

PFA Tips

Back to School

The beginning of a new school year can bring excitement and anxiety for both children and parents. After months of a different summer routine, adjusting to new schedules, expectations, people, and environments can be especially challenging for children with autism and their families. While change can be difficult, the following tips can help prepare a child with autism for the new school year and make the transition back to school easier.

Mark the First Day of School

Talk with your child about the exact day school begins and mark it together on a calendar. For some children, knowing exactly when school starts and counting down the days can make the transition feel more predictable.

Ease into the School Schedule

If bedtime and wake-up times changed over the summer, gradually move them closer to the school-year schedule before the first day. A gradual adjustment can make early mornings easier once school begins.

Visit the School

If possible, visit the school before the first day. Show your child their classroom, locker, cafeteria, restrooms, and other important areas, and practice the routes they may take throughout the day. Taking pictures can give your child a chance to become familiar with these areas before school begins.

If your child is changing schools, talk about why the change is happening. They may have anxiety about leaving their old school but have difficulty or be unable to put those feelings into words. Talking about those concerns and offering reassurance can help make the change feel less overwhelming.

Meet the Teacher & Support Staff

If possible, give your child an opportunity to meet their teacher and other staff members they will regularly interact with. With permission, consider taking pictures of important staff members so your child

can get to know their faces. Even a brief interaction between your child and their teachers can help everyone feel a little more comfortable on the first day.

Establish a Home-School Communication Plan

Ask how your child's teacher typically communicates with families, whether that is email, an app, a communication notebook, or another method. If there isn't an established plan in place, work together to decide what will work best. Starting the year with clear communication and expectations can help families and school staff stay connected and on the same page.

Prepare Supplies, Clothing, and Everyday Skills

Purchase school supplies, clothing, uniforms, and shoes early so your child has time to get used to them. Not everything has to be new. Familiar supplies from last year may be comforting. Color-coding materials by subject can make organization easier and can also be incorporated into a visual schedule.

If your child is sensitive to clothing, wash new items and remove uncomfortable tags or labels. Choosing a first-day outfit in advance is another way that you can make that first morning a little less stressful.

Think about the everyday tasks your child will need to manage at school and practice them at home. Practice things like opening lunch containers and water bottles, fastening and unfastening buttons or zippers, using a combination lock and packing and unpacking belongings. Ask the teacher for a typical daily



schedule and review it together using conversations, pictures you took, social stories, or a visual schedule. Practicing these small routines can build confidence when your child is navigating a busy school day.

Make an "All About Me" Book

Create an "All About Me" book or portfolio with pictures, interests, favorite things, strengths, and anything else your child would like teachers or classmates to know. This can be a fun way for your child to introduce themselves and share who they are.

Review Your Child's IEP

Before school begins, review your child's IEP (Individualized Education Program) to make sure the goals, services, accommodations, and supports still reflect their needs.

Consider what may have changed since the last meeting. If your child developed new skills or needs over the summer, share that information and any strategies that worked well at home with the school team. Remember, there's no need to wait until the annual review to raise concerns or request an IEP meeting.

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Prepare for Unexpected Changes and Sensory Needs

Even with plenty of preparation, school days won't always go according to plan. Talk about possible changes such as a substitute teacher, different schedule, delayed bus, or special event. Social stories or simple conversations about what to do when something unexpected happens may help.

Think about less-structured times such as lunch, recess, arrival, and dismissal, which can be harder because expectations are less predictable.

Also consider sensory needs. Hallways, cafeterias, buses, classrooms, and assemblies can be loud and overstimulating. Sensory tools, noise-canceling headphones, movement breaks, or access to a quiet space are all helpful options that can be incorporated.

Plan for After School Regulation

For some children, getting through the school day takes a lot of energy. During the first few weeks especially, consider keeping the time immediately after school less demanding.

Your child may need a snack, quiet time, movement, a favorite activity, sensory input, or time without questions or expectations. Pay attention to what helps your child decompress before moving into the evening routine and homework.

Get Your Paperwork Organized

Make sure the school has current medical information, medication forms, allergy information, dietary accommodations, emergency contacts, and any other required paperwork. Having all this updated before the first day helps the school prepare for your child's needs and gives you one less thing to stress about getting done that crazy first week.

Give Everyone Time to Adjust

The first few weeks may come with late buses, changing routines, and unexpected challenges. Pay attention to what is working, stay in communication with the school, and adjust along the way.

Most importantly, remember that a successful transition doesn't mean everything has to go perfectly on the first day. Your child may need time to become comfortable with their new routine. Celebrate the small successes and give your child, yourself, and your family time to find your new rhythm.

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=ITpnvDZL6eo&feature=youtu.be>

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