

TIPS TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE START THE SCHOOL YEAR

What to expect

Knowing the teacher, the students, the classroom and the timetable ahead of the first day

Build relationships

Orientation

Visiting the school and classroom ahead of the first day and meeting their teacher

Supports

Confirming with the school that supports are in place ahead of day one and revisiting the IEP within the first weeks

Teacher's resources

Ensure the teacher has useful resources such as the IEP, student profile and previous teacher handover

Lower demands

Reducing household demands and minimising out of school activities in the first weeks

Be Informed

Revisit school and department policies

Plan ahead

Anticipate with our young person what could happen and plan strategies for when reality does not meet expectations

Social stories

Our members told us what helps their kids have a positive start to the year.

Remember students should have a say in what they need to be successful!

TIPS TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE START THE SCHOOL YEAR

The start of the school year can be difficult for neurodivergent and disabled young people. Our members told us what helps their young person have a positive start to the new school year. We at Square Peg Round Whole, have collated the responses into a handy resource to help you plan for the return to the classroom.

What to expect

Knowing what to expect at school and in the classroom ahead of returning to school can help ease anxious minds. Our members offered the following advice for preparing their young person:

- Know what to expect – who the teacher is, who the students in the class will be, which classroom they are in, what the daily routine will look like.
- Meet their class teacher 1:1 before school returns, with an opportunity to discuss anything my child is anxious about, any uncertainties they have and familiarising themselves with new teacher so they can identify them as a trusted adult.
- Obtaining weekly and daily timetables ahead of time.
- Knowing who the teacher is and having time to build the relationship before school starts (ideally in term four).
- Visiting the classroom/ school/ teacher and (with permission) taking photos, that we can then use to revisit at home later. These can also be used to create personalised social stories if useful for your child.
- Create colour coded timetable (with pictures for younger kids).

Supports

Ensuring supports are in place and meet the young persons needs will help smooth the transition back into the classroom. Our members had this to say about supports:

- Ensuring that I (parent) reach out to teaching and support staff to confirm accommodations and supports, and explaining the accommodations and supports to my child beforehand.
- If possible, ensuring an IEP or planning meeting is scheduled for early in the term, to make sure that any issues are addressed as early as possible before things can snowball.
- If necessary, arranging a graduated transition plan to help with building to full-time attendance.
- Ensure that there is an IEP in place and support available from OT, psychologist etc.
- Actively facilitate your child having a say in the supports, adjustments and accommodations that will help them when school returns.



Orientation

Visiting the school and re-orienting after a long break was recommended by our members. Here's what they had to say :

- Visiting school before it starts, talking to their teacher, walking around the school to familiarise themselves again, visiting the classroom they will be in
- Orientation to playgrounds, toilets, lunch space etc. prior to school starting again.

Teacher's Resources

Sharing with teachers helpful and neuro-affirming resources can help to build a collaborative relationship ahead of the school year. Resources that our members felt were useful are:

- Emailing an updated student profile/ about me document to the school and teacher.
- Try and get a handover from the previous teacher – what tools and strategies worked well to support them on their learning journey.
- Create resources (like break cards, introduction cards for relief teachers with a brief outline of IEP accommodations, information about your family culture/ neurodiversity).

Lower Demands

Returning to school can be stressful for young people. The added demands of the classroom may mean that they have less capacity for other daily tasks. Our members had this to say about lowering demands:

- Any ways we can think of to lower the demands and anxiety around a return to school.
- Minimising or eliminating any after school activities for a few weeks if there are any big changes or at a new school.
- You control what happens before and school, so do what you can to meet your child's needs in those places with food, rest/ recovery. If they aren't coping with the school routine, it could be that you need to limit before and after school activities.
- Remember that mental health and wellbeing days are perfectly valid. If your children need a break, you can facilitate that if necessary.

Plan ahead

Anticipating what could happen on our young person's return to school and having strategies in place can help in minimise negative impacts. Advice we received on planning ahead:

- Having discussions and scenario planning with my child. See what the child thinks will happen on the first day. Then do the "What Ifs." What will you do/ say if its different to your expectations? Give them strategies.
- Keeping expectations realistic no matter what their intentions are.
- Action plan your response for if things go south.
- Setting up their desk/ class items/ locker before the first morning back at school, to remove the pressure of having to organise these things first day and first time back.
- Arranging medication blister packs done with plenty of time for the start of the school term.
- Allow children to choose things that they love (like lunchboxes, pencil cases, water bottles) so they are excited about the prospect of having them at school.



Social Stories

Social stories can be a powerful tool in helping young people prepare for their return to school. Social stories should only be used to provide facts about the classroom and not expectations around behaviours. One member said:

- Create a social story book with photos and routine information, especially when there will be big changes from last year.

Build Relationships

Building relationships with administrators, teachers, other students and your young person can be beneficial. Comments we received from our members are:

- Organising a playdate with a school friend just before the start of school term. Visiting the school for a play with the friend, if possible.
- Introducing myself and my child to the school admin and office staff.
- Build a respectful and positive relationship with the teacher and school leadership – e.g. prepare a one page about me document for your child, offer to meet with them in a couple of weeks to discuss any concerns they might have.
- Spend as much time as possible before school starts connecting with your child, being interested in what they have to say and their interests etc. This hopefully helps top up their spoons and self esteem and reinforces that you will always be there for them.

Be Informed

Understanding the school and department policies ahead of the school year will help you to know your young person's rights. One member had this to say:

- Obtaining copies and familiarising yourself with the school and department policies regarding things like accessibility and accommodations, behaviour management and exclusions – knowing what processes are and everyone's rights and responsibilities can help make discussions more fruitful instead of adversarial if issues arise.

And finally, one member offered... consciously cultivate parental self-care and self regulation.