AUTISM SOCIETY
ALBERTA

Getting Ready for Back-to-School

Back-to-school tips

Are you thinking about transitioning your autistic child or student back to school after the summer break? Just like any student, they may or may not be looking forward to returning to school. They may be apprehensive that once again they'll be around many other students. Perceived expectations around interacting with classmates, riding on the school bus, trying to follow instructions from teachers and aides, and dealing with sensory issues, can heighten unease.

What can you do to help your autistic child or student get in a more positive mindset, and lessen feelings of anxiety? Here are a few pointers to help you get started, and maybe inspire you to come up with your own personalized solutions. Whether you're a parent, a teacher or an aide, being proactive can make all the difference!

- At home, you can start by reading fun **stories** about returning to school. Even make your own Social Story about going back to school. This is even more important if your child is starting at a new school.

- On your family calendar or your child's calendar, **countdown** the last week before school, so they can visualize exactly when they will be starting.

- If you have any **photos** of fellow students (including a class photo from the year before), the school or the staff, you can look at them and talk about them. Pictures of staff and the school (building/grounds) may be available on the school's website. As an alternative, you could make a back-to-school video.

- A few weeks before school starts, prepare your child's biological clock for the new **schedule**. Gradually adjust their routines in the morning and at bedtime by 10 - 15 minute increments.

- Enjoy playtime at the **school playground** to familiarize them with it. If possible, arrange a playground date with other students who will be going back to school with your child. Talk about being kind, taking turns, sharing, and who they can go to if they need help on the playground. You might even act out scenarios to practice these skills.

- Does your school or school division have a **school bus** safety program? Quite a few do, which usually take place in August. This would be a chance to refamiliarize the student with not only the rules of riding the bus, but how it feels and sounds. Although often aimed at younger children or first-time riders, you could advocate why your child needs to be included too. This isn't available for your school? Here are examples of a few places that are doing it, that you could share with your school division.
    - St. Albert Public Schools https://www.spschools.org/division-operations/transportation/first-riders-night?fbclid=IwY2xjawEUywxleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHb85APda5iQyrYFoGEDFm-CxofVI

nzby3CNXe9y8gig_VctkYlZX5j6bcg_aem_qZ8aLkIKXACW22GQJO0B7Q
    - Parkland School Division https://www.psd.ca/transportation/bus-safety/first-ride-program
    - Calgary Catholic School District https://www.cssd.ab.ca/my-first-ride

- Often, the staff goes back to school a week before the students. Make arrangements for you and your child to **visit inside the school** one or two times during that week. If possible, have them greet their teacher and/or aide. Walk around the school to reintroduce the sounds, sights and feel of things. Visit the gym, washroom, library, playground, etc. Pack a snack and eat it wherever your child will normally eat lunch. Find out where her desk will be and read a fun book or color a picture while sitting there. Take photos of their teacher and/or aide, your child's classroom and desk, and other key areas in the school so that you can look at them at home and talk about them.

- If transitioning back to school will be VERY difficult, consider letting your child go for partial days the first week. This more **gradual start** could make the difference between a negative or a more positive feeling towards school, and give him more time to adjust to sensory issues and school expectations.

- Speaking of **sensory issues**, ask if your student will have access to the tools they may need to help with overwhelming sensory input: things like a weighted vest, sunglasses, earplugs, body sock, and rubber pencil topper to chew; whatever is needed. Also remember that they'll be expected to sit still longer than at home, so ask about things like fidget toys, a seat wedge, a ball chair, desk leg resistance bands, a visual timer, etc. Be prepared that some items may be provided, and other things you may need to provide. Ask if the school has a sensory room.

- Give the teacher **helpful information** about your child, which could include:
    - sights, sounds, or words that may cause anxiety
    - food intolerances or restrictions
    - how your child communicates
    - potential sensory issues
    - your child's favourite interests or activities

- Work with your child's teacher to provide an **optimum learning environment**. Where's the best place for his desk? Near the teacher's desk so she can help him? Near the front of the room, so potentially distracting students will be behind him? At the side of the classroom near the door so he can easily leave when a break is needed? Will the student work best in a bright, colourful classroom to keep her stimulated, or would that be overwhelming, and she'll need to wear sunglasses to tone things down? It's different for everyone.

- **Consider your child's schedule with the teacher**. Try to have some variety between sitting down time versus movement time. If possible, have a visual schedule prepared during that week the staff is back, so you can go over it with your child at home beforehand. When possible and practical, give your student choices, so they don't feel like school is totally out of their control. Agree on a signal or a word that indicates to the staff that they need a break from the classroom. Teach an appropriate way to ask to go to the washroom.

- Once school starts, if your child has noticeable behaviours or verbal challenges, consider giving a fun and interactive **presentation to the students**, all about your child. This is especially advantageous if your child is entering a new school. If your child is non-verbal, you can show the other students how to communicate with your child, and how your child communicates (in whatever form that may be). If they stim a lot, explain why they do that. Accurate information can help prevent erroneous thoughts that fellow students might come up with, and pave the way for understanding.

Collaboration between parents and the teacher is key. Taking the time to make your child or student feel safe and acclimatized to the school environment is well worth the effort. It can make the transition back to school go more smoothly, and help to start the year off on a positive and engaging note for the student.

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Online Resources

- Dr. Carol Gray is the developer of Social Stories. You'll find her website here. https://carolgraysocialstories.com/
- How to Write a Social Story (A Step-By-Step Guide) from the *Life Skills Advocate* website. https://lifeskillsadvocate.com/blog/how-to-write-a-social-story/
- There are several back-to-school social stories on the Autism Little Learners website. https://autismlittlelearners.com/social-stories-for-school/
- Video: Preparing For Your Autistic Child To Return To The School Routine - 10 Expert Tips https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVzyH54E7aU
- Podcast: Uniquely Human: Strategies for Successful Transitions Back to School for Parents and Professionals https://uniquelyhuman.com/2022/08/19/strategies-for-successful-transitions-back-to-school-dave-finch-barry-prinzant/ *(Although recorded during Covid, the strategies in this podcast are still relevant now)*

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