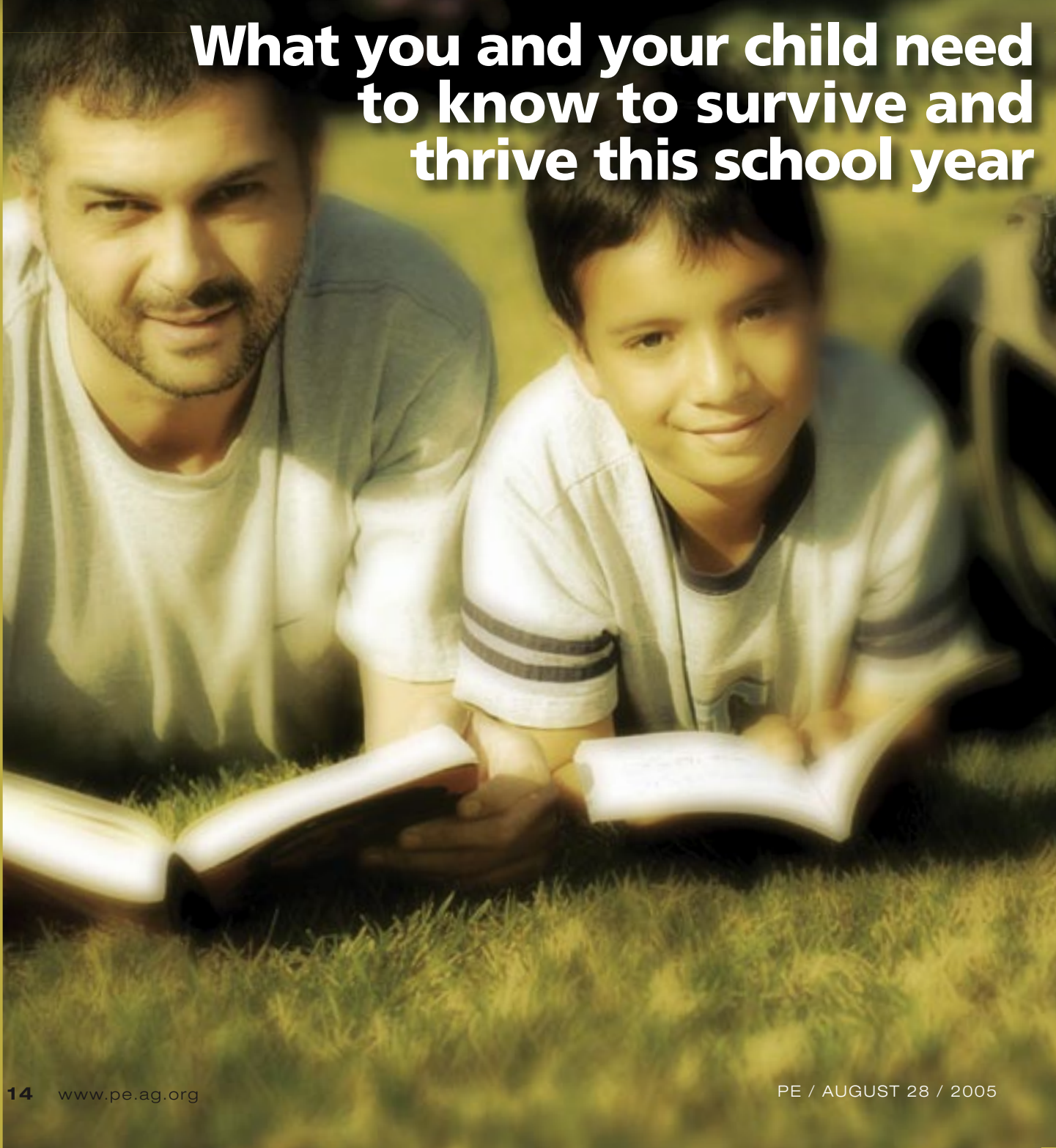




# K-12

**What you and your child need  
to know to survive and  
thrive this school year**



By Ashli O'Connell

It was early September and the Rocky Mountain air was starting to cool. I had a new pair of jeans and a bright pink shirt laid out next to my new saddle shoes. The sun wasn't even up yet, but I sprang out of bed. Ready to get dressed, grab my new Holly Hobby lunch box and race to the bus stop. It was the first day of school, and I couldn't wait to get there. Mom had to catch me in the yard to cut the tags off my new school clothes.

It could have been third grade. Maybe fourth or fifth. The memories run together now that I'm a 30-something mom with a school-age child of my own. But I haven't forgotten the excitement and promise that came with each new school year. What would my teacher be like? What would I learn? What new friends would I make? I couldn't wait to find out.

Reality usually set in by the second week. The teacher wasn't all fun and games. The work was hard. Sometimes

the kids were mean. Each new grade brought challenges that hadn't even occurred to me that exciting first day.

As a parent now, I experience excitement — and fear — from the other side of the fence. What will my daughter learn? Is she ready? Will the other students be nice to her? Will they tell her things on the playground that I don't yet want her to know? How can I best help her navigate the academic, social and emotional challenges that lie ahead?

Most parents are asking the same questions today. There's good news for all of us: From the first day of kindergarten to the day students head off to college or the work force, experts consistently say that parents have the greatest influence on how well their children weather the often-turbulent school years.

The *Evangel* spoke with students, educators and counselors to find out how parents can best help their children survive and thrive this school year.

*Continued on page 18*

## Do's and don'ts for elementary school parents

### Don'ts

1. Don't expect the school and teacher to do it all. Reading at home, helping with spelling words and working together on projects are all ways parents can support the learning taking place in the classroom.
2. Don't rescue your children from responsibility. Help them learn to remember their library books, their homework, their lunch, etc. If parents go overboard in meeting these needs, children fail to learn personal responsibility.
3. Don't underestimate your ability to help your child learn. Your input is vital to your child's academic success.

### Do's

1. Do offer continual love and support to your children. When children have a happy, secure home they are able to learn more quickly and retain new concepts more easily.
2. Do be sure your children have adequate rest. Sleep-deprived students lack concentration and motivation.
3. Do pray with and for your children — for their physical, emotional and spiritual protection. You may not be able to be with your children 24-7, but God can.

*Even well-intentioned parents make mistakes because they don't always know what to do. Because the early-elementary years are so vital to building the foundation for academic success, there are important do's and don'ts for parents to keep in mind.*



## Curiosity, cooperation and confidence

**K**indergarten is that critical first step for parents and students. Parents who have controlled every aspect of their children's lives are now sending them out into the "real world," and the transition can be frightening to parents and students alike.

For this reason, experts say kindergarten is as much — or more — about acclimating to the school environment as it is about academics. First and second grades build on this important foundation.

Debra Yonke has taught elementary school for 13 years and currently works as a staff development specialist for the R-12 School District in Springfield, Mo. She believes it is important to develop what she calls the "three Cs" in early-elementary-age children: curiosity,

cooperation and confidence. If a child is interested in learning, able to work and play with other children and secure in his or her self-worth, teachers have a much easier time instilling the academics.

There are a variety of ways parents can foster the three Cs. Yonke stresses with parents the importance of exposing children to a wide variety of experiences. Trips to the zoo and library and nature walks at the park, for example, encourage curiosity and provide opportunities for discussion. "Children who come to school

without these experiences are at a great disadvantage," she says.

Cooperation is also critical to academic success. Educators recommend that children spend time with alternate caretakers prior to entering kindergarten, al-

lowing them to practice being outside the parents' care. Parents should also provide opportunities for social interaction with other children their age and help normalize problems and work through solutions when social challenges arise.

The third C, confidence, comes from meeting a child's intense need to belong — to a family, a school, a group of friends — and a need to contribute, by giving back to family, school and friends. Children can and should be given responsibilities around the home and opportunities to help others in practical ways.

A curious, cooperative, confident student is teachable, and educators say that's the most important quality for an early-elementary student to bring to the classroom.

"If students come to me ready to learn with these things intact, I can teach them all the academic things they need to know," says Sherry Vargason, a first-grade teacher with 25 years of teaching experience.

Dr. Pat Barrett, a psychologist and



"Kindergarten is not like preschool; it's hard work. You have to color so much it makes your hands hurt."

— Abby, 6



“First grade is a little bit harder than kindergarten with all the math and reading. It’s going to be different and you need to read a lot at home.”  
— Madison, 7

## Talking about puberty and sexuality with your child

**A** child should begin to learn about sexuality at 2 or 3 years old, says Dr. Pat Barrett of EMERGE Ministries in Akron, Ohio. “Slang terms for body parts should not be used after 2 years, and children should begin to be taught about the preciousness of their body and private parts,” she says.

Children should be answered honestly when they ask questions about sex, but they should only be told what they are capable of understanding and the language used should be on their developmental level. Barrett stresses that parents need to make it clear to children that talking about sex to them is okay and that parents are willing to answer any questions.

The average age for the onset of puberty is 10; therefore the subject should be introduced by age 8 or 9, Barrett says. When parents begin to notice mood swings and body changes, they need to explain that what is happening in children’s bodies happens to everyone and is a natural part of God’s design for growing up.

Girls should be told of the coming physical changes before they happen. “At school, girls are seeing and hearing about others who may be further along in puberty, and this can be upsetting,” says Barrett.

Barrett tells parents that male children may go to their mother to discuss changes. “This is not abnormal, but part of the identification and fear of not being the man that Dad is,” she says. “Mothers can answer questions, but should gently guide their husbands and sons into open communication. Mothers should suggest that the father (or a male relative if the father is not present) have early discussions with the son.”

Steve Dunleavy, also a counselor at EMERGE, says parents of teens need to be aware of the sexual pressures their sons and daughters are facing at school.

“Having an open relationship with your kids goes a long way in helping them resist peer pressure,” Dunleavy says. “It’s hard for a lot of Christian dads or moms to talk to their children about sex, because it’s often viewed as a taboo topic in churches and it is sometimes difficult for them to talk to each other about it. But learning to talk to your teens in an open manner about subjects that they hear about every day at school really is important.”

EMERGE recommends the following books for negotiating these discussions:

- *Why Boys and Girls Are Different*, ages 3 to 5, by Carol Greene
- *Where Do Babies Come From?*, ages 6 to 8, by Ruth Hummel
- *A Chicken’s Guide to Talking Turkey with Your Kids About Sex*, ages 8 to 14, by Dr. Kevin Leman and Kathy Flores Bell
- *How to Talk Confidently with Your Children About Sex* by Lenore Buth

— Ashli O’Connell

child therapist with EMERGE Ministries in Akron, Ohio, says it is also important for Christian parents to know that many books will be read to children in public schools that show alternate lifestyles and behaviors as normal.

“It is important for parents to continue to instill their spiritual views and beliefs, to maintain open communication with their children and help them see that what the world says is normal may not be right in God’s eyes,” she says. “Children at this age need to be taught how to handle the differences in belief systems in a respectful manner.”



“The work is harder in second grade. You learn your borrowing and you read chapter books. Just go every day and don’t worry about stuff like, ‘Am I going to get this worksheet finished today?’ You’ll probably get it finished tomorrow before recess. But if you don’t, that’s bad news for you because you’re going to have to miss recess.”  
— Daniel, 8

## School gets serious



In the third or fourth grade the learning environment becomes more independent. It is helpful, Barrett says, if children have regular age-appropriate chores and responsibilities at home and have learned how to work independently by this time.

Parents and students should be prepared for an increased amount of homework and standardized testing during the upper-elementary years. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers the following tips for developing good homework and study habits:

- Create an environment that is conducive to doing homework. Youngsters need a permanent work space in their bedroom or another part of the home that offers privacy.
- Set aside ample time for homework and studying.
- Establish a household rule that the TV stays off during homework time.
- Be available to answer questions and offer assistance, but never do the work for them.
- To help alleviate eye, neck and brain fatigue while studying, it's recommended that youngsters close the books for 10 minutes every hour and take a break.
- If your child is struggling with a particular subject, a tutor can be a good solution. Talk with your child's teacher first.

It is also during these years that children begin to choose and be chosen

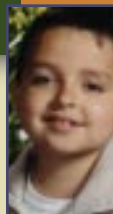
into peer cliques. They are still very much influenced by parents and teachers, but around this age peer groups become more influential. Yonke recommends that parents help their children foster healthy friendships by getting to know friends' parents, inviting children to their house and providing other supervised

opportunities for the children to spend time together.

Fifth-grade teacher Amie Turner,



"In third grade we learned decimals, division and multiplication tables. We read harder books and we had to write a lot of stories. We also had letter grades for the first time. I liked that because my mom and dad gave me money for A's."  
— Johnathon, 9



"Fourth grade was all right, but having to do different things like math and word building was hard. If I had a lot of homework I would ask God for help and to do better the next day and not feel lazy."  
— Gabriel, 10

who has taught for six years, says that fifth grade presents

several new challenges for elementary-age children. The onset of puberty is a major event for children, and the physical and emotional changes have a significant impact on a student's ability to cope with classroom challenges.

"I wish every parent could be a fly on the wall in my classroom," says Turner, who notices a big change in her students every January. "It's like clockwork: Before Christmas everything is just fine, and over Christmas break the kids completely change. The girls are suddenly more sensitive, emotional, and meaner to each other. The boys become a lot more aggressive. Boys and girls start 'going together.' The drama really picks up."

Turner says if parents are not talking

with their children at home about puberty and the changes that

are happening both physically and emotionally, students have a more difficult time adapting and staying on top of their schoolwork. (See sidebar on page 19 for more information on talking with your children about puberty.)

In the fifth grade, and sometimes in the fourth, many schools start to departmentalize. Students may have one homeroom teacher, another for math, and another for science, etc. Teachers say this is a huge adjustment for kids, but an important one in preparing for middle school.



"Fifth grade can be fun and challenging at the same time. You have to explain yourself more and learn how to socialize. Expect more homework, a lot of reading and a lot of projects like science fair."  
— Samantha, 11

## DID YOU KNOW?

Parents underestimate the level of influence they have to change a school for the better. Educators say a small group of parents has the power to change the course of their school. Be sure to approach administration as friends, not foes.

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## What happened to my child?

**T**he transition to middle school usually means there are many new students to interact with, more teachers to adjust to and intensified expectations for both performance and individual responsibility. All of this comes at a time when students are also experiencing a host of changes associated with the transition from childhood to adolescence. They are beginning to think of themselves as individuals outside of the family unit. Attention turns to exercising independence and developing strong relationships with peers. The atmosphere at home may become strained



“Seventh grade was a big change for me. All of my teachers had different personalities and different teaching methods. There were also some difficult changes such as more homework, tough finals and big projects. Thankfully, God and my parents were right behind me helping and encouraging me every step of the way.”

— Lindsay, 13

as parents and children struggle with redefining roles and relationships.

“It’s so true,” says Val Cantu, who has taught middle school math for four years. “You think you know your child and then they hit middle school. Suddenly you’re asking, ‘Who is this child?’ ”

Cantu says she sees many parents back off on their level of involvement at this stage of their children’s lives. This is a common mistake, she says. “These kids are starting to look grown-up, but emotionally they are not very mature. Parents possibly need to keep a closer eye on them than they did before. It’s important to have good

communication with teachers, to know where your child’s grades stand, and to know whom your children are hanging around with.”

She also recommends that parents get to know the school counselor, who can be a wonderful resource when a child is not transitioning well.

Parents need to work hard to foster open communication with their children, especially as they grow into the teen years. Steve Dunleavy, a counselor at EMERGE, recommends that parents establish regular one-on-one “activity nights” with their kids, approximately once per month with each child.

“The kids set the agenda for these times,” he says. “Whether it’s roller skating, laser tag, whatever your teen likes to do — it’s during these times that open communication happens.”

Dunleavy acknowledges it is difficult to find a balance between being



"Sixth grade is different from fifth because the work is harder. There is a lot more discipline.

You need to study because the tests are hard, and get a lot of sleep so that you can pay attention in class."

— Ashley, 12

## Demystifying middle school

Educators say most children have a lot of anxiety about the transition to middle school. Here are some practical things you can do to alleviate your child's fears:

- **Buy a cheap combination lock and practice opening it together.** Lockers are a huge source of anxiety for new middle schoolers.
- **Walk the halls of the school with your child on more than one occasion.** In addition to classrooms, be sure to locate bathrooms, the library and the cafeteria — plan out the best route for your child to take when navigating the hallways, which can be very overwhelming to a new middle school student.
- **Find out ahead of time what the lunchroom procedures are.** Middle school teachers have found that some students do not eat lunch at the beginning of the year because they do not know what to do.
- **Be alert to signs of depression or anxiety that may indicate your child is not transitioning normally.** Isolation from friends or family, moodiness, change in eating habits and noticeable change in academic performance that last more than two weeks should be evaluated by a professional.



overly intrusive and being aloof, but not finding this balance is one of the greatest mistakes that parents of teenagers make. "This is why these activity nights are so important," he says. "You create an opportunity for discussion and then let your child determine when they want to speak or if they want to speak at all."

He calls this practice "parenting through relationship."

"Building a relationship with your kids through what they like to do will really help you get them through this time," he says.



"Eighth grade is kind of hard. You are learning for high school. You are also reviewing and being taught new techniques and equations. You need to get good grades in order to pass high school."

— Gabriel, 12

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## The future is now



"Ninth grade is not as scary as everyone says it is. I know there's always that fear of peer pressure and getting asked to do things that you know aren't right. But as long as you don't hang out with the type of people who do that kind of stuff then most likely you won't have to worry about it. High school is fun. Just relax and enjoy it. Let everyone know that you aren't into doing bad stuff and people will respect you for it."

— Elise, 15

**N**inth grade is a critically important transitional year, says Lori Haldorson, who has been teaching high school math for 22 years.

"All of a sudden students are taking classes for credit and they have to pass or they will not graduate," she says. "That is a very, very difficult concept for a lot of kids. We lose a lot of students in the ninth grade."

Learning time-management skills becomes important if a student is to be successful in high school. In earlier grades, teachers often made decisions for students that students now will be expected to make for themselves. Parents should stay alert and be ready to help their children in making responsible decisions regarding their class



"Tenth grade is harder than freshman year because the classes are more difficult and it's harder to keep up. If you get involved in sports or clubs you'll have a lot more fun and the year will go by faster."

— Candace, 16

load, extracurricular involvement and church activities. Sometimes, parents can ask school counselors to assist students in understanding how the choices they make now will affect college, work, or other training after high school.

"Students and their parents need to be realistic about how many activities they can handle," says Haldorson. "There are so many choices for students, and there is more pressure than ever to be involved in sports and extracurricular activities. Many students are working part-time jobs as well. Academics become the least important thing for a lot of kids."

As ninth-graders navigate the transition to high school course work, they also face new social and emotional issues. Decisions on dating, sexuality, smoking, drinking and drugs will continue to confront them throughout high school.

Haldorson says many parents underestimate the social pressures that students face. "As adults we can avoid most of the temptation that our students cannot," she says. "They have to go to the locker room; they have to go

to the cafeteria, the crowded hallways. If parents are not giving their students the tools to handle tough situations, teenagers find it very difficult to handle temptation."

Sami Iannone, a recent high school graduate and member of Lakeside Assembly of God in Oklahoma City, says facing the social pressures of high school was made easier because of the support she got at home.

"I had to take a stand early in high school that I was going to hang around the right people. I lost some friends that way, but in the end I gained

*Continued on page 26*



"Being an 11th-grader is full of freedom. First, most people are driving by 11th grade and you're at the age where you don't desperately need a full-time job. It's also full of anticipation because you know there is only one year until you are 18 and a senior that rules the school."

— Colton, 17

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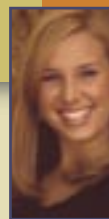
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## High school



"Get involved in high school because that helps you reach out and be a witness. Don't try to be lost in the crowd. Other students will respect you if you stand up for what you believe, and you'll have nothing to regret when you graduate."

— Sami, 18

respect from my peers."

But that doesn't mean it wasn't hard. "I would come home crying sometimes because I felt left out," she says. "But my parents were right there to hang out with me. We'd go to dinner, rent a video or something. They would listen to me, pray with me and encourage me."

Sami says that's what teens need most from parents. "So many teenagers don't feel loved because they can't measure up to their parents' expecta-

tions. Kids just need their parents to love on them." ■

*Ashli O'Connell is assistant editor of Today's Pentecostal Evangel.*

*E-mail your comments to [pe@ag.org](mailto:pe@ag.org).*

## B r a i n f o o d



## Getting the right fuel for school

**W**hile toaster pastries and sugary cereals are popular breakfast foods among today's kids, nutritionists say such foods fail to make the grade when it comes to getting students through a busy morning at school.

Most parents know that nutrition is important for a child's physical development, but experts now believe it may also play a key role in academic achievement.

Dr. Doris Derelian, who studied the effects of food intake among elementary aged children in the early 1990s, says research over the past two decades has consistently shown a link between healthy eating habits and classroom performance. And the most critical meal of the day, according to Derelian, is the one many busy parents overlook: breakfast.

"The data says that nationwide on any given school day an average of 50 percent of children are entering the classroom without adequate nutritional preparation," says Derelian, who heads the Food Science and Nutrition Department at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. "That carries over to every aspect of the school day."

Derelian says foods containing large amounts of processed sugar metabolize quickly and may leave children feeling weak and hungry by midmorning.

"The blood sugar can be dramatically affected by the composition of the meal," she says. "A child who has a glass of orange juice and some cereal on the way to school is consuming carbohydrates that will get used up very quickly."

Children who are hungry or experiencing low blood sugar may make mistakes more often, have difficulty concentrating and seem sluggish or be more prone to disruptive classroom behavior. They may also complain of headaches or stomach discomfort.

"Clearly if a child can't pay attention, can't absorb the information being presented or is unable to adequately perform on tests, it's going to affect that child's learning experience," says Dr. Ferdinand Yates, a Christian pediatrician in Buffalo, N.Y.

To help get children through the morning, Derelian recommends a breakfast loaded with complex carbohydrates and protein. Instead of toaster pastries, for example, bacon and toast with fruit preserves would be a better choice.

"If they have to eat a toaster pastry, maybe they'd be willing to have some cheese and a glass of milk with it," Derelian says.

— Christina Quick

# Five things every high school parent needs to do

- 1. Research the high school.** Know what honors programs and technical programs are available. Help your teen plan out the next four years in a way that maximizes his or her talents and dreams.
- 2. Be realistic about how many extracurricular activities your teen can handle.** Be sure to factor church activities into the equation. Help your child understand that academics take priority over after-school jobs and extracurricular activities.
- 3. Talk about the big issues.** High school students face unprecedented pressure to lose their virginity, experiment in homosexuality and try smoking, drugs and alcohol. Do not expect your school and church to handle this for you — parents underestimate the level of influence they can have on their teens. Give students tools to avoid these situations and to say no when confronted with pressures.
- 4. Take your teen to college visits.** Students can be overwhelmed by the choices available and the paperwork for college applications and financial aid. Parents need to be available to help their teens through this process.
- 5. Foster relationships with the parents of your teen's friends.** Share feedback and ideas for working together to help your children through this critical stage of life.

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