

Getting Ready for School:

Interview with Paula Kluth, Ph.D.

Do you have suggestions on what parents can do before school starts to help with the transition?

Parents can work on their own or with teachers to prepare students for school. Reading about the school (on the district website, for instance), having siblings describe teachers and events, and showing the learner photos or video of the school building can all help. Tools like Social Stories (**see Carol Gray's website for "how to" info**) and video modeling can help as well. Creating a back-to-school checklist, first-day picture schedule, or other similar visuals may also soothe some students.

How can parents work with teachers and all school staff to educate them about autism and their child's individualized educational needs?

I often suggest having the student create a short portfolio, pamphlet, or even video for their teachers (see my website for an article on the personal portfolio). If the student cannot create such a product, families can assist the student in doing so. The product can include information about strengths, needs, preferences, and tips for "how to teach & reach me".

In addition, if the family has actual examples of curricular adaptations (e.g., adapted tests, software, math manipulatives) that have been successfully used in the past, pictures of them or actual work products should be given to teachers to help them craft appropriate new supports. Many teachers (like students) are visual learners and will be able to create the most effective materials, strategies, & environments when they see as well as hear what works best.

What can parents do to educate "other students" about autism (How to Be a Friend) to help with their child's transition back to school?

One of the best ways to educate other learners about peers with unique learning profiles is to build classroom community and teach about differences throughout the year. In the beginning of the year, students might all create "about me" posters, presentations, or books and share them to each other. A student's autism can be explained as part of these introductions. In talking about a disability in the context of all individual differences, students will see that EVERY learner is unique, not just some! If a student on the spectrum wants to elaborate on his or her specific needs, that

learner may be invited to field questions from classmates or to teach a mini-lesson on his or her label, strengths, or challenges.

There are also some great pieces of literature that might be appropriate to use in classrooms. For older students, autobiographies of those with autism can serve as tools to discuss the needs of some individuals on the spectrum. For younger learners, books such as *Ian's Walk* or *It's OK to Be Different* (Todd Parr) are nice introductions to the topic. I have just published a new book (with my colleague, Patrick Schwarz) about honoring a student's fascinations called *Pedro's Whale* so I have started using that in classrooms as well.

About Dr. Kluth

Dr. Paula Kluth is a consultant, teacher, author, advocate, and independent scholar who works with teachers and families to provide inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities and to create more responsive and engaging schooling experiences for all learners. Paula is a former special educator who has served as a classroom teacher and inclusion facilitator. Her professional interests include differentiating instruction and inclusive schooling.

She is the author or co-author of nine books including *"You're Going to Love This Kid": Teaching Students with Autism in Inclusive Classrooms*; *Access to Academics: Critical Approaches to Inclusive Curriculum, Instruction, and Policy*, *A Land We Can Share: Teaching Literacy to Students with Autism*; *Joyful Learning: Active and Collaborative Learning in the Inclusive Classroom*; and *Just Give Him the Whale: 20 Ways to Support & Honor the Passions & Interests of Students with Autism*. Paula is also the director of a documentary film titled *"We Thought You'd Never Ask": Voices of People with Autism*.

You can find out more about Paula on her popular website (www.paulakluth.com) or by joining her on her Facebook Fan Page.