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8 Back-to-School Tips for Special Needs Students

Get your child with special needs focused on back-to-school season with these expert tips.

Julia Quinn-Szcesuil, *Contributor* | Thursday, Jul 04, 2013 | [0 Comments](#)

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Many kids aren't really excited to head back to school after their summertime freedom, but for special needs students, the transition from home to school can be extra rocky. There are a few things you can do now to help make the new beginning more exciting and less stressful.

"Anything you can do to make something a routine before it has to become a routine, eases the transition," says Terri Mauro, author of About.com's guide to special needs and founder of the Mothers with Attitude blog. "And whatever you can do to keep structure to your days will help."

And if you hired a special needs nanny or sitter to watch your child in the afternoon, ask her advice. She probably has lots of experience getting kids with special needs through the back-to-school chaos.

1. Provide Summertime Structure

Start summer days early and give kids something to anticipate, says Mauro. Tell them breakfast will be followed by a trip to the park or to the museum or the free movies or wherever you plan to go. If you're going to be home that day, map out what the day will look like: playing a game or doing an art project.

2. Associate School with Fun

Visit the school as often as possible. Weekly visits to the playground -- even if just to have a quiet lunch -- help your child become familiar with the surroundings. Meeting a friend there is even better. As the school year approaches, call ahead and ask if you can meet the principal and the teacher and walk around the classroom before school starts. Not all schools encourage this, but it never hurts to ask. If your child has any kind of sensory processing issues, introduce new clothes (even the new backpack) into the wardrobe in late summer, so they have time to adjust.

3. Work Behind the Scenes for a Good First Week

“If your child takes the bus, don’t expect it to magically show up,” says Mauro. Call to make sure everything you expect to be in place is ready. The last thing you want is to have your child ready to go and a no-show bus. “It can really set your kid back a week or two,” she says. Contact the school nurse ahead of time to make sure all medications and care plans are in place, too.

4. Easy Anxiety with Familiar Faces

If your child is nervous about the coming school year, familiar faces are welcome when school begins. If staff agrees, take photos of teachers, principals, aides and nurses, (alone or with your child) and of the classrooms, the gym, the cafeteria and the office, suggests Alisa Dror, head of the Pinnacle school (a part of the Greenwich Educational Group), in Stamford, Conn. “Make a little photo book,” she recommends.

5. Map Out the Day

Ask the teacher about what will happen when your child arrives at school, so you can talk about what to expect. These social stories can give students the tools they need when faced with something unplanned. Let them know feeling jittery is okay, but tell them who they can talk to.

6. Examine the IEP

“Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are one of the biggest issues to look at,” says Jennifer Sommersness, an independent educational consultant and founder of Welcome Spoken Here. “Make sure it is a working IEP, with the right wording and levels of performance.” Gear each item to your child’s needs and abilities. Parents can be active and valued team members, says Sommersness, and can make sure the document conveys information they want everyone to see. “If it is only based on what a student can’t do, it squashes creativity across the board,” she says. A good IEP is positively worded and strength-based.

7. Share the Joy

Balance the official IEP with a “meet and greet sheet” that you and your child can create, suggests Dror. Include things like “what I am good at,” “what bothers me,” “what keeps me motivated” and any other pertinent facts. “It just makes it a little more personal,” says Dror. “And it also gives some proactive strategies teachers can have in place.”

8. Have Fun

Summer is all about fun, so keep the fun going well into the fall. When you’re shopping for back-to-school supplies, pick up some new educational toys that are geared towards special needs students. For example, toys from companies like Fun and Function help kids at all levels play and develop new skills.

Next summer, get an early jump start. Dror suggests seeing if your child qualifies for any extended school year services during the summer so your child doesn’t regress.

Learn more about [Easing the Back to School Transition for Kids with Special Needs »](#)

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