

Positively Parenting

Our children, our challenges, our choices

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Help Your Special Needs Child Adjust To Back To School Time

By Dr. Scott L. Barkin

Back-to-school for most parents means getting their children back on a school-centric schedule, establishing new bed times, and enrolling in after-school activities. But for parents of children with special needs, changing their child's routine and removing them from their comfort zones can prove more difficult. By slowly introducing techniques to help the child acclimate and creating a consistent environment in the weeks leading up to the start of the school year, these families find that the back-to-school transition can go much more smoothly.

One way to soften the transition is by helping a child with a developmental disorder embrace the seasonal shift. This helps kids anticipate what's to come rather than resist it. Through use of a calendar, parents can remind their child that moving from summer fun to a Monday through Friday routine doesn't mean that the fun stops completely. Calendars can become a visual cue for children who may not have the internalized mechanism for planning and anticipating their responsibilities. The calendar can demonstrate readily when it is time for school and schoolwork and when it is time to play.

For children who can't recall which holidays are which or keep the seasons straight, calendars with photos representing family activities during these times will serve as a pleasant reminder of what they can anticipate. Working together with your child to pick out these photos and write down entries on the calendar will help teach them the concept of scheduling events and activities, as well as planning and anticipating. While they may be having a great time on summer vacation, and might struggle to make the transition into the school year, these photos show that virtually every month of the school year has a holiday that allows for "special plans" and fun activities.

In addition to the visual aspect, calendars can also help a child see extracurricular activities and schedule conflicts for themselves so that a parent doesn't always have to appear to be the "bad guy" when saying no to an opportunity or activity. When presented with this dilemma, the best way a parent can work with their child is to point out the conflict on the calendar, and use anticipation to show them a similar activity coming up, such as: *Soccer practice is on Tuesday and Thursday, and when it's over, it will be close to Thanksgiving. During Thanksgiving, we can pick apples at the farm.*

If a parent has a developmentally disabled child who is older, a natural extension of the calendar is the use of a PDA (personal digital assistant). PDAs can be utilized as a wonderful tool for helping a child recall their daily, weekly and monthly schedule. These devices are convenient for

scheduling activities and managing tasks as they are optimally portable and increasingly accessible (some can sync with other family members' calendars online).

Back-to-school season can be a busy time of year for every family, but a calendar with visual cues can help to keep everyone on track and poised for happy times ahead.

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