

Managing the “Back to School” Transition

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Going back to school time is typically an exciting time filled with great anticipation for children and their parents alike. For children with anxiety, social fears and/or selective mutism, however, this transition time can be quite difficult. Going back to school means going back to the very setting where these children may feel major apprehension, worry or fear. Going back to school means a new classroom, new classmates, a new teacher and increased work demands. It also means leaving the comfort zone of their home environment, parents and siblings around which they are probably more relaxed and less anxious. So how can you make the transition back to school as smooth as possible? The following tips may help your child in the coming weeks and help ease the stress for the whole family.

Make the “unknown” known

- Find out as many “unknown variables” and communicate these as soon as possible for your child. Who will her new teacher be? Which classroom will be hers? Which peers will be in her new class (especially those who she already knows and feels comfortable around)? What parts of 2nd grade will be similar to what she knew in 1st grade? For some children, this can be a catch 22; having too much information too soon can heighten anxiety. Know your child’s capacity for processing information and provide only enough information to reduce the anxiety.
- For the variables that you do not yet know, remind your child how she has successfully handled other similar “unknowns” in the past – and that this situation will likely be no different.

Talk, talk, talk – the sooner the better

- Talk about the return to school frequently and well in advance.
- Point out all the positive things about the return to school (such as seeing a favorite friend every day, having recess outside with the big kids, or joining an older sibling in a new school building).
- Talk about the anticipated routine when school days return such as how the morning routine will go at home, how your child will get to and from school and what after school arrangements or activities are scheduled.
- For children who are very young (such as preschoolers) or older children who are not as skilled at articulating with words, the use of “social stories” may be helpful. Use this as an arts and crafts opportunity where your child helps you make a small book that tells the story of what his day will be like when he returns to school, including as many details and steps to the school day routine as possible. Taking pictures of these places and incorporating them in the story may help reduce the language processing demands, especially for younger children. Then read this book with your child daily. This will help him see the school day as a predictable routine that he is very familiar with and make for a smooth transition later in August.
- Another fun project to make the return to school exciting is to create a “countdown calendar” to the first day of school. You may want to include milestones like purchasing school supplies, getting a new outfit for the first day, and/or a visit to the school building to scope out the new classroom in this calendar.

Going on Location

- Start going to visit the school property as soon as possible, even if the school building is still closed. You can walk the grounds, try to find the window to your child’s new classroom, see where recess will be and play on the school playground. Hopefully, your child will be at ease on these empty school grounds and be able to communicate freely with you and her siblings, helping her make the association that she can feel comfortable at school.
- Arrange “play dates” with a favorite friend on the empty school playground this summer, preferably with a friend who will be in your child’s class this fall. This too will begin to facilitate comfort with peers in the school setting and help your child realize that she can feel comfortable even if she once thought she could not feel relaxed at school.

- As soon as school personnel return to school (many principals and guidance counselors return early in August before teachers and other staff arrive), plan visits inside the school building. Start with baby steps and gradually build up from there with these visits. For example, start out going into the school just to walk the halls and find your child's new classroom together. Next, visit this empty classroom (without the teacher or any peers present) and linger for a while, checking out the desks, room layout and where cubbies or mailboxes may be. Finally, visit this classroom again when the teacher is there (typically in the week before classes start), to "help" her set up her classroom (preferably a nonverbal task where your child can help with a specific job without the pressure for direct communication, with the comfort of a parent present). For an older child, you may want to use these school visits to help him locate his locker, his classrooms and where the cafeteria will be. Repeat these steps as necessary. These steps will help insure an easier transition to the first day of school, as the teacher, classroom, and school layout are already familiar.

Collaborating with the School

- Make sure you talk with the school staff such as the principal, guidance counselor and/or speech-language pathologist and teacher prior to the first day of school. Even if this was already done at the end of the prior school year, use this as an opportunity to re-establish a line of communication about your child's struggles to date and what will/won't help moving into this school year. Remind the teacher to not force participation or communication with your child, but rather take your child's lead and read your child's cues that she is feeling comfortable or feeling stuck.
- Provide the new teacher and other staff, if you haven't already done so, with reading material to get familiarized with SM. Check out the online library at SMG's website, at www.selectivemutism.org for articles and handouts that can be given to the teacher. Check out the online bookstore for book suggestions that may help your child's teacher as well

Keep Your Own Anxiety in Check

- As parents of anxious or selectively mute children, watching them struggle with the transition back to school can be heart wrenching. We anticipate their discomfort, their worries, their apprehension... and want to do anything we can to shield them from upset. However, it is important that you NOT communicate your anxiety to your child in any way. If you talk about the return to school with any apprehension or hesitation in

your voice, your child will pick up on this and it will likely exacerbate his anxiety. If, on the other hand, you talk matter-of-factly about school, emphasizing the positive points and assuring your child that he can handle the difficult parts of the transition – this will help your child feel more confident and capable!

Be Patient...

- New routines and transitions take adjustment time. It will likely take weeks or even a couple of months for your child to adjust to the new school year. It is important to continue to maintain a positive attitude about the adjustment. Even after the first day of school, continue to plan visits up to school (as needed) to help your child feel comfortable. Arrange play dates one-on-one with classmates your child enjoys, and be patient – it will take time to see the full benefit of all of your efforts.
- However, if you notice that something is not working, be proactive. If there is a problem with the routine in your child's new classroom, with the teacher in any way, or a social problem you see emerging with a difficult peer... communicate quickly with the school to resolve these issues and come up with an alternate strategy.

For more information about selective mutism as well as information about resources in your local area, visit SMG's website at www.selectivemutism.org.