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As summer ends, families find ways to stay connected

BY LIZA N. BURBY | Special to Newsday
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There's something about flipping the calendar over to September that feels a lot like hearing the starting gun at a race. Suddenly you're off and running with your children's hectic schedule of homework and after-school activities, leaving in the dust whatever quality family time you managed to maintain this summer. The only hope you have to catch your breath, short of holiday breaks, is the promise of next June. And we're not even a week into the sprint.

Karen Henry, 48, of Malverne, mother of Samantha, 13, and Max, 15, says she finds the start of school particularly difficult since she and her husband, Steve, 47, both teachers, also went back this week. "It's harder because we do spend several weeks together during the summer. So it's more of a challenge during the school year when the whole week we have night activities and sometimes five minutes to eat together. It feels like being on a treadmill all of a sudden."

But the first month of school doesn't have to undo the benefits of a summer vacation. In fact, even if you're not already feeling frenzied, this weekend is a good time to take stock of your family's schedule - and state of mind. Otherwise, says Debbie Mandel, Lawrence-based author of "Addicted to Stress" (Jossey Bass, \$22.95), the stress is likely to spread to everyone in the house and make getting through the school year difficult for kids and parents alike.

Families are more likely to feel this pressure because they tend to over-schedule their children in their quest to set them up for success, says Barbara Fontana, a psychologist and marriage counselor in Shoreham.

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"You have to ask yourself if the pace you're keeping as a family is necessary. Two to three activities in the same school day is too much," she says. "Parents need to talk about what is reasonable given that kids need time to themselves, to relax and just to be kids. ... Limit the number of activities per child to two a week."

In addition to taking stock, try to shift your schedules to include family bonding, just as you did this summer. Mandel says that doesn't necessitate setting aside a large block of time, but rather even just 10 minutes. "The point is to establish a ritual that connotes downtime like an after-dinner walk together, stretching before bedtime, preparing dinner

together," she says. "It's times like that when kids tend to open up and talk to you, so that's an added bonus."

For the Henrys, whose children are involved in soccer and music, a "no friends on Sunday rule" helps to anchor the week. "We have to make a commitment to set aside that time," says Karen Henry. "We also try to eat together often, something that's so easy during the summer. ... Every so often we have dinner at 3:30 just so we can sit down together at the table. And when we feel we haven't really spent time together in a while, the kids ask to see videos of our summer."

[Lakeview](#) residents Sheila Lake, 41, a PTA president, and her husband, Christopher, 56, a [NYC Transit](#) Authority manager, are used to spending much of the school week going from one game to another for their four kids, Alexis, 8, Brandon, 11, Christopher, 14, and Darrell, 22, so they also try to bind the family together around meals. "During the summer we barbecue often, and the kids like that," says Sheila Lake. "But once school starts, that's difficult to do. Our solution is to try to go out to dinner once or twice a month. And we go to all the kids' functions together as a family, even though they're at three different schools. It's hard, but it pays off in the end."

TIPS: Activities to bring the family together

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There are many other ways families can creatively spend time together. "Addicted to Stress" author Debt Mandel suggests starting small, like shared weekend activities like a Friday pizza, video or game night. Here are other suggestions from Mandel and Shoreham psychologist Barbara Fontana:

Creative meals. If family picnics connote summer fun, then have one on the weekend, preferably following a hike. When the weather doesn't cooperate, spread a blanket on the living room floor for an indoor meal instead. You also can plan a Sunday brunch, which everyone helps to prepare, or set aside one night for a theme meal, taking turns choosing throughout the school year. And who says you can't grill outdoors just because you now need a sweater? Warm up by making s'mores.

Day trips. If the kids enjoyed your family summer getaways, take advantage of the season to pick apples, head out east for the farm stands and look for fall festivals each weekend. The parks and gardens are still open, and you can take walks at the beach. Start planning now for the next school break, Columbus Day weekend.

Sleeping in. If everyone is missing the extra sleep summer vacation brings, try not to schedule early morning activities on the weekend. When possible, have a pajama day and plan breakfast for dinner.

Summer memories. Plan to do something together with all those summertime family photos. Have a scrapbook night or design a collage. You can even use the latter to get a jump on your holiday photo for cards.

Reading together. No matter how old the child, most will enjoy spending time each night listening to you read aloud from a book you liked as a kid or one of the books they recommend. You also can listen to books on CD together for a soothing way to end a busy school day.

- LIZA N. BURBY



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