

## Back-to-School Toolkit

Back-to-school season can bring excitement — and stress — for kids and parents alike. New schedules, academic demands, and social changes can make it hard to settle into routines after summer break. To ease the transition, FSC has gathered practical strategies — grounded in neuroscience and psychology, informed by ADHD and trauma research — to support learning, regulation, and connection so families can start the year with confidence and calm.

### Study Tips That Work with How Brains Learn

**Why these tips work:** Kids — especially those who are neurodivergent or experience anxiety — often benefit from external structure, short bursts of focus, and multi-sensory engagement. Research shows that learning improves when activities include novelty, appropriate challenge, urgency, and personal interest. These strategies build on those strengths while reducing the overwhelm and distraction that can come from repetitive or overly demanding tasks.

#### 1. Use a Pomodoro Timer (25–5–4 method)

**How it works:** 25 minutes of work, 5 minutes of break, repeat 4 times. Use a kitchen timer, your phone, a free app, or even ask Alexa to “set a Pomodoro timer.”

**Why it helps:** Breaks tasks into manageable chunks, prevents overwhelm, and leverages urgency — all while giving the nervous system regular rest to improve regulation and motivation.

**Tip:** Use a visual timer so your child can track time without asking “How much longer?” Over time, repeated exposure to visual timers can improve their internal sense of time and independent time management skills.

#### 2. Try Body Doubling

**What it is:** A focus and productivity strategy where you work in the same space as another person, each on your own tasks. You’re not helping each other directly, but you are modeling responsibility and focus for one another.

**Why it works:** Having another person present creates external accountability and structure without adding extra pressure, boosting focus, reducing procrastination, and making tasks feel more manageable. It also engages the brain’s mirror neurons — systems that reward us for social connection and shared activity — to increase motivation.

**How to use it:**

- Sit at the same table quietly working on your own tasks.
- Invite a friend or sibling to “study together.”

- Try virtual body doubling (e.g., StudyWithMe videos, video chat with a classmate)

### 3. Build Structure with Transitions, Choices, and Emotional Readiness

If your child has difficulty getting started or shifting from another activity (clubs, screentime, etc.), these strategies can reduce power struggles:

- Give a **5-minute warning** before starting homework to help them wind down.
- Use a **movement break** or snack between school and study time to signal a transition.
- Keep routines **predictable** — same study spot, same time — to help the brain know what to expect and to model how to build structure independently.
- Give **choices** to build autonomy: Let your child pick which subject to start with, where to work, or which pen or highlighter to use. Small choices reduce resistance and increase buy-in.
- Break work into **micro-steps**: For kids who get overwhelmed, guide them step-by-step at first (“Open your notebook → turn to page 37 → read the first question”), then fade support as they build independence.
- **Check in emotionally before starting**: A quick “How ready do you feel for homework on a scale of 1–5?” can flag if they need a regulation break before getting started.

### 4. Multi-Sensory Study Strategies

When subjects are challenging, engaging other areas of the brain — especially areas where your child has strengths — can boost learning and reduce stress.

- Read notes out loud while walking, tossing a ball, or using a fidget tool.
- Use color-coding for subjects, tasks, and notes to reinforce learning through visual associations.
- Turn important facts into songs, rhythms, jokes, or movement games.
- Write stories or draw pictures (even using pop culture references) to illustrate difficult concepts or subjects. This not only taps into your child’s strengths, which can enhance memorization, but also makes learning more enjoyable — reducing the intimidation factor for challenging material.

## Reinforce What’s Going Well

Have these strategies helped? Fantastic — let’s repeat that success. Kids are more likely to stick with behaviors that get noticed and appreciated. For children who have struggled with homework in the past, positive reinforcement can help rebuild confidence and motivation.

- **Be specific:** Instead of “Good job,” try “I like how you kept working even when that question was tricky” or “You did a great job asking for help when you got stuck.”
- **Acknowledge effort, not just results:** Praise persistence, focus, and problem-solving. These skills build over time and lead to better outcomes.
- **Offer small rewards when needed:** This can be as simple as a sticker chart, extra bedtime story (or screentime), choosing the family’s after-dinner game, or a favorite snack.
- **Pair praise with observations:** Point out exactly what you saw — “You sat for the whole 25 minutes” or “You started even though you didn’t feel like it.” This helps them know exactly which behaviors you would like them to repeat.

Positive reinforcement isn’t about ignoring challenges — it’s about making sure your child knows you notice what they’re doing right, even in small moments.

## Co-Regulation Strategies for Parents

When homework time starts to spiral, don’t panic — get strategic. These techniques can help you defuse tension and stay curious about what your child’s big emotions might be trying to communicate.

1. **Match and lower:** Start by meeting your child’s energy level with empathy (“I hear you, this is SO frustrating!”), then gradually slow your tone and pace to help them regulate. This is based on Dan Siegel’s “right brain to right brain” communication model. [Learn more about this approach here.](#)
2. **Ground together:** When emotions run high, we can lose touch with our bodies and get stuck in our thoughts — which are often filled with fears or anxieties. Focusing on physical senses helps the nervous system settle, making healthy communication and good decision making easier. Try having your child name:
  - a. Five things they see
  - b. Four things they feel
  - c. Three things they hear
  - d. Two things they smell
  - e. One thing they taste

*Bonus:* A sour candy or strong mint in the last step can boost the calming effect by giving the brain an intense, pleasant sensory cue to focus on.
3. **Breathing tools:** Try “box breathing” (inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4) together. If that’s tricky, encourage your child to make each exhale longer than the last, turning it into a game of who can go the longest, or to “blow out” an imaginary candle (their fingertip).
4. **Plan for a distraction-proof safe space:** Have a designated “calm down” spot with sensory tools (stress ball, weighted lap pad, soft blanket) and minimal distractions to help them recenter without jumping into a new activity.

## When the Strategies Aren't Working: Troubleshooting & Support

Tried every one of those strategies and still hitting a wall? Keep in mind: it's completely normal for a strategy that used to work to suddenly fall flat — or for something that never helped before to finally click. This kind of variability is especially common for kids with ADHD or anxiety, whose needs and capacities can shift from day to day. Flexibility and experimentation are key.

Before diving into troubleshooting, start with the basics: has your child had a snack, some water, and a chance to move or rest their body? Meeting these essential needs first can prime their brain and body for better focus, regulation, and success.

Once those boxes are checked, these next strategies may be more effective.

### 1. Reassess the environment:

- a. **Change location:** school ↔ home ↔ public library; bedroom desk ↔ shared table.
- b. **Adjust sound:** quiet ↔ background noise; ambient room sounds ↔ noise-canceling headphones; white noise ↔ study playlist.
- c. **Tweak sensory input:** school clothes ↔ cozy PJs; scented candle ↔ unscented space; fidget tool ↔ clear desk space.
- d. **Modify lighting:** bright ↔ soft; overhead lighting ↔ gentle lamp light.
- e. **Check posture/seating:** Some kids focus better sitting, others standing. Try a footrest, wobble pads, or stretchy bands to improve comfort or provide stimulating movement.

### 2. Reach out for extra support:

Sometimes the real challenge isn't the homework, it's the social stress, life pressures, or anxiety about the future. Mental health support can also improve academic and social wellbeing.

- a. **Family Service Center** – Counseling for youth and families in the North Shore area. Call 847-251-7350 or visit [familyservicecenter.org](http://familyservicecenter.org).
- b. Contact your child's school counselor to explore available supports.

### 3. Consider a comprehensive evaluation:

If struggles often lead to meltdowns or ongoing frustration beyond homework time, a comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation can clarify strengths, challenges, and best-fit supports. Share results with the school to create a coordinated plan that incorporates professional, targeted interventions.

### 4. Explore school support plans:

Ask about a 504 Plan or Individualized Education Program (IEP) if challenges are persistent. These can provide accommodations such as extended test time, reduced homework, sensory breaks, or preferential seating.



Your school's special education coordinator or case manager can guide you through eligibility and implementation.

**Bottom line:** Support is not one-size-fits-all. Adjust, try again, and reach out for help — you're not alone.

# BACK-TO-SCHOOL TOOLKIT

Brain-friendly, trauma-informed homework tips

## Before Homework Starts

- Snack + water (fuel that brain!)
- Move/stretch or rest body
- Quick check-in: "1-5, how ready do you feel to start?"



## Study Strategies

- Pomodoro: 25 min work, 5 min break x 4 (use visual timer).
- Body Doubling: Work beside someone else, each on your own tasks.
- Transitions: 5-min warning before starting; snack or movement between activities.
- Choices: Let kids pick subject, location, or supplies.
- Multi-sensory: Read aloud while moving, color-code notes, make songs or stories.

## Encourage & Reinforce

- Praise effort, persistence, and problem-solving, not just good results
- Be specific: "You stuck with it even when it was tricky."
- Small rewards if needed: story, snack, family game.

## Regulate

- Co-regulate: Match their energy with empathy, then slow your tone.
- Grounding: 5 things see, 4 feel, 3 hear, 2 smell, 1 taste (bonus: sour candy).
- Breathing: Box breathing (4-4-4-4) or "blow out a candle."
- Calm space: Quiet spot with sensory tools.

## Troubleshoot

- Change location (desk ↔ table)
- Adjust sound (quiet ↔ study music).
- Change sensory input (cozy clothes, fidget tools).
- Modify lighting (bright ↔ soft).

## Get Support

- Professional counseling can address the concerns "behind" the homework, and Family Service Center is here to help.
- Ask your school about a 504 Plan or IEP if challenges persist.

