



# Strong Systems Build Tough Minds

A family guide to the first month of school for parents of middle and high school students

Every August, families promise this year will be different. By October, many of those plans are buried under missing assignments, late nights, and loose papers. Those problems start in the **first weeks of school**, while habits are still forming. And habits take time: a 2024 University of South Australia research review put the real number around two months, not the 21 days of the old saying. So this is a plan for the first month, not the first morning. It takes real effort, and it pays all year.

## DECIDE TO BE DIFFERENT

### Before Day One: The Weekend Before

#### 1 Move bedtime back over two nights, not one

A summer sleep schedule doesn't reset in a single evening. Shift bedtime and wake-up earlier on both Saturday and Sunday so Monday morning isn't a shock to the system. Sleep is a performance issue, and most teens start the year short on it (the data is on page 5).

#### 2 Walk through the schedule together

Have your student talk you through their classes in order. For a new building, find a map. Make sure school portal logins work now, not the night something is due.

#### 3 Set up the study spot

A clear surface, decent light, chargers, basic supplies, and no phone. Ideally not the bed. It doesn't need to be fancy. It needs to exist before homework does.

#### 4 Agree on the phone rule before the first battle **THE BIG ONE**

Decide together, in a calm moment: where the phone lives during homework, and when it comes back. Something as simple as "the phone charges on the kitchen counter from 7 to 9" works. A rule made in advance is a routine. A rule made mid-argument is a fight. This one gets its own spotlight for a reason: the typical teen now receives 237 notifications a day and picks up the phone more than 100 times (Common Sense Media, 2023). Phone time can wreck the best-laid plans. The sooner kids and parents both realize that, the easier the whole year gets.

#### 5 Put a planner in the backpack

Paper or app, either works. The best planner is the one your student will actually touch every day. It goes to school on day one, because that's when the dates start arriving.

## Week One, Day by Day

Each of these takes 10 to 20 minutes in the evening. None of them require nagging. They're things you do *with* your student, once, at a set time. Few families do them consistently. That's what makes them an edge.

### DAY One

#### Collect, don't quiz

The only job today: every syllabus and handout comes home, on paper in the backpack or posted on Canvas or Google Classroom. At dinner, skip "How was school?" and ask one specific question instead (page 5 has a list). Let the first day just be a first day.

### DAY Two

#### Build the planner

Sit down together and transfer **every date from every syllabus and class page** into the planner: test dates, project deadlines, recurring quizzes. Twenty minutes tonight prevents most of the "I didn't know it was due" moments of the semester.

### DAY Three

#### Run the homework routine, even if there's no homework

Same time, same place, phone parked in another room. If assignments are still light, use the block to review notes or organize binders. You're not doing homework tonight. You're **installing the routine** while the stakes are low.

### DAY Four

#### The 15-minute Thursday review

Thursday, because Friday nights are for games and fun. Start with a quick look at the grade portal together, then three questions: What worked this week? What got dropped? What changes next week? Set the rhythm now: **same review, same night, every week**. A weekly check builds accountability. Daily checking builds resentment.

### DAY Five

#### Enjoy Friday. It's earned.

Go to the game. Get pizza. Let school be done for the day. A family that runs its systems Monday through Thursday gets Friday night free, and that's the deal you want your student to feel: handle business first, then enjoy it.

### COACH'S NOTE

The goal for week one is not perfect grades. Nothing is even graded yet. The goal is systems: by Friday, your student should have a planner full of real dates, a homework routine they've already run three times, and the quiet confidence that comes with being organized. None of that is luck. It's a decision your family made a week earlier.

## Weeks Two, Three, and Four

Week one builds the systems. The next three weeks are where they either set or slip. Here is what each week is for.

### WEEK Two

#### Make the checks routine

The newness wears off and the real schedule shows up: first quizzes, heavier homework. This is the week the Thursday review and Sunday reset either become normal or quietly disappear. Keep both. In the portal check, let your student lead: they read the screen, you listen.

### WEEK Three

#### The boring week is the one that counts

Nobody feels motivated in week three. That's normal, and it's the point: habits are built by repetition after the excitement is gone, not before. Don't renegotiate the phone rule or the homework block now. Systems that run on the boring days are the ones that hold on the hard ones.

### WEEK Four

#### Review it, then lock it in

Sit down together for a 20-minute month-end review: What's working? What got dropped? What does next month need? Keep what worked, fix one thing, and say the wins out loud. A system that has held for a month mostly runs itself from here.

### WHEN TO PAY CLOSER ATTENTION

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## Worth Noticing Early

One rough week isn't a pattern. But a few things are worth acting on if they're still true in week two or three: **"I don't have any homework" every single day** (there's almost always something to review), **a planner that's still blank on Friday**, **missing assignments already showing in the portal**, or **bedtime sliding later every night**. These are habit problems, not character problems. Caught early, they're small fixes.

## Coach T's Insights

I'm a tutor and a coach, not a counselor, so this is plain talk: reps, routines, and standards. Four of these are for your student, one is for you, and all five are what I tell families before the first bell rings.

### THE MAIN THING

## *"All learning is self-learning."*

A coach told me that years ago, and the world keeps proving him right. The world now changes faster than any curriculum, and waiting around to be taught is how you fall behind. The students who learn how to learn **now** will handle whatever comes next. That's the urgency, and it's real. So take ownership of your education, whatever the system around you looks like: value learning, and remove what stands in its way, starting with the phone and social media. That responsibility doesn't fall only on parents. Kids are smart. Encouraged to take the wheel, they can figure out what's best for them and what they need to do. This whole guide is just a way of handing them the wheel.

### 1 Smile and be kind. Everyone is nervous

Your classmates are just as nervous as you are, even the ones who hide it well. Look for someone who could use a hand. Helping somebody else is the fastest way to get out of your own head. And the same goes for your teachers. Be kind to them too: they're nervous on day one just like you, they have their own adult lives to manage, and they're doing it in front of twenty-five of you at a time. A friendly face in the room means more to them than you'd guess.

### 2 Fake it until you make it

Don't spend the first week collecting rumors about your teachers and deciding how terrible a class is going to be before it starts. Walk in positive and give the year a real chance. Have a good attitude from the start, and maybe you won't be proven wrong.

### 3 Parents: relax, and let go a little

Don't panic over week-one wobbles. Let your student figure things out, and let them mess up some. A forgotten assignment in week one, while the stakes are low, teaches more than a month of reminders ever will. They will learn from it, and that's the point.

### 4 It's not cool to act uninterested

Here's a secret: the kids who make fun of everything are usually the most scared. Acting bored is just hiding. Raise your hand, join something, get involved. Caring about things is what confident people actually do.

### 5 Take it day by day, class by class

Don't spend the whole day rushing to lunch and then rushing to get home. Slow down and find something to enjoy in each hour: a subject, a person, a small win. And while you're in there anyway... try and learn something.

## The Six Anchors

Talent doesn't collapse in October. Systems do. When a student struggles, it's rarely about intelligence. It's one of these six anchors coming loose. Set them in week one and check them all month, then all year.

### 1. Consistent sleep

Teens need 8 to 10 hours, but in the CDC's 2023 national youth survey, 77% of high schoolers reported getting less than 8 hours. Grades track sleep closely. Protect it before anything else.

### 2. Real meals, starting with breakfast

A teenager running on vending-machine snacks is running on fumes. CDC research links eating breakfast to better grades and stronger memory and attention. Real meals, most days, beat any supplement.

### 3. Daily movement

Practice, a pickup game, a walk: anything counts. CDC reviews link regular physical activity to better grades, attendance, and classroom behavior. It's also the cheapest stress relief a teenager has.

### 4. A planner they actually touch

Not the fanciest system, the one they'll open daily. If assignments live only in their head (or "it's all online"), things will fall through. Every date goes in, same day it's assigned.

### 5. A fixed homework block

Same time, same place, phone elsewhere. Attention research finds it takes about 23 minutes to fully refocus after one interruption (Mark, UC Irvine). A set routine protects focus, and it ends the nightly negotiation.

### 6. The Sunday reset

Fifteen minutes: empty the backpack, toss the junk, file the papers, check the planner for the week ahead. Small weekly maintenance is what keeps October from unraveling.

## GETTING MORE THAN "FINE"

## Six Better Questions Than "How Was School?"

"How was school?" gets one-word answers because it's too big to answer. Specific questions get real conversations. Keep these somewhere you'll see them and use one at dinner.

» *"Which class do you think will be the hardest this year, and why?"*

» *"Which teacher explains things the best so far?"*

» *"Who did you sit with at lunch?"*

» *"What's one thing that's different from last year?"*

» *"What's the hardest part of your day right now?"*

» *"What are you looking forward to this year?"*

## The First-Month Checklist

- ☐ **Bedtime shifted back** over the weekend, before day one
- ☐ **Study spot set up** clear surface, supplies, not the bed
- ☐ **Phone rule agreed on** decided calmly, in advance
- ☐ **Every syllabus collected** day one
- ☐ **Every date in the planner** tests, projects, recurring quizzes
- ☐ **Homework routine run 3+ times** same time, same place, phone parked
- ☐ **Grade portal login works** checked before day one
- ☐ **Thursday 15-minute review, every week** worked, dropped, change
- ☐ **Sunday reset, every week** 15 minutes: empty backpack, check planner
- ☐ **Weekly portal check, student leading** part of the Thursday review
- ☐ **Month-end review done** keep what worked, fix one thing, name the wins

### Tough-minded doesn't mean doing it alone.

This is tutoring plus coaching. A tutor helps with tonight's assignment. I also build what's underneath it: the systems, the routines, and the ownership that carry the year.

I work with families in Brentwood, Franklin, Nashville, and online. Send me a short note about your student through the website and I'll reply within a day. No pressure, no sales pitch, just a straight answer about whether I can help.

MESSAGE COACH T

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