



Transition Ideas for Parents and Caregivers of Children with Special Needs

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As the days of summer break draws to a close, parents and caregivers begin preparing themselves and their children for the transition back to school. For families of children with special needs, transitions in general can be challenging and due to the unpredictable nature of the start of a new school year, the preparations may need to be more involved.

A new school year typically creates a whole host of transitions for children and their parents or caregivers. But, it doesn't have to be a time of irritability and anxiety if plans are prepared in advance. Many parents and caregivers of children with special needs, preschool through high school, start planning for the new school year during the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) transition meeting held the previous Spring. Sometimes, the receiving teacher may attend that transition IEP meeting along with other support staff, allowing an opportunity for introductions to the new staff. Of course, there is always the possibility of unanticipated changes in staff assignments, creating even more need for transition planning. Below are several steps parents or caregivers can do to ease transitions of the new school year. This list is not exhaustive and not all suggestions will apply to your child, but they are a good starting point for most and can serve as a guide.

1. Visit the school, the classroom and meet the teacher(s) ahead of time:

- Several days prior to the start of school, go and walk the school campus together. Check out where the cafeteria is located, find all of the restrooms, and don't forget to find the office. Determine where the pick-up and drop-off location will be for the child and explain this is the place to go to meet and greet family or caregivers. For the older children, be sure to locate the football field, the track, and find the lockers. Ask for the child's locker combination in advance and help the child unlock the combination. This will usually help reduce the anxiety associated with what is a very new experience for most children.
- During the days or weeks prior to the first day, many teachers can be found setting up their classrooms and are often happy to schedule visits and even receive some help from children. Seeing the classroom(s), where he or she will sit, and getting to know the teacher(s) is a great way to alleviate anxiety. Many

schools have an open house or “tea” for this purpose, but if this large group activity seems too overwhelming; contact your child’s special education teacher and ask to set up an individual or small group tour.

- Ask each teacher(s) for permission to take their photo. Print out the pictures for your child with the teacher’s name visible on the photo. Frequently look at the pictures with your child, identifying the teacher’s name, and subject taught and share any cool facts known about that individual(s). Also try having a school map and then your child demonstrates where each teacher is located. A photo of the principal, secretary, janitor, and other service providers are extremely useful as well. The staff will love to know that your child can call them by name and perhaps a special bond can begin forming. By having the opportunity to view the pictures and “get to know them” before actually meeting staff on the first day, your child may feel more comfortable on the first day of school more confident and secure throughout the school environments.

2. Use that visit and those photos to write a social story, or narrative of what to expect:

- What will your child’s school experience be like? Children are often anxious to find out about their day. Create a story that includes pictures of the school, their teachers, their classroom, and any important location they will travel to throughout the day (lunchroom, art class, gym, office, etc.) The more real pictures the better.... and pair those picture with words, or a brief narrative. For the older children, he or she might write out their schedule in a planner or in a notebook. We all have our daily planners whether it be a date book, iPad, Smart Phone or a notepad. We all tend to keep social stories (what to do in which situation) in our heads, but some children may need to write their stories more specifically. For example: “When I walk on campus, I will go to room _____. My teacher M_. _____ will be there waiting for me. I will try to remember to greet her/him by saying, “_____”. Then I will follow the directions of the adult in the classroom.”

3. Plan a date with a classmate:

Most schools post class lists in advance of the beginning of school. Even if it’s quick phone call, email or just meeting another family at the park for an hour, this is a great way to get acquainted with a new classmate or reacquainted with an old one.

4. Prepare a one-page quick-whip overview about the child:

- Write up a brief, one-page document that covers information about your child at a glance. Note any food allergies or medical needs the school should know about, things that are likely to cause a behavioral response from your child, and things that will calm him/her down. Additionally include emergency contact information. It might also be helpful to provide information in the same fun caring manner for classroom peers (with teacher permission) for those who might want to help your child: “I’m a fun girl, but some things are hard for me. I have a hard time getting strong, and that makes it harder for me to run, climb, talk, and write. I try really hard and I’m getting better all the time. I might need your help sometimes. Do you think you can help me?”

5. Shop for school supplies together:

- Letting your child pick out her/his school supplies might help her/him feel proud of the materials and want to take special care of those materials. Personal responsibility - One more expectation met!

6. Travel the bus route in advance:

- Check with the district and see what the policy is for this. Depending on the bus policy and your child’s needs, one may be able to arrange a “tour” of the bus where your child can learn the behavior expectations on the bus and meet the driver. This could be accomplished during an already scheduled pre-routing bus practice conducted by the schools. If this is not an option, the parent or caregiver and child can still hop in the car and travel the bus route. Point out where the bus will stop and explain that at those stops, new kids will be getting on or off the bus.

7. Establish the school routine:

- Will the home have new routines and expectations once school starts? Will bedtime be earlier? Will TV be limited? Is there a set time for homework and a special space? Will baths/showers be more frequent? Begin the new routine at least 2 weeks before school starts is optimal.
- If your child has any negative feelings toward these routines and expectations, they typically will not be directly associated with school since they were hopefully started well in advance of school starting. By the time school starts, the child will be familiar and comfortable with the new expectations. Remember, helping to

create a positive environment for your child includes telling them over and over that they can succeed. The more a child hears the positive, the more it becomes their reality.

Finally, I encourage the development of a collaborative relationship with the child's teacher(s). That early bond will be crucial to working together as a team throughout the school year.

Parents and caregivers have a lot of responsibilities and parenting is a challenging job in itself. Should you have questions, if special education advisement is needed, or your child needs support or interventions, please contact The A.B.L.E. Choice, Inc. at www.theablechoice.com or at 888-513-9332. We may be of assistance navigating through the educational process with a child-centered approach.