

Ten Tips for Helping Your Child with Asperger Syndrome Get Ready to Return to School

By Diane Adreon, M.A., Associate Director
University of Miami Center for Autism & Related Disorders

Hopefully summer has been a time for your family to "re-group" and enjoy a lifestyle that is more relaxed than the pace most of us experience during the school year. In the short time prior to the start of school, there are several things parents and school personnel can do to ease the transition into the school year. Like most useful strategies, these require time and effort. Setting the tone for the return to school can have tremendously beneficial results. A significant number of students with AS encounter substantial problems adjusting to the school environment. "Although some students begin to struggle as early as preschool or kindergarten, almost all will have encountered some degree of difficulty by the upper elementary school grades" (Adreon & Stella, 2001, 268)

Re-Establish "School-Year" Home Routines:

Many students with Asperger Syndrome have difficulty adjusting to new routines. Therefore, in the weeks prior to the beginning of school it is helpful to gradually move into the schedule that is necessary during the school year. This might mean shifting bed time to the time your child will need to go to sleep during the school year. You may also focus on helping your child become accustomed to waking up earlier in the morning. For many children, it is important that they also reestablish morning routines. This may reduce some of the "challenging mornings" many parents report in getting their child ready for school. For example, if John has been in the habit of eating breakfast in his pajamas and watching his favorite television show for an hour prior to getting dressed in summer, it would be advisable to modify his routine several weeks prior to the start of school.

Establish Homework Routines:

Establish "homework" routines by helping your child get into the habit of doing quiet activities at a specific time and place every day. This could be time for reviewing previously mastered skills, doing silent reading, journal writing, crossword puzzles and similar activities before school begins. Do be careful that this is not a time to have your child engage in his/her's **most preferred** activities, as it is designed to set the stage for homework during the school year.

Figure Out How to Motivate Your Child:

Plan on using external motivational systems in order to be able to implement these changes. Students with Asperger Syndrome rarely see "our agenda" as necessary or important. This can often involve the use of activities/items we often give away freely (Watching TV shows, playing a favorite games, errand to favorite store, points/tokens exchangeable for something your child wants). Remember, the key to motivation is that the **reinforcer** must be **powerful** and **immediate!**

Address the Issue of School Clothes:

If your school requires school uniforms, you may need to give your child time to get used to wearing the uniform. In some cases, it may be helpful to wash the uniform several times with fabric softener to lessen the "sensory" challenges. Plan to have your child wear his/her uniform for gradually longer periods of time, over the course of several days prior to the start of school. If your school doesn't have uniforms, it is still possible that "appropriate attire" for school may be different than what your child chooses to wear during the summer. Have your child practice wearing appropriate school attire before the first day of school. If your child will be attending a new school and you're not sure what students wear, it's a good idea to ask - so you can help your child learn to wear clothing that will be considered "ok" by peers.

Set the Stage for a Good Relationship:

Make friendly overtures with school personnel to set the stage for a collaborative relationship. When you stop by the school during the summer, consider bringing cookies for all staff working in

the front office. Bet yet, when your child accompanies you, let your child practice the social skill of offering items to others. Remember, in general, school personnel are overworked and under-appreciated!

From the very beginning, look for opportunities to show appreciation and support to all school personnel who go out of their way to help your child be successful. Some suggestions include occasional treats (homemade or bought), gift certificates to stores, donations of useful items for the classroom, paid attendance at conference, hosting teacher appreciation lunches or dinners, volunteering to help with various projects at school, and letters of support sent to their supervisor (Wagner, 202, 146).

Implement Student Orientation Activities:

If your child will be attending a new school, see if it's possible to visit the school several times over the summer. Perhaps your child can be provided with opportunities to become acquainted with some of the staff at school as well. The more familiar the student is with all aspects of the environment, the more comfortable he/she will be. If your child will be returning to the same school, you may not need as extensive an orientation. However, it may still be beneficial to meet his/her new teacher and to see the classroom. One parent indicated that she purchases the school yearbook to acquaint her child with the building, pictures and names of key school personnel, as well as information regarding available extracurricular activities (Thanks to Marianne Bryant of Inverness, Florida for sharing this idea).

We often fail to recognize the importance of re-acquainting the child with AS to familiar routines. Rebekah Heinrichs shared an experience with her son, Sam. "Last year, a few days before school officially started, I dropped Sam off at school during the scheduled time so he could find out who was in his class and his teacher assignment for fifth grade. Before dropping him off, he told me he wasn't sure he remembered how to get home. He had walked the same two blocks back and forth to school the year before. I was shocked at his statement even though I was aware of his orientation difficulties. I reassured him of how to get home and told him he could wait for me if he wanted." (Myles & Adreon, 2001, 127).

Student Orientation

Provide a walk-through of the student's daily schedule. In schools where the schedule changes from day to day, the student should have the opportunity to practice all possible schedules. If applicable, student "buddies" should be available to walk through the schedule with the student with AS. The following are suggestions for the walk-through:

Provide visual/written class schedule(s) for the student.

Videotape a walk-through school schedule for the student to review at home.

Practice route(s) from various classes to the bathroom, counselor's office, home base, etc.

Meet all teachers and relevant school personnel.

Provide the student with pictures and names of all teachers in advance of orientation.

Provide the student the pictures and names of all additional personnel, such as cafeteria workers, school nurse, etc.

Provide the student with pictures and names of student "buddies."

Show the student where his/her assigned seat in each classroom will be.

Obtain information about school routines and rules (i.e., lunch, going to the bathroom, before/after school, transportation).

Practice routines such as finding homeroom from the bus stop, opening locker, going through the cafeteria line, etc.

Provide instruction on the procedure for seeking out the safe person and home base.

Practice use of transition to home base through role-play. (From Myles, B.M. & Adreon, D. (2001) *Asperger syndrome and adolescence: Practical solutions for school success*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism/Asperger Publishing. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

Call Your School Contact Person & Review Plans for Staff Training:

If this was not previously arranged, do recognize that the week prior to the start of school is an extremely busy time. You may be able to arrange for the team to meet for one hour and arrange for follow-up meetings at the beginning of the school year. The most helpful information will include simple suggestions to assist teachers in reducing your child's anxiety. Teachers do not need to become an "expert" on Asperger Syndrome before your child walks into their classroom. If a meeting is not going to be possible, prepare a one page synopsis about your child for the teacher. This may include (a) Challenges that may not be obvious, (b) Stress Signs, (c) Stress Triggers, (d) Suggestions to reduce anxiety, and (e) Strengths and interests - how the teacher can use them to orchestrate successful experiences.

Ideally, adults throughout the school will know the child with AS and engage in positive short dialogues to help him/her feel comfortable and supported. Even routine greetings such as "Hi Jerry" said with a smile can be a positive and helpful social exchange for the student.

Leave Time In Your Fall Schedule for Phone Calls/Meetings:

You will want to remain in close contact with school personnel to identify problems early on in the school year. In particular, you will want to monitor supports/problems in all unstructured situations, monitor your child's stress signals, monitor for teasing and bullying and communicate frequently about homework assignments.

Orchestrate a Few Social Gatherings for Your Child:

The development of all positive social relationships will be helpful for your child. Prior to the start of school, you will want to try and target one or two children who will attend school with your child: Usually, successful social experiences are easiest to structure with one child at a time, rather than a group. Sometimes, parents experiences more success if they establish a relationship with the parent of a "tolerant" peer and enlist the support of the parent (and the student) in serving as a "peer buddy".

Plan a Relaxing Day Just for You!:

As your child's advocate you have a never-ending job! There is always so much to teach and so much to do. Usually, the school year is stressful- not only for the children with AS, but their parents as well. Remember, you have to make some effort to take care of your own needs, if you plan to have the time and energy to attend to the needs of others.

Adreon, D. & Stella, J. (2001). Transition to middle and high school: Increasing the success of students with Asperger syndrome. *Intervention in school and clinic*, 36 (5), 266-271. Myles, B. M. (2002). *Asperger syndrome and adolescence: Practical solutions for school success*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism/Asperger Publishing Company. Wagner, S. (2002). *Inclusive programming for middle school students with Autism/Asperger's syndrome*. Arlington: TX: Future Horizons **This article reprinted with permission from "FASTimes", the Florida Asperger Syndrome Times** The author, Diane Adreon, M.A., is the Associate Director of University of Miami Center for Autism and Related Disorders and co-author, [Asperger syndrome and adolescence: Practical solutions for school success](#).