LSUHS Podcast: What Every Parent Should Know Before School Starts Again

Audio	Video
Mark Klein: Summer break. As a child, there's nothing more fun in the world. And as a parent, you can realize just how quickly a few months without routine can throw off your family. And it always seems that just as you start to figure it out. Well, that's when the pencils and notebooks go on sale in stores. It's already that time of year, folks. Back to school season is almost here, so how can you go from summer days by the pool to school days, stuck in carpool, and still set your child up for success along the way? The person that you're about to meet has advice to help you to just that. Today's guest was recently bestowed the LPA Distinguished Psychologist Award. That's the highest honor for a psychologist in the state of Louisiana. She's a pediatric therapy specialist that has dedicated her work to the early identification of autism spectrum disorder, advancing early intervention, and empowering families. She serves as a child clinical psychologist within the Children's Center on campus at LSU Health Shreveport. Dr. Michelle Yetman. **Dr. Michelle Yetman:** Thank you.	Mark and Michelle Yetman, PhD, Interview in a Television Studio

Mark Klein (Host):
Dr. Michelle Yetman, glad to have you here.
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
Great. Thanks for having me.
Mark Klein:
No problem. So I can't believe it. I mean, I feel like we say this every year, right? But seriously, we say this right now because it is almost back-to-school season. That's insane.
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
Yeah.
Mark Klein:
And so it's a huge transition. There's so much that we can learn about this, but I want to just dive right into it and talk about some ways that we can help prepare families as they transition back to normal. Let's jump right into it. Why is this time of year so important for a child?
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
Well, it's a big transition. You used the right word. It's a transition. For some kids, it's starting school for the first time. For others, it's going to a new grade, meeting new friends, having new teachers, and all of that can be a little scary. It can also be very exciting.
It's also a big pivot from being relaxed and hanging out. During the summer, we tend to let our routines fall by the wayside, including wake-up times and bedtimes. So it's a big adjustment getting back into the regular routine and rhythm of school.
Mark Klein:
It's a big adjustment. So let's talk about making that adjustment. What are some easy ways for a parent to dip their toes back into getting back to a routine? I imagine if you just set the alarm for 6:00 in the morning the next day, it's probably not going to go that well.
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
It would not go well. We all want to squeeze the last little bit out of summer, but what works best is anticipating that we're going to have to get back to those early mornings, packing lunches, and everything else a week or two before school starts.
The biggest thing to start adjusting is sleep. We all tend to stay up later during the summer, and the daylight hours are longer. For children, sleep really dictates behavior and mood. You don't want to be sending your children to school sleep-deprived. It's not good for learning, behavior, or their teachers.
Start very gradually, maybe in 15- or 20-minute increments. Push bedtime earlier and move wake-up time earlier. By a few days before school starts, they're already in the rhythm of going to bed and waking up on a school schedule.

Mark Klein:
You've spent a lot of time talking about sleep so far. How important is sleep for a child, especially as they transition into the school year?
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
It's really critical. Even from an adult perspective, our ability to tolerate stress and discomfort decreases when we're sleep-deprived. Everything feels harder.
Sleep affects mental health, behavior, learning, concentration, and attention. Sleep-deprived children can often appear to have ADHD-like symptoms when they may not. For children who already have ADHD, lack of sleep can make symptoms more extreme.
Sleep is one of those foundational pillars of health. It impacts all aspects of functioning. With screens and technology, the latest data shows that many children are not getting sufficient sleep and are going to school sleep-deprived. Ensuring your child gets adequate sleep is probably one of the best things you can do to set them up for success in school.
Mark Klein:
You just touched on what feels like the buzzword we're all thinking about right now: screens. During the summer, I imagine many families relax their rules. As we approach the school year, how important is it to have a game plan around screen use?
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
There are a lot of guidelines available so parents don't have to figure this out on their own. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers screen-time recommendations based on age.
Many families relax these rules during the summer because there's more downtime and parents are busy. However, screen use is one of the things, alongside sleep schedules, that you want to start dialing back as school approaches.
Mark Klein:
I don't want to get too far off topic because this is so important. What about children modeling their parents' screen behavior? That's something I think about all the time when it comes to my own phone use. What do we know about that?
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
That's kind of the running joke. We always think about whether kids are on screens too much, but maybe it's the parents who are on screens too much.
Parents are a child's greatest role model. When we talk about screens, it's not just the screen use itself. It's what you're not doing instead. If you're scrolling or absorbed in a screen, maybe you're not having conversations.
For young children, conversation is critical. Children don't learn language from screens. They learn language through human

interaction. Those interactions help them talk about their day, their experiences, and their feelings.
Screens are also very one-dimensional. The brain develops in a three-dimensional world. Kids learn through playing with toys, building things, being outside, and interacting with other children. Screen time can be very isolating, and humans are social creatures. Parents are the gatekeepers. Before we criticize our child's screen use, we should ask ourselves how much time we're spending on screens in front of them.

Mark Klein:
As school starts again, some kids are excited to see friends and teachers. Others are nervous. What are some tips for helping children work through those nerves?

Dr. Michelle Yetman:
You're raising an important point about temperament. Some children are naturally extroverted and can't wait to go back. Others struggle with transitions and take longer to warm up.
First, normalize those butterflies. It's normal to feel nervous when entering a new situation and not knowing what to expect. We often say there's about a six-week adjustment period at the beginning of school. Many children have some difficulty adjusting but settle in once routines become familiar.
If difficulties continue beyond the first month or so, that becomes more concerning.
As a parent, acknowledge your child's feelings. Sometimes we want to rescue our children from uncomfortable emotions, but it's important to let them know it's okay to feel nervous, worried, or scared.
In psychology we often say, "If you can name it, you can tame it." Once a feeling is identified, we can talk about it and develop strategies for coping.
You can also practice routines ahead of time, such as packing lunches, driving to the school, or even arranging to visit the teacher and classroom before school begins.
One of our family mottos was, "We can do hard things." Just because something is hard doesn't mean we can't do it.
Breathing exercises can also be very helpful. For example, have your child imagine a balloon in their stomach. Breathe in for four counts, hold for four counts, and breathe out for four counts. This helps calm the nervous system.

Mark Klein:
Going beyond that initial six-week adjustment period, how can you tell the difference between normal nerves and something that may require an evaluation?

Dr. Michelle Yetman:
One of the biggest indicators is a change in behavior. If your child is

usually happy, outgoing, and playful but suddenly becomes withdrawn or consistently different, that's something to pay attention to.
Anxiety in children often presents physically because they may not yet have the emotional vocabulary to say, "I'm anxious." Instead, they might complain of headaches or stomachaches. These unexplained symptoms can be signs of anxiety.
If those behaviors persist beyond the normal adjustment period, it would be worth discussing them with your pediatrician or seeking psychological support.

Mark Klein:
Let's talk about the role of teachers. They have a unique perspective because they observe children in a different environment. How should parents approach parent-teacher conferences when hearing criticism or concerns about their child?

Dr. Michelle Yetman:
First, as a child psychologist, I love that parents are their child's biggest advocates. It's great to believe your child is wonderful because the world can be tough, and children need a supportive home team.
At the same time, teachers provide a valuable perspective because they've worked with many children at the same developmental stage. They can often tell the difference between typical development and a potential problem.
For example, with academics, teachers are often the first to notice when a child is falling behind in reading or other skills. They can identify concerns that may warrant further evaluation.
Teacher feedback is incredibly valuable and often provides objective information that parents might not recognize at home.

Mark Klein:
Let's speak about the evaluation process. For those who may not be familiar, what is the Children's Center and its role in helping children succeed?

Dr. Michelle Yetman:
At LSU Health Children's Center, we see children ages two through twelve. Referrals generally involve developmental concerns.
For younger children, that might include delayed milestones, such as speech and language development. We also evaluate behavioral, social, and emotional concerns, as well as conditions like ADHD and learning disabilities, including dyslexia.

Mark Klein:
If a teacher recommends an evaluation, what are a parent's next steps? And what would you tell parents who may be nervous because of the stigma sometimes associated with evaluations?

Dr. Michelle Yetman:
I always say information is power.

Diagnosis can sound like a scary word, but diagnosis helps determine treatment. If a child is struggling, we first want to understand why so we can figure out how to help.
Whether it's speech delays, autism, ADHD, or a learning disability, identifying the issue allows us to develop a treatment plan. The goal is always to help the child close developmental, behavioral, or academic gaps.
Everyone involved is on the same team. Parents, teachers, psychologists, and pediatricians all want to maximize that child's potential.
Mark Klein:
What does an evaluation actually look like?
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
It depends on the child's age.
For younger children, evaluations often look a lot like play. Parents stay with their child, and we observe interactions while gathering developmental history and parent concerns.
With autism evaluations, for example, we observe for key signs and symptoms, gather extensive background information, and then meet separately with the parents to discuss findings and recommendations.
For older children being evaluated for things like ADHD or learning disabilities, we conduct parent interviews and then work directly with the child. We usually avoid using the word "testing." Instead, we present activities and games that assess academic skills, cognitive abilities, and attention.
It's usually not uncomfortable for children. In fact, most kids enjoy it, especially because there's often a prize at the end.
Mark Klein:
So the parents are the ones who are stressed, while the kids are having fun?
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
Exactly.
Mark Klein:
As we get closer to the school year, you've shared a lot of great information. If parents could take away just one thing from this conversation, what would it be?
Dr. Michelle Yetman:
Be encouraging and be positive.
You don't have to rescue your child from difficult emotions. Instead, validate their feelings and encourage them to push beyond their comfort zone.
Childhood is filled with challenges that help children grow. Learning to do hard things builds confidence and self-esteem. Our job isn't to rescue children from every challenge. It's to support them as they work through those challenges.

Audio	Video
Children also look to us as role models. How we manage stress teaches them how to manage stress. **Mark Klein:** I'm curious. You can hear the passion in your voice when you talk about children and families. Where does that passion come from? **Dr. Michelle Yetman:** I'm not entirely sure. It's been a lifelong passion. I love my job. I love what I do. I love the team I work with, and I love helping children and families. As a parent myself, I understand the worries and concerns parents have. I've been doing this work for several decades, and I still genuinely enjoy it.	
Mark Klein: Thank you so much for being here. We really appreciate it, and best of luck to everyone as the school year begins. I know we're all excited to get back into a routine very soon. For more information on the LSU Health podcast, it's available wherever you get your podcasts, including YouTube, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Amazon Music. If you're interested in appearing on the show, send us an email at SHVcommunications@lsuhs.edu.	LSUHS Podcast animation.