

TRANSITIONS BACK TO SCHOOL: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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In June, as my peers excitedly counted down the days until summer vacation, I remember sitting in school filled with dread, remembering from previous years all of the painful transitions and the increased amount of time spent in unstructured social situations that occurs over the summer. My nice organized and predictable school days would soon be replaced by chaotic summer activities such as camp, which, at times, felt like a jungle. My anxiety level tripled during the summer months. Around mid-August I would finally, some-what settle into a summer routine and my anxiety would ease only to make another transition back to school in September!

Why are these transitions so hard for me, I often wondered? Why is it that it appears so many people around me can move in and out of different situations experiencing change and not feel as horrible inside as I do? I've discovered that neurologically typical (NT) people have the ability to tolerate ambiguity, meaning *it could be like this, or it might be like that...* Many people on the autism spectrum are missing this skill. The other important thing I've discovered is that NT people use their imagination (sometimes unconsciously) to foresee what new situations will be like. I believe the purpose of this function is to ease tension. How many of you before an IEP meeting "played out" different scenarios in your head about what **could** possibly happen?

When I was younger I had difficulty tolerating ambiguity. Everything could only be one way or only have one possible outcome. When I left school in June I expected that when I returned in September everything would be **exactly** as I had left it: building structures, landscaping, smells, my peer's height, weight, and haircuts, teacher's last names, etc.. Of course this is not the case. Life goes on - schools change structure and are painted before the start of the new year, people growl and change their hair, adults marry and women become pregnant (changing shape), the new classroom will have a different echo than the previous one, etc..

It is vital that the child emotionally understands the transition, meaning that they can literally feel the emotions associated with the transition, and is not simply able to verbalize the physical transition. If your friend was trying to prepare you for a rollercoaster ride it's much more important that you are prepared for the rush (fear) you will feel going down the loop, then what color the rollercoaster car you will be sitting in is.

Here are some suggestions I have about making the transition back to school:

1. Start talking to your child about his/her new classroom. Make sure you talk about the emotions involved (scared, relief, happy,...). Write a transition script such as, "In 11 days you will be returning to the Johnson Elementary School. You might feel scared like the time that we saw the big lighting storm and your stomach felt like it was bubbling inside... you might also feel happy like the time..."
2. Make a calendar of the countdown... and plan transition related activities for each day about 2 weeks prior to school's start. On the calendar, write down all of the transition activities that will occur (i.e.: August 21 - drive by the Johnson school, August 22 - stop in the parking lot and talk about what the first day will be like, August 23 -

play on the playground at the Johnson school, August 24 - visit the new classroom, ...). If your child uses photographs or symbols, make the calendar out of them. Many teachers actually start school a few days before the kids arrive. Call your school and see if you can bring your child in to the classroom so s/he can adjust to the classroom and teacher.

Sometimes I have trouble understanding emotions until I'm actually in the situation. For this reason, you might want to have your transition discussions at the school. Walk around the grounds, play on the playground, pretend you are dropping your child off at school, etc.

3. Transitions are much easier if there are only a few of them at a time. When I was going to school, I had a really difficult time transitioning into new school materials such as book covers, pencils, notebooks, paper, knapsack, school clothes, etc. Many people could not understand why I would prefer to use old beat up notebooks from last year when I had brand new clean ones; the transition was too overwhelming. Try purchasing the materials early (like this week) and lay them out where the child can see them. This might ease some of the transitions.

4. Another area related to #3 was new school clothes. Take winter clothes out and hang them in the closet (or put them in drawers) long before the season actually starts. This will start to prepare the child for the transition. During the year, have the child practice wearing various articles of clothing (although the season doesn't call for it). New clothes can be very scratchy and most of the time they smell funny! Try buying new clothes at the end of last season and wash them each week with the rest of your clothes for a month or two or consider purchasing used clothing. These strategies may ease sensory tension.

5. I have also noticed the fall (and spring) are very difficult times for me; I become extremely moody and sometimes I regress (mainly perseverating or ritualizing more than usual). I think this has something to do with my inability to internally regulate my sensory environment. When rapid weather changes occur it's almost as if I need extra time to process the change. In September, New England tends to have erratic weather (80 degrees one day, 60 the next) and hence, my sensory system goes wild. Unfortunately, I have not found a really good way to increase my tolerance. What helps somewhat is allowing for extra time, putting less demands on myself, allowing for more "down time", and making sure to get plenty of exercise.