

# Key Takeaways

## Preparing Your Child for Back-to-School

with Annie Gunning, CCLS

*Couldn't make it to our Live Q&A?  
Don't worry, we took notes, and like any  
good partner, we're willing to share!*





## COMMON CHALLENGES WITH THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL TRANSITION

Parents can expect their child may be navigating:

- ↳ **Meeting new people** - teachers, classmates, school staff, and figuring out who is there to support them
- ↳ **A new environment and routine** - sensory input, accommodation plans, and the physical layout of a classroom
- ↳ **Academic demands** - learning new material
- ↳ **Being fully understood by the school** - making sure teachers and staff know a child's physical, medical, and emotional needs and their strengths and learning style



## TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL TRANSITION

Parents and guardians can ease the return to school by using these tools:

- **Talk through the day ahead of time.** Walking through the day helps kids process what to expect, builds confidence, and reduces worry.
- **Read books about starting school.**
- **Use a visual calendar or social story.** Families can customize their own by using this **template**.
- **Practice short separations.** For anxious children, try gradually building up time apart.
- **Highlight what's ahead.** Naming what a child is looking forward to matters just as much as preparing for what's hard.

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## TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL TRANSITION

CONTINUED...

**Consider implementing these prep activities  
to build familiarity:**

- Drive by the school, walk the halls, or visit the playground.
- Meet the teacher, counselor, or school nurse, if possible ahead of time.
- Take photos of the classroom door, hallway, nurse's office, or counselor's office to review together.
- Time the prep to your child's age. Younger children usually do best with preparation closer to the first day, while older kids can handle looking further ahead.
- Restart the daily routine a few days early.

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## COMMUNICATING YOUR CHILD'S NEEDS TO THE SCHOOL

### ↳ With teachers and staff:

- Share relevant diagnoses, medical or developmental information, and anything that affects learning, emotion, or safety — including triggers and warning signs.
- Include emergency plans and add to IEPs.

### ↳ With your child:

- Talk with them ahead of time about how they want to handle questions from classmates. Kids get to decide how much they want to share.
- Role-playing these conversations at home, before they come up in real time, can help a child feel more prepared and in control of their story.

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## FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTION AND CONFIDENCE

- ↳ **Join the school's parent group or social media page** - stay in the loop on meetups, playground gatherings, or grade-level events.
- ↳ **Encourage clubs, activities, or groups** where they can meet peers with shared interests.
- ↳ **Ask about a buddy program**, where incoming students are paired with a peer before the first day.
- ↳ **Highlight strengths and normalize differences.** Every child learns and moves differently. Framing differences as universal helps build both confidence and empathy. **Check out these books** celebrating differences and inclusivity.

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## BOOSTING SELF-ESTEEM

- ↳ **Give kids real responsibility.** Being the "helper," or having a role that matters, builds genuine confidence.
- ↳ **Listen and validate before problem-solving.** Asking "What do you think we should do?" builds a child's own problem-solving skills and independence.
- ↳ **Celebrate all wins, not just big ones.** where incoming students are paired with a peer before the first day.
- ↳ **Make sure accommodations are in place and know they can change.** If something isn't working the way you expected, it's okay to adjust.

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## ENCOURAGING EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

**We can make space for the excitement and worry that can come even with expected transitions by:**

- Check in with open-ended questions, especially with older kids who may not volunteer how they're feeling.
- **Validate first.** "This is going to feel hard, and that's okay" goes further than jumping straight to a solution.
- Offer creative and physical outlets.
- Expect after-school meltdowns, especially in the first few weeks.
- **Reactions can look different by age.** Younger kids may show frustration, tantrums, clinginess, sleep changes, or a new bossiness as they test out control. Older kids may show it more physically.

## ADAPTING FOR UNEXPECTED TRANSITIONS

**Even with the best preparation, life can bring curveballs: a sudden hospitalization, a classroom change, or a shift in friendships.**

- **Build a plan with the whole family, including siblings.**
  - ↳ If a sibling is hospitalized during the school day, talk through logistics ahead of time, including who, what, where, and when details.
- **Ask your child how they want to be updated.**
  - ↳ Some kids want to know what's happening right away; others prefer to wait until the school day is over so it doesn't interrupt their day. Following their preference helps children feel like a valued, informed part of the family.