



A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

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Strategies for helping K-5 schoolers **EMERGE SUCCESSFULLY** from the COVID cocoon:

1. Normalize getting back to school routines

Bedtime, wake-up time, getting dressed, meals, limiting screen time (otherwise falling asleep can be difficult), etc. Importantly, though, that “normalizing routines” does not mean organizing every waking hour the child has: lack of downtime is just as detrimental as lack of structure (it “kills” the self-directed play, which is an important tool of getting to know the world at this age). Organize the day around the events that need to happen more or less at the same time (bedtime, waking up, meals) and leave room for play and exploration.

2. To talk, or not to talk, that is the question

Indeed, some parents find it useful to begin talking about school earlier – even having a trial run (driving to school, getting to know the building, meeting the teacher) or buying supplies, etc. Others note that it provokes anxiety (really, if you think about it: the most difficult time dealing with something scary is actually before it is going to happen). My opinion: talk, plan, get ready, but do not make it the central part of the days/weeks before school. Also, vary the ways you introduce the idea of school: discuss a social story, read a book, then drive to school, tell your own schooldays story the next day while buying a back pack – and on, and on, and on.

3. Do not be the source of anxiety.

Very often parents are much more anxious than their children, and they are quite capable of transmitting this anxiety. Make sure you never discuss any of your own fears in front of the child (not with your child, but in front of him as if he were not there). Remember that your child’s intuitive mind is quite powerful and they know full well that, no matter what you tell them, the truth about how you really feel is in your conversation with a lady you are sitting next to on the plane, with your mom as you cook dinner, or in your remarks when you watch news (they may not “hear” what you are telling them as they stand right in front of you, but rest assured that they hear your entire conversation with a friend over the phone from another room).

4. Speaking about fears...

As I said before, do not amplify your child’s fears. But do not dismiss them either. Learning “happens” in that narrow zone in which the child is able – with your guidance and encouragement – to do something he cannot do on his own. The same about fears. Rather than saying, “It is going to be fine” or “I do not know how you are going to make it” offer something akin to, “I know how you feel, and I feel the same way, but we are going to do it together and I will be there to support you!”

5. Why are transitions from the summer break to school more difficult for children with attention deficit?

Physiologically, it is hard for individuals with ADHD to find reinforcement. Their fidgeting, racing, etc. are really a constant quest for something that would be satisfying. No surprise that, once they find it, they hyperfocus (e.g., game for hours). Summer is naturally more “pleasant” than school, so there is no surprise that it is hard to lure kids, esp. kids with ADHD, into the classroom. But, again, they will get there – with your guidance and encouragement. I would say, normalize routines, set achievable goals, and, most importantly, celebrate success – unable of reflection and struggling to enjoy simple things, the child won’t “see” the natural positive consequences of his actions unless you point to them.

6. Why are transitions from the summer break to school more difficult for children on the spectrum?

Schools have been created to capitalize on the fact that humans are intensely social creatures. In the past several decades, this premise has been taken to new heights with the transition from acquisition to participation models of schooling: schools function now more as communities of practice than places where knowledge is simply transmitted/acquired. Understandably, this shift has been particularly painful for those individuals who do not experience social interactions as rewarding: individuals on the spectrum. If the ability to interact with friends is what somewhat reconciles many children with the idea of school, kids on the spectrum see exactly this as the major challenge... Plus, more rigidity with routines, which, if disrupted, are harder to re-establish. My advice for parents: do not do it alone. Seek help from professionals who will guide and encourage you through the steps – and follow all the above recommendations to make it easier.