

Easing the back-to-school transition for children with special needs

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Credit: University of Alabama at Birmingham

For many families, the daily routine established during the previous school year was likely interrupted by beach trips, summer camp and other travels. With the start of a new school year right around the corner,

daily routines are about to change once again.

The transition from summer break back to school can be tough for everyone; but for families of [children](#) with special needs, Jennifer Kilgo, Ph.D., professor in the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Education, says concerns about the back-to-school transition can be even more intensified.

"Every parent has concerns about the back-to-school transition, whether it's re-establishing a routine or anxiety if their child is going to a new school or getting a new teacher," Kilgo said. "Now think about how much more intensified those concerns might be if you have a child with a disorder, like autism, and the child has communication, friendship or behavioral issues. Any kind of preparation you would do for a typically developing child is multiplied when you have a child with special needs."

While the needs of every child are different, and children who receive special education services will have an Individualized Education Program to follow, Kilgo says there are some additional things that parents can do to put themselves and their child at ease as they prepare for the new school year.

Environmental preparation

Try to schedule a couple of visits to the school prior to the first day so your child can get the lay of the land. If the child uses a wheelchair, this will help them become familiar with the routes they will take between classes. This is especially important if he or she is transitioning to a new school.

"Remember to think about the environment outside of the home and the people your child will interact with," Kilgo said. "Whether it is the teacher, principal or the bus driver, reach out to them personally or via

email so they know the child."

Kilgo says one of the things she has seen parents do that helps familiarize the adults who will be interacting with their child is to create graphic organizers or a one-sheet questionnaire about them.

"I love to see teachers ask students questions about their likes, dislikes, favorite activities and other related questions," Kilgo said. "If the school doesn't do this, it can be a good thing for parents to do to further help the teacher learn unique things about their child, such as how the child lets you know they are feeling a certain emotion. Many children with special needs have alternative ways of communicating, and some have behavior plans that need to be followed whether they are in the classroom or on the school bus."

Talk about school

Play up anything that is familiar to the child, such as a friend or special activity.

"For children with autism or behavioral issues, social stories can help," Kilgo said. "These include photographs of some of the events that will take place each morning or what their day is going to be like."

Kilgo adds that it is important for parents to appear calm and organized during the transition to avoid triggering any negative emotions in the [child](#).

Get back on a schedule

Robin Ennis, Ph.D., assistant professor in the UAB School of Education, advises parents to try to return to a schedule with regular bedtime

routines and morning routines as soon as possible.

"Getting children and adolescents into a regular sleep pattern is very important," Ennis said. "The start of the new school year is also an opportunity to set up new routines. For example, if you plan to have a new homework station or system for keeping track of family activities, review these with your children and put them into place consistently."

Read books about school

Ennis says there are several great books about school that can get students excited about the new school year. For younger children, check out "Teachers Rock" by Todd Parr or "The Night Before First Grade" by Natasha Wing. If your children are older, visit the library. The librarian can help you find great books set in the school environment.

Engage in a little pre-correction

Talk to your children about the expectations for behavior at school, such as listening to the teacher and being a good friend.

"Talk about what good behaviors look like, and take it a step further by acting them out at home," Ennis said. "This will go a long way in setting your children up for success. When you notice similar behaviors at home, be sure to acknowledge their good behavior. For example, if they shared something with a sibling, thank them for sharing and tell them that sharing is a great way to be a good friend at school, or if they listened closely to your instructions, acknowledge it and reinforce it by telling them that is exactly how they should listen to their [teacher at school](#)."

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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