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## How to get your child back on track before school - in six steps



Don't panic if you've all been having more screen time this summer CREDIT: SCHEDIVY PICTURES INC

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Unless you are a parent who really loves routine, one of the most delicious things about the long summer break is the opportunity to let go of the reins.

Children amble down late to breakfast in pyjamas while their bedtimes slip in the long, lazy evenings. If they want to play on their iPads for two hours, well, it's Mum and Dad's holiday, too.

But after six weeks of feasting, flopping and playing Fortnite, the beginning of September can be a harsh wakeup call.

“The whole lovely thing about the summer holidays is that everyone relaxes a bit,” says Andrea Chatten, emotional and behavioural child psychologist and founder of [Unravel support](https://unravelsupport.co.uk/) (<https://unravelsupport.co.uk/>). “By now some children will be practically nocturnal - their whole body clock will be out of sync.”

The next few days are crucial when it comes to getting your strung-out summer children and teens ready for the term to come.

“Doing the legwork now gets their mind into the mindset of an active learner, rather than someone who has been playing in the happy, hippy fields,” Chatten says.

Small steps now will have children positively bounding into school for the autumn term - or at the very least not turning into snarling monsters when the alarm goes off.

## Step one: get over it

Start by laying down your own guilt over lax summer parenting and accept that change is possible. “If you got a bit lax over the break because you had something going on, or there wasn't a lot of structure to the day so the children were on screens, that isn't the worst thing a parent can do,” says Alexander Kriss, psychotherapist and author of *Universal Play*, a book about the effects of video games.

“Nothing terminal has happened here. You don't need to feel ashamed that you let things slide, and your children don't need to feel ashamed that they enjoy spending time on their screens.”



Chances are that, over the summer, your family sleep habits have changed CREDIT: BRAUNS

## Step two: set the goals

Knowing the official guidelines can help to set boundaries. According to [The Sleep Council](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/) (<https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/>), children between seven and 12 years old require between 10 and 11 hours of sleep per night, dropping to between eight and nine hours between the ages of 12 and 18.

Recent suggestions from Canadian academics also include an hour of physical activity and fewer than two hours on screens a day for teens.

[A study published in medical research journal Jama earlier this month found that fewer than one in 10 14-year-olds operates within these limits](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2748680) (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2748680>) at present, but they are something to aim for.

## Step three: move slowly

Sleep consultant Lauren Peacock, who runs [Little Sleep Stars](https://littlesleepstars.com/) (<https://littlesleepstars.com/>), says that moving bedtime 15 minutes earlier every day will help get even teens back on track.

“You have to start where you are,” she says. “If your children have been going to bed at 10 and you put them to bed at 8pm they won’t sleep.” While the toddler regime of ‘bed, bath and story’ won’t work for teenagers, Peacock says that a consistent screen-free routine before bed will benefit everyone.

“Make sure all technology is removed from their bedrooms,” she says.

## Step four: talk to your kids about your aims

Placing new limits on the amount of screen use per day may be necessary, but should be done with caution.

“Open dialogue about the rationale behind the boundaries you have set is important,” says Kriss. “Parents should be upfront about why there needs to be moderation, but they also need to acknowledge that they understand that this stuff is meaningful to the child, and isn’t just perceived as ‘candy’ for them. Technology can be a source of connection, a place to vent aggression. It has its own time and place like anything else.”

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## Step five: deploy distractions

Replacing screen time with new activities over the next few days will help to soften the blow. Parenting coach Alex Kremer suggests planning in some physical exercise in the open air.

“This can really help with sleep, but don’t run them ragged,” she counsels. “If they are overtired this releases cortisol, which stops them sleeping.” A reintroduction to regular mealtimes at the kitchen table, rather than out and about, will help, too.

Hannah Feldman, founder of Kidadl, an activities app designed to get children out and about, suggests laying out some traditional board games.

“When my kids want to play a computer game my first port of call is to set up a favourite board game, and soon they all convene around the table to play,” she says. “Sometimes as parents we need to provide the spark to ignite the (real life) action - as once they get started they’re off!”

## And finally...

Don’t assume your entire school re-entry project is a failure if the first day back goes badly.

“They probably won’t sleep the night before, and will be nervous and apprehensive,” warns Chatten .

Even if there are tears before registration, you can comfort yourself with the fact you’ve done your best.