this dilemma is communication. To aid the teacher in getting to know your child, make an appointment with him/her in mid-September to discuss your child's academic strengths and weaknesses. Communicate frequently with the teacher about what the class is studying. Often a not-so-competent teacher is overwhelmed. If the teacher knows you are supportive, she/he may be more attentive to your child's learning. Keep in mind that in spite of your opinion, your child might really like this teacher, so be careful not to let your child know you are unhappy. Through vigilant communication with the teacher about your child's progress, chances are your child will have a fine academic year anyway. As in life, your child must learn to deal with a variety of personalities. If the situation gets out of hand, then by all means, speak to the principal.

For an extreme scenario, some parents advocate a proactive stance. Meet with the principal early on and request your child not be in that teacher's class. Explain why your child would not be a good fit based on his/her learning style. For instance, perhaps the teacher is too rigid and your child requires flexibility due to special learning needs, or you believe the teacher is loose with discipline and your child would thrive in a more structured environment. In this way you can diplomatically achieve what is best for your child.

2. NONE OF YOUR CHILD'S FRIENDS ARE IN HER/HIS CLASS.

Initially this is very disappointing for a child. However,

most parents surveyed believe it is often for the best. Some parents suggested that perhaps the teachers separated your child and his friends on purpose. Consider these real case scenarios: "Paul" and his good friend "Matt" were too competitive with one another. "Elise" was always dominant in her friendship with "Elena." Remind your child that s/he will make new friends in class, and still have play dates, recess, and activities with the old friends. Being in a class apart from friends fosters self-reliance and independence in your child. It forces a child to branch out in a healthy way and make more friends.

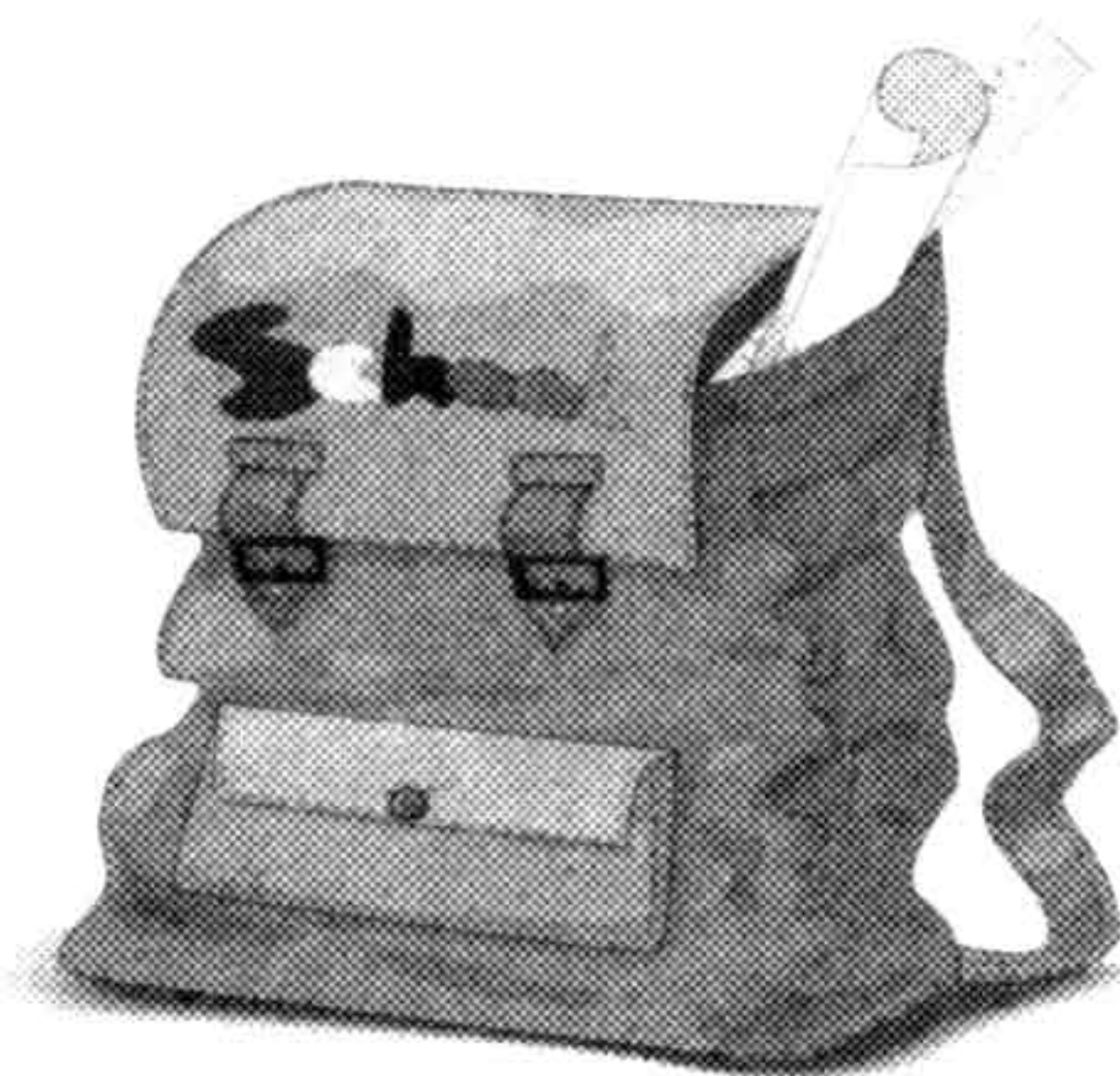
3. YOUR CHILD GETS PLACED INTO A COMBINATION CLASS, K/1, 1/2, 3/4.

Combination classes are common in some Massachusetts communities, such as Lexington, Cambridge, Newton, and Framingham. A combination class, such as a kindergarten/first grade, contains about 10 children from each grade level. Older children in addition to learning the curriculum of their grade level, are exposed to previously-learned material which reinforces their own learning. They may aide in leading the younger group, which gives them a boost in self-esteem. The younger group is motivated by the performance of the older group, and ideally, the next year they will

"cycle" up and become the older ones. For some subjects, a teacher's aide will teach one grade while the teacher teaches the other. The advantage is frequent smaller groups and more individualized attention.

Most parents believe that a combined class is right for some students but not for others. Half of the parents surveyed have requested their child be in a combination class, whereas others have requested the opposite. Combined classes raise heated debates in any school system. Nevertheless, parents all agreed that the success of the program depends on a competent teacher who has extra support, and that students in a combined class may receive more individual attention due to the smaller class size and extra support staff.

So if you find your child unexpectedly in a combined class, take heart. Meet with the teacher and the principal to learn how your school is structuring the combined class, and what extra support staff will be provided. If you are still uncomfortable, request your child be in a different class, or monitor the situation throughout the year to ensure that curriculum needs are being fulfilled.



4. YOUR CHILD HAS A HEALTH ISSUE WHICH REQUIRES VIGILANCE, SUCH AS FOOD ALLERGIES, DIABETES, OR ANOTHER HEALTH ISSUE.

Get to know the school nurse! Meet with the school nurse before school starts plan to receive regular feedback from her/him via e-mail, phone, or a health folder to be sent home. Discuss your child's medical condition with his/her teacher, and alert the lunch, art, music, and gym teachers as well. After a change in "Jack's" hay fever medication, Jack's teacher was able to alert his mother when Jack began acting lethargic in class. In an age appropriate way, your child should be taught about his/her condition. Enlist the support of the classmates and their parents by sending home a letter about your child's health issue. Six-year-old "Andrew" has a peanut allergy. When someone in his kindergarten class inadvertently brought in a peanut snack, several children in the class quickly alerted the teacher. Raising awareness of the issue educates and makes everyone more empathetic, as well as benefits and supports your child.

5. YOUR CHILD IS NERVOUS ABOUT STARTING KINDERGARTEN OR STARTING AT A NEW SCHOOL.

There is a lot a parent can do before school begins. Arrange a tour of the classrooms and meet the teachers in his/her grade level. Most schools do this with entering kindergarten classes. Once you receive the class list (over the summer) arrange some play dates in August with some of his/her future classmates. If your school has not done so, organize a class picnic on the school playground. In this way, your child will already know some kids when that first day arrives. Several days before school begins, call and arrange to bring your child in to meet his/her teacher a day early. These steps will go a long way toward easing his/her comfort level.

So relax. The key to managing these oh-so-common back to school dilemmas is patience and communication. As with many challenges in life, they serve as opportunities for growth, as much for us parents as for our children.

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