

Helping Our Kids with Autism Transition Back Into School

By

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Sara is really worried. Her son Joshua is 6 years old and has a moderate form of autism. "He's never done well with transitions and last semester the start of the new school year was a disaster. "He would tantrum in class nearly every day, crying and shouting and making it impossible for his teacher to handle him. We didn't recover until Thanksgiving!" Kids get derailed for all kinds of reasons; fatigue, hunger, illness, etc. But when you have a child with autism, that derailment, the underlying neurological differences that are potentially responsible for the delays in your child's development, can make the beginning of the school year seem like an almost impossible task.

Autism, which can be characterized by differences in reciprocal social interactions, communication and behaviors, is currently the most common developmental disorder in this country according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and impacts 1 out of every 150 children. Experts suspect that there will be 4 million Americans coping with autism within the next 10 years. With this rising number, schools are rapidly striving to implement programs, resources, and support tools for families and children dealing with autism. To help provide autistic children with added support, parents can utilize these core tips to more effectively improve their child's transition into the new school year.

Countdown to Transition Preparation; Social Stories, Role Playing and Calendars:

Start a month ahead with a scheduled bedtime and wakeup routine. Keep the schedule of events exacting-getting up, eating, dressing, brushing hair and teeth, etc. See how much the child can do without a prompt but if needed have a picture schedule or written visual schedule posted on the refrigerator or bathroom mirror.

In order to make back to school run smoothly, read age-appropriate books about going to school to help your child know what to expect or help your child make their own story with the creation of a personalized social story. Social stories are unique in that they can identify a concern and develop a story that supports a desired outcome, also allowing differing perspectives to be addressed.

To begin your social story, try and get a picture of the school, teacher and classroom setting and make a social story about school. The more information your child has about his new teacher, the easier the transition will be. In the context of writing your child's social story, let him/her know that their thoughts are perfectly normal. If your child is unable to express emotions, simply tell him/her that whatever they are thinking and feeling is valid and that you are there to help.

Here are a few suggestions to add to your child's social story:

Vacation is so much fun. I really enjoy going to _____.

School begins on _____.

I am going into _____ grade.

My teacher knows all about me and I can't wait to meet her. Her name is _____.

I might know some friends in my class but I will also make new friends.

It's good to go to school because I get to learn and play/hang out with my friends.

Never use school as a threat or a means to change or challenge a child's behavior. If you can, meet the teacher before the school year begins. Make sure that you walk through the building locating the classrooms, bathrooms, and lunch room and recess areas. For older children and teens, practice the route that they will take as they go from class to class and spend time helping them figure out locker combinations in a timely fashion.

Role playing another way for the child to use visual depiction to ease into the new school year. Depending on your child's developmental age, prepare for school experiences by using puppets or by role-playing some enjoyable school activities. Playing "school" is a great way to help your child understand how school works and what will go on while he/she is there.

To help reduce anxiety and create predictability, consider creating another kind of visual aid, in this case, a back to school calendar. Create a countdown to school with each day numbered as to the days left until the new semester starts. Begin your child's day by going to the calendar and marking off the last day. Continue the activity by counting how many days are left until school begins.

Find Out About Available Programs:

Whether a child with autism is in elementary, middle, or high school, the first step to fostering support outside of the home is with parents meeting with teachers and school administration. The earlier parents can meet with school, the more tailored the program can be made your child.

When meeting with the staff, find out how much experience the teachers have with autistic students. This is an opportunity for parents to seek out answers to all relevant questions that will impact their child's upcoming academic year.

It's equally important for parents to honestly share with their child's teacher any behavioral concerns or issues that they are aware of so that the teacher can be better prepared with appropriate strategies to service the needs of the child. If your child is a visual learner (as many children with autism are) you may want to suggest that the teacher create a visual schedule on the board and/or at the child's desk that creates

visual cueing, point by point, to help the student break down and understand the sequential order of events in class. Likewise, If your child becomes overloaded easily, suggest that the teacher make an accommodation by creating a 'safe space' corner in the classroom. This area might include a bean bag, something special to hold (akin to a transitional object/and or sensory tool to soothe) and a timer so that children know when they need to return to the rhythm of the regular class. If there are district budgetary constraints, parents might want to consider offering to buy these items and bring them into class for everyone's benefit.

Parents should also keep in mind that they have the right to ask questions and request administrative intervention if they are concerned with the actions or behaviors of their child's teacher. Always start by respectfully approaching the teacher with your concerns. If this approach proves ineffective, then parents should always reserve the right to advocate for their child by speaking to the principal or resource specialist at school.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Meetings

If your child has an individualized education plan, please be aware of when those goals will expire. If the IEP is scheduled to expire sometime in the first months of school, then you need to contact the special education department of the school to schedule an IEP meeting as soon as the staff comes back from summer break. If your child has had significant changes in the past 12 months then you should start to think about the new goals that you would like to place into your child's IEP program.

Establish a Communication Plan

When meeting with teachers, parents should set up a clear and agreeable communication plan. Students with developmental delays like autism can often exhibit unexpected outbursts or tantrums and parent and teachers must be able to quickly contact one another in case of an urgent need or emergency. Parents need to have a respectful and trusting relationship with their child's teacher. If a teacher observes some form of behavior or expresses a concern, parents need to remind themselves not to take this feedback personally.

In addition, considering that many autistic students struggle with organizational issues, teachers and parents can set up a dialogue where the parents are informed of all assignments and upcoming academic requirements. A positive pattern of communication may include asking the teacher to email the parent each day with a quick summary of homework and upcoming quizzes or test. Or, if the child needs less support, then an alternative plan could involve the parent calling or emailing the teacher when a concern arises.

Maintain and Monitor a Routine with the Child

Each day, a parent can review homework assignments with their child in a specific order to maintain routine and predictability. If a child needs less one-on-one support, then a parent can establish a routine where and when a child should complete their homework

each day. Start the homework at the same time every day. The earlier the child gets started, the better. Have the work area organized and free from distractions. The supplies should be color coded and in a set place. The kitchen table or a desk might not be a comfortable work area for a child with autism. He/she might do better sitting on a soft cushion bean bag with a lap desk. Have an exact order, always using picture cues and a visual timer (with or without an alarm depending on your child's auditory processing sensitivities) to show the expected work time.

In regards to homework, think about your child's sensory needs and ask yourself the following questions;

Is the lighting too bright?

Are there noise distractions or will music help?

Does my child need deep pressure input, such as a weighted blanket or vest?

Consider a physical activity before settling down to do work and remember to include sensory breaks, like a crunchy snack, as a way to help a child tolerate the homework load.

Create daily checklists that can include tasks like putting completed homework in the correct class folders, make sure materials for tomorrow are in the child's back pack, etc.

Be aware that sometime the amount of homework that a teacher assigns may not be appropriate for your child. Consider asking for a shortened work load written in on the child's IEP plan, especially if the assignment keeps repeating the same concept over and over. Be aware of problems with muscle tone such as weak hand muscles. Your child might need adaptations such as a parent's help with the writing or being able to key the work into a computer.

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