

EHS pediatrician shares back-to-school health tips

By MELISSA BERMAN

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As summer winds down and children prepare to return to classrooms, parents are checking school supply lists, adjusting schedules and making sure their children are ready for a healthy start to the school year.

Dr. Cynthia Criss, chair of Pediatrics at Episcopal Health Services, said the weeks before school begins are a good time for families to address medical, developmental and emotional concerns. Criss has worked at EHS for more than 26 years.

Criss encourages parents to schedule children's annual wellness visits throughout the year rather than waiting until August, when pediatricians often see a rush of back-to-school appointments.

"When kids come and think they're well, it's easier on pediatricians if parents try to keep their wellness visits throughout the year," Criss said.

Still, a pre-school physical can help parents and pediatricians identify concerns, update school health forms and make sure the school nurse has current information about allergies, medications and other medical needs.



Courtesy Episcopal Health Services

Cynthia Criss, chair of Pediatrics, Episcopal Health Services.

"It's always a good time to update allergies and sensitivities with the pediatrician," Criss said. "You want to make sure the families have their medications for school."

She said parents should also use the visit to discuss anything that could interfere with a child's ability to learn.

"It's an excellent time to take care of any barriers that we might find for learning, like vision concerns or hearing concerns," Criss added. "If the kid is having difficulty with attention, you maybe get them to the neurologist or the psychiatrist."

Academic struggles should also be addressed rather than ignored, she said. Parents can speak with pediatricians and school officials about appropriate support, including an Individualized Education Program or other educational plan.

Criss said parents should avoid allowing children to get too far off their normal schedules during the summer, particularly teenagers who may stay up late into the night.

"My best advice for this is try not to get kids off a routine to begin with," she said. "It's not a big deal if you have a kid being up an extra hour. But when you have teenagers staying up all night long and then trying to get them back on schedule, that's a little bit rough."

For children who need to adjust their schedules, Criss recommends moving bedtime earlier by 10 to 15 minutes each night while gradually waking them earlier in the morning.

"You really should be going to bed 10, 15 minutes earlier every night, and then getting them up earlier in the morning," she said. "It can be very disruptive, kind of like when

there's a time change."

Nutrition can also affect a child's ability to concentrate during the school day.

"If the kid all of a sudden crashes because they only had a doughnut or a Pop-Tart for breakfast, they're going to have trouble concentrating until they get their lunch," Criss said.

She recommends a balanced breakfast that includes protein, whole grains and fruit. Easy options include oatmeal with fruit, whole-grain pancakes or waffles with nut butter, yogurt, cheese, turkey roll-ups and small sandwiches.

Criss also advises parents to make sure children are up to date on recommended vaccinations and preventative care, including routine childhood and adolescent vaccines and an annual flu shot.

Beyond physical health, Criss said parents should pay close attention to children's mental and emotional well-being.

"We screen for it every year," she said, referring to mental health concerns. "But I think the parents need to see the signs."

Those signs can include headaches, reluctance to go to school and changes in behavior.

"Don't say, 'You'll be fine,'" she said. "Just try to keep that open communication with the children."

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