

PFA Tips

Back to School

The beginning of a new school year is an exciting yet anxious time for both parents and children. It typically brings a change in the daily routine established over the summer months. This transition can be especially challenging for families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). While change can be difficult, the following tips will help prepare a child with ASD for the new school year and make the transition back to school easier.

First day of school

Discuss with your child the exact day and date that school will begin. Show them the date using a wall or desk calendar or an electronic device. Allow your child to mark the date. You may want to count down the days until the first day of school to provide comfort in the expected.

Reset the clocks

If you've allowed your child to stay up later during the summer, start rolling back bedtime now so that when school starts your child will have an easier time falling into the new schedule.

Use an alarm clock

Let's face it – how many kids want to get up for school? Let the alarm clock be the "bad guy" waking your child, not you. Consider using their favorite music rather than a buzzing noise.

Visit the school

Show your child their classroom and even their locker and desk if possible. If you go before the classroom is set up, go back closer to the first day so that your child will have a chance to see how the class will look when they get there that official first day. This later visit will also be helpful in case the teacher was still rearranging the classroom earlier. Take a walk through the halls practicing the routes they will travel to the various classes. While you're there, take pictures that your child can refer to back at home. If this is a new school for your child, you may also want to consider visiting

the child's previous school and reinforcing the message that they are not changing schools because people at the old school didn't want them. Sometimes our kids have anxieties over these feelings, but they aren't able to articulate those fears.

Meet with the teacher and inclusion helper

Ask for a copy of a typical day's schedule so that you can prepare your child with social stories, visual schedules, and discussions. Let the teacher meet your child and go over your child's reactions, learning styles, favorite things, and what challenges and frustrates your child. Make sure you share with the teacher systems that work for you at home. If you have charts or tools you use at home, offer a duplicate set for the classroom for consistency for your child. Ask the teacher if you may take a picture of them to have at home so that their face will be even more familiar to your child on that first day.

Prepare the school supplies

Purchase the school supplies well in advance so that your child can get used to them. Keep any favorite items from last year. Even if you were rewarded as a child by all new supplies, your child may prefer the "old friend" items. Color code notebooks and materials (including making text book covers) for different classes. Blue equals Math, red equals English, etc. Color coding will help your child identify and keep their materials together and can be integrated with a picture schedule.



Don't forget the school clothes

Purchase school clothes, uniforms, and shoes early too. And wash them many times. Cut off the labels if they bother your child. For preteens and teens, you may want to help them select a "cool" first day outfit ahead of time. First impressions are important to peers at this age.

Make an All About Me book

A portfolio of pictures, stories, favorite things and anything else the child feels is important to share with other students and teachers could be a great tool for introducing your child.

Play school

Go through typical school activities, practice walking up to school, unpacking, taking jackets on and off, walking quietly through a hallway. Keep them used to the feeling of "school" even if it's at home. In addition, create a social story or picture schedule for school routines. Start reviewing and practicing early.

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Make sure your child's IEP is up to date

If you haven't looked at your child's IEP since your last annual meeting, go through it and make sure that the goals and accommodations listed are still relevant. Have your child's needs changed since your last meeting? Have they met some of the goals listed and are now ready to take on new challenges? Remember, you don't have to wait for an annual meeting – you can request an IEP meeting at ANY time.

Expectations

Prepare your child for situations that may not go as planned. Discuss a plan of action for free time, such as lunch and recess. Use social stories to familiarize your child with routines and how to respond when an unexpected event occurs. Anticipate sensory overload. The activity, noise, and chaos of a typical classroom (and cafeteria) can sometimes be difficult to manage. Establish a plan of action for this situation, possibly a quiet room where your child can take a short break. If your child has dietary issues, determine in advance how this will be managed so as to avoid any miscommunication.

Get your paperwork organized

While you're thinking about organizing new binders, paper and pencils, take a moment to evaluate if your own paperwork is in order. Get your medical information in order (Vaccinations required? Documentation from physicians? Allergies? Meds?).

Figure out who your emergency contacts are going to be and make sure you have their current phone numbers. You may be able to get the school's emergency cards when you visit (see above) and fill them out ahead of time. This will give you a less stressful first evening, so that you can help your child with their homework or last minute shopping for the supplies that were not on the list.

Practice patience

Allow more time for everything during the first week. Consider having activities or diversions available in case you need to wait a long time for transportation.

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Communicating with Your Child's Teacher

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/education/parent-tips-communicating-with-your-childs-teacher/>

PFA Tips: Understanding IEP Meetings

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/education/different-ieps/>

A Guide to Organizing Your Paperwork

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/A-Guide-to-Organizing-Your-Paperwork.pdf>

"Organizing Your Child's Special Education File"

<http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/organize.file.htm>

2-minute Tutorial: How to Help Your Child Get Comfortable with a Combination Lock

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITpnyDZL6eo&feature=youtu.be>

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