



Back-to-School Tips for Children with Special Needs

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As a new school year approaches, nerves often take center stage for many families who have children with special needs. Parents and children alike worry about teachers, the other children, homework, lunchtime and much, much more.

Get Ahead of the Curve

Before classes begin make arrangements to take your child on a tour of the school. It is often very helpful to locate new classrooms, library, cafeteria, gym and restrooms. If your child is moving up in grade level, practice opening a locker. Meet school staff and the therapy team; ask teachers about their daily routines and how those routines are implemented. These steps can often remove some mystery and can help reduce the child's anxiety.

While there, take photos that you can use along with social stories to reinforce what to expect: getting ready in the morning, traveling to school, eating lunch and other common situations. Begin to practice getting up early enough to catch the bus, walking in a line, doing circle time. Talk through any questions or concerns that your child has.

Beyond the Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Don't count on the IEP to do all the heavy lifting; it provides little information on what really makes your child tick. Pull together a one-to-three-page overview of what teachers and service providers should know about your family structure, your child's likes and dislikes, what sets her off and what calms her down. Describe what's being done at home to work through anxieties and behaviors. List food allergies and other necessary medical information, as well as emergency contacts. For disabilities that aren't widely recognized, include basic facts and a few helpful resources. Preparation of this summary has the additional benefit of reminding parents about areas that need continued attention at home.

Follow up on the details negotiated in last spring's IEP. Have all necessary services been scheduled? If your child needs support from an in-class aide, be sure someone's been assigned and see if you can meet that person in advance. Think outside the box about steps that can make the school year as successful as possible; a key lock versus a combination lock. A bean bag seat cushion for a child who has trouble sitting still.

Most teachers will welcome this assistance. They realize that your child's success requires a home/school partnership, and this lets them know you can be counted on, involved and will expect ongoing communication.

A few other tips:

- When it comes to school supplies, buy items that will help your child stay organized. If the occupational therapist uses a certain type of pencil, be sure that's on your list, as well (and have extras at home)
- Schedule necessary medical checkups in plenty of time and let the doctor know which records you'll need for the school nurse.
- Make digital copies of important documents, such as the IEP, immunization records, and that personal summary so that you can easily send them to educators and other service providers throughout the year.

The key to a successful experience for our children lies in a school/home partnership. It goes a long way if you take the time to prepare, speak with teachers and providers, and let folks know you are an involved advocate who wants to work with the school to make the year as successful as possible.

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