

Back-to-School Shoes

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As I write this column, it is the first day of the 2009–2010 school year for many students across Colorado. The build-up for this big day is impossible to miss — discounted school supplies are advertised everywhere; the latest styles in clothing are on sale; and the media is buzzing with back-to-school topics. If a space alien, or someone equally out of touch with modern culture, was dropped in the midst of this rush, they might think that a child’s success in the educational world depended on nothing more than the quality of their clothes, or the fancy all-inclusive accordion-folding organizers. Have they invented one that will complete its owner’s homework yet?

Call me nostalgic, but as I look back on my own first days of school, I wouldn’t change the fact that I wore the discount tennis shoes known sentimentally as Traxx (I don’t remember how many “x’s” there actually were in the name, since they sadly don’t exist anymore, despite their seeming “old school” appeal). They weren’t “brand-name” shoes. I now realize that those shoes were more of a blessing in disguise. They freed me up to focus on more important things, like learning.

While I watch our students at Prince Street Academy on this day, I think about the year ahead and about the main things I hope they will learn. Not surprising, many of the learning objectives I see

as crucial to the development of our future are not found in text books. I've gathered the following tips from a variety of parents who seek to maximize their children's learning potential by benefitting from all kinds of opportunities:

- **Teach kids to think critically and solve problems using their own situations.** One single parent I know, Sue, has an “assessment” session with each of her three kids at the end of the first week of school. During this time, she encourages them to focus on things that seem to be going really well, along with issues that provide opportunities for improvement. Sue explains that no topic is off limits, but she works at balancing the negative with the positive, in the hope that her children will learn the importance attitude plays in making the best of situations. She also takes on the role of a teammate with her kids, encouraging them to think and talk about how they can solve problems, or improve less-than-positive situations. Sue emphasizes that she always steps in as a parent when more serious or potentially dangerous situations arise, such as extreme bullying, but she believes that allowing her children to work out most situations can provide lessons that will benefit them throughout their lifetime.
- **Foster social consciousness and empathy.** Jeff is a dad who works from home and is the primary caretaker of two school-age children. He's proud of his children's ability to empathize with others despite their young age. When I asked him what he's done to support their budding empathy, he says that he has always made sure that his kids were exposed to books with all different types of people cast in the main roles. Jeff says that he thinks the diversity of

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his kids' books helps them to realize that we all have similar feelings, despite our different physical appearances and backgrounds. He also encourages his kids to reach out to peers, whether by checking to see if a dejected peer is okay, or by sticking by a classmate who is being mistreated. Jeff told me that one of his proudest moments thus far as a parent was the day his daughter's teacher called to let him know she had "caught" his daughter respectfully telling some of her peers to stop picking on a child in her class.

- **Utilize "real world" learning opportunities.** My friend Geneva has five boys! Most of the time, I'm impressed by the fact that she's able to take regular showers and speak in coherent sentences. But, Geneva does a lot more than that as a parent. All five of her sons have volunteer experience helping out at local soup kitchens and shelters. Two of the boys, ages six and eight, have developed a passion for bird watching during time spent as volunteers for Colorado's open space clean-up project. A third son, who's almost 11, can identify just about any tree the family might find on a hike. Geneva is quick to point out that there are an unending number of "service learning" opportunities in our communities. She says, "There's no doubt in my mind that through volunteering, my kids are becoming better people. They have learned the importance of helping those less fortunate than themselves, and many of them have developed potentially lifelong hobbies. Maybe even more important, I've been able to witness the development of a passion for learning in my boys. It's a passion that I know will stick with them."

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Here's wishing all of you a safe, productive school year filled with countless opportunities for passion-filled learning in every subject area. If any of you readers happen to have a pair of "old school" Traxx lying around somewhere, I'm a size 7ish. Have a wonderful year.

Alyce Duckworth is a licensed clinical social worker and principal at the Prince Street Academy Day Treatment Program at Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network. She can be reached at aduckwo@admhn.org. For more information about mental health matters, services or to read other articles Alyce has written, visit admhn.org.

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About Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network (ADMHN)

ADMHN is a private, nonprofit 501 © (3) corporation providing professional, comprehensive behavioral health care and substance abuse treatment primarily, but not exclusively, in Arapahoe and Douglas counties. We offer programs for adults, seniors, families, couples and children. These services include counseling, psychiatry, crisis services, case management, substance abuse treatment, victim services, an adult acute treatment unit, adult supported and residential housing, services to the criminal justice system, vocational and social rehabilitation, a day treatment therapeutic school and school-based services. Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network has an on-site pharmacy. We offer community education, wellness programs and a Speakers Bureau. Learn more at admhn.org.

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