



## Transitioning Your Special Ed Child Back to School

It's almost that time of year again when the thought of going back to school can be overwhelming for kids. Having new teachers, classes, schedules, and homework is a lot to adjust to in a short period of time. But starting a new school year doesn't have to be anxiety-provoking. With a little careful planning, you can provide your child with a smooth transition so their back-to-school experience is a positive one.

### Get Organized

For kids with special education needs, structure and planning is especially important. Make sure as a parent that you have your child's school supply list organized and ready to purchase. If you are including your child in the shopping process, know whether short trips are best or if this is a task you should handle on your own. Keep the supplies to a bare minimum and present your child with simple choices. While every child is different, kids with autism often need to know what's going to happen next. Consider placing a calendar in a prominent location where you can mark any important school dates to eliminate surprises.

### Have Conversations About School

Without over-discussing school, casually start conversations with your child to gauge what feelings they may be experiencing. This is an opportunity for you to calm any unnecessary fears or provide solutions that may help them gain a sense of control. Ask them how they would like you to help with the transition, instead of taking full control of the situation. If they are worried about missing you, be compassionate but also firm in your stance that school is where they belong and where you know they will succeed.

## Reinforce Body Calming Techniques

While summer may be a less stressful time, it's still important for your child to keep up with body calming techniques. You don't need to wait for a meltdown to occur to talk to your child about recognizing the difference between being calm and being upset. Whether it's counting, hugging a pillow, breathing or another technique, have them practice self-calming skills so they remember to use them at school. If your child is restless and needs to move during the school day in order to concentrate, use the same sensory filters found in the classroom at home such as a wiggle cushion, ball chair, weighted vest or other things that help them remain in touch with their physical needs year-round.

## Be Sensory-Minded

While some kids look forward to getting new back-to-school clothes, children with sensory issues may struggle with new fabrics and textures. Dressing for success may mean soft, comfortable clothing that keeps your child calm. If this is the case, look for tagless shirts, seamless socks, and other sensory-friendly clothing. When uniforms are required, consider having your child practice wearing long pants for short periods of time as some kids struggle with going from shorts to long pants after not wearing them all summer.

## Review Your Child's Medication Plan

For some children with ADHD, parents choose to give them a medication break over the summer. Be sure to discuss any medication changes with your child's doctor so you are able to monitor any difficulties or side effects. If your child requires daily or rescue medication to be administered at school, be sure all school medication forms and doctor's instructions are provided to the school in advance.

## Do Your Homework with the School

Make sure your child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan is in place and know when the next review meeting is scheduled. Talk to your child's teacher, guidance counselor, nurse or administrator in advance about any specific concerns you have regarding your child's health or learning challenges. Be open and honest, presenting yourself as a partner in your child's education.

### Visit the School in Advance with Your Child

During the summer, arrange a visit with your child's school a week or two before classes start to reduce any anxiety they may have about attending their new school or returning to the same school. Help them navigate the hallways and locate restrooms, water fountains, the guidance office, the nurse's office, the resource room, and any other important areas of the building. Introduce your child to their teachers, principal and administrative staff if possible so they become familiar with his or her needs.

### Turn Back the Clock

About two weeks before school starts, establish a bedtime that gradually gets earlier and allows for 10 hours of sleep. When you're ready for your child to start taking responsibility for getting themselves out of bed in the morning, get them their own alarm clock to encourage independence. A soothing-sounds alarm clock may be a good option for a child with sensory issues.

### Find a Buddy

If possible, find a friend or neighbor who is attending the same school to ride the bus with your child or walk into the building with them. Life is always easier with a buddy!

### Feed Your Child Well

Providing kids with a healthy breakfast, lunch and dinner can make a huge impact on how they perform and how they feel throughout the day. Stock up on fruits, vegetables and other healthy after-school snacks and avoid giving your child sugary drinks or beverages containing caffeine.

### Review Safety Basics

Remind your child about the basics of traffic safety and physical safety. Be sure they know how to spell their name and know their phone number. Teach them how to deal with bullying behavior by reporting it to a teacher or guidance counselor.

### Stay Positive

Kids pick up on our stress levels, so if you are calm and relaxed about school it increases the likelihood that your child will be, too. Keep a positive attitude about all the school tasks you need to complete, even though they may be tedious and time-consuming.

### Conclusion

A little preparation over the summer can go a long way in ensuring your child has a successful return to school. Remember back to your own fears as a child, and understand that for kids with special education needs, those fears may be even greater. Your planning and support will help make all of their new experiences both exciting and positive.