

Setting the Stage for School: A Guide for Parents

By Debra Reicher, PhD
and Carolyn Waldecker, PsyD
The Hagedorn Little Village School
Jack Joel Center for Special Children

It is an extraordinary milestone when any child enters school for the first time. This event is often marked with excitement, anxiety, ambivalence and tears of fear and joy for both the child and his or her family. Entrusting the care of your child into the hands of another can be anxiety provoking. This may be exacerbated by the fact that children with ASD often have significant difficulties communicating their needs. There are several steps parents can take to ease this transition. Most children with ASD are visual learners, so creating a social story with photographs of your child, a school bus, the school your child will attend and even the teacher can help prepare a child for the new environment. You can read this story repeatedly as the first day of school approaches. Taking your child to visit the school and the playground will develop a sense of familiarity with the new environment. You can also take your child school supply shopping so that he or she can pick out items of preference. If your child does not like shopping, pick out a lunch box or folder with his or her favorite character on it. Taking advantage of any orientation program your child's school offers is also important, as many schools



Debra Reicher, PhD

will provide a chance to come in and meet the teacher before the school year begins. Children with ASD often have difficulty with transitions so plan ahead. It is a good idea to start an earlier bedtime and waking time midsummer rather than waiting until the first day of school.

As children with ASD are often diagnosed during toddlerhood, a center based program may be recommended and your



Carolyn Waldecker, PsyD

child may begin school sooner than you intended. Many children with ASD begin attending early intervention school programs around the age of two years. You may be concerned about sending baby who is non-verbal, may not self-feed, still naps and is not toilet trained to school. Feelings of guilt and ambivalence are common as you try to explain to other family members that your toddler will be

attending school. Remember your reasons for deciding to enroll your child in school are sound, as you are taking advantage of the brain's neuroplasticity or brain's "moldability" at early ages. Also keep in mind that the staff working with your child is specially trained in early childhood development and special needs children. They will therefore be skilled at reading cues in young children, even non-verbally, in an effort to decipher what your child needs. All activities should be developmentally appropriate for the needs of your child. You should inquire as to the staff to student ratio is to ensure adequate supervision and safety. If your younger child is attending a full day program, there may be a scheduled nap time during school hours. There may also be a psychologist at your child's school to help with the transition, so do not hesitate to call him or her for information and support.

Close communication between classroom staff, therapists and parents is the key to a successful experience. Inform the school staff of any changes at home that may impact your child's functioning and ask what you can do at home to reinforce learning that is occurring at school. Communication can be via phone, e-mail if the school permits, and most commonly through a notebook you send back and forth daily to give and receive messages between yourself and the classroom staff

see Guide on page 27

Guide from page 25

and therapists. Let your child's teacher know about who your child; for example, write a letter to the teacher explaining how your child communicates, what your child enjoys, what your child finds stressful and how your child calms down when he or she is upset. If your child uses a pacifier, bottle, blanket or other item to self sooth, be sure to let the teacher know this information and they will let you know about the classroom policy regarding such items. You may be allowed to pack these at the beginning of the year and as your child adjusts to the school setting, he or she may no longer need them. Some classrooms may also allow a young child to gradually increase the amount of time spent in school if s/he is having difficulty adjusting to the school setting.

Many ASD children will have their first experience riding a bus as they begin school. As children with ASD often have sensory issues, they may find stimuli such as noise, smell and lights overwhelming. A school bus may place a child with ASD on sensory overload without preparation. For some children,

being able to hold a small toy or preferred item, if it is allowed by the bus company, may be comforting and soothing during the bus ride. For other children, if approved by the bus company, headphones or an iPod may serve to block out unwanted noise and have a soothing effect. Social stories can also be useful in preparing a child with ASD to ride the bus for the first time.

The transition from early intervention and preschool to school age can be difficult for many parents and children. As many services through early intervention are done within the home, once your child transitions to the Committee for Preschool Special Education (CPSE), some of these services are likely to be done in the school setting. While your child may have received speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and/or physical therapy at home, the frequency and location of these services may change and in certain circumstances, your child may not qualify for a service for which he or she previously qualified. Do not be afraid to ask the committee to explain the rationale for discontinuing a service. The educational classification system changes when a child transitions

from preschool to kindergarten. All preschoolers receiving special education services, regardless of the type, frequency or number of services, receive an educational classification of "Preschooler with a Disability." Once a child begins kindergarten, it is a federal regulation under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that they receive one of 13 educational classifications if they are determined to be eligible to receive special education services. One of these educational classifications is Autism, but others include Speech or Language Impairment, Learning Disabled, or Other Health Impaired (OHI). If your child is going to need an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), one of these classifications will be assigned to your child at the committee meeting. If your child is entering a mainstream classroom, inquire about the teacher's previous experience and the approach taken with ASD children.

The first few weeks of school can be stressful for both children and parents in light of the challenges an Autism Spectrum Diagnosis presents. Aside from the difficulty with transitions and change in routine, your ASD child may not communicate with you about his or her day at

school. You may wonder what he or she did during the day, if he or she was happy, and how he or she is adjusting. A temporary increase of self-stimulatory or other maladaptive behaviors may occur during this transition but will likely dissipate as your child adjusts to the routine of attending school. Attempting to keep your own anxiety under control is also essential, as children pick up on your tone and affect and will react accordingly. Research whether or not your child's school offers a parent support group or other forum such as Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA) where you can meet other families of special needs children. Remember that children with ASD tend to thrive on routine, so once school becomes part of his or her new routine (and yours), everything will fall into place.

Debra Reicher, PhD is the Director of Psychological Services and Carolyn Waldecker, PsyD is a Neuropsychologist at The Hagedorn Little Village School, Jack Joel Center for Special Children in Seaford, NY. For more information, please contact Carolyn Waldecker at Carolyn.Waldecker@littlevillage.org or visit www.littlevillage.org.