


# Getting Ready for School: Transition Tips for Students with Autism

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For many learners with autism, transitions are the toughest part of schooling. Moving from classroom to classroom or teacher to teacher can be stressful enough, but moving from building to building is almost always a process filled with anxiety and trepidation. These four strategies are designed to prepare the learner with autism for a new school or a new schooling experience and can be used days or months before the student arrives as well as throughout the school year.

## School Preview

Many students with autism will profit from seeing, experiencing, and learning about the school before they show up on the first day. This is an effective strategy for students who are changing schools or for those who will be going to a certain classroom for the first time. A student can pre-view the school using many different tools. Some learners might appreciate a videotape of the school and its rooms, complete with short interviews with his new teachers. Other students like to tour the school themselves and meet teachers face to face before school officially starts. Still others may want to hear siblings, parents, or friends tell them about the school. Students may also be interested in reviewing brochures of the school, newsletters from the previous year, and/or the school’s website (if one exists).

## Surveys

Before the year begins or during the first few days of school, many teachers ask students and their families to complete a survey. The purpose of this tool is to help the teacher become more personally acquainted with students and to make an immediate connection with families. Some teachers may choose to administer different surveys to students and parents while other teachers may design a survey that families and students complete together. While a survey would undoubtedly help a teacher learn more about his student with autism, many teachers choose to use surveys with every student in the class.

When considering using a survey, teachers will want to focus on learning styles, interests, needs, strengths or even on student ideas for the classroom. Although questions will vary by age group, possible questions include:

- How do you learn best?
- What hobbies do you have?
- What scares or upsets you?
- What kind of expertise do you have (e.g., skateboarding, karate, collecting bugs, drawing)?
- What do you need to be comfortable in my classroom?
- What do you want to learn this year?
- What is your least favorite part of the school day?
- What is your favorite part of the school day?

If one or more students cannot write, the teacher, parent or support person can allow learners to submit visual surveys. Students might draw pictures, create a collage, or submit photographs or a video in response to the survey questions.

### Routines and Schedules

Some students will profit from the development and implementation of written schedules, picture calendars, or the use of a daily planner. As one of my former students explained to me: “School is very stimulating and a lot of noises and disorganization for me. So I need to get used to new places and have a schedule”. Teachers should talk often to students about how time will be used in the classroom. They should also try to give students with autism as much warning as possible when they are going to alter the class schedule or when a substitute will be teaching the class.

All students in a given classroom may benefit from knowing more about the schedule. Having information about what content will be taught and what activities will take place in any given day or week can help any student become a better planner and time manager. Teachers can make going over the daily schedule a regular part of the daily routine in any classroom; even taking a few seconds to review this information can make a difference in the learning of some students.

### Personal Portfolio

Students who have unique needs and abilities may want to introduce themselves to a teacher through the use of a portfolio. Portfolios may include photographs, artwork, writing or schoolwork samples, lists of favorite things, or even video or audiotapes.

A portfolio can be an especially helpful tool for students who do not speak or use a reliable communication system. I worked with one young man, J.D., to assemble a portfolio he would use as he transitioned from high school to the work place. This young man did not speak and those who met him for the first time often struggled to connect with him. When his teachers first accompanied him to his new school, J.D.’s peers began asking them questions about him: Did he understand them? Did he have any interests?

The teachers decided that J.D. needed a way to represent himself so that they didn’t need to serve as his voice and liaison. In order to facilitate this process the teachers worked with J.D. to create a portfolio that he could use to introduce himself to new people and to interact with those he already knew. J.D.’s portfolio included:

- Four pages of photographs (J.D. with family and friends; snapshots of him playing soccer at a community park; J.D. working with peers on a biology experiment, vacation photos from the Rock and Roll Museum in Ohio)
- A short “resume” outlining some of the classes he took in middle school
- A list of his favorite movies and compact discs
- A “Learning About Autism” pamphlet J.D. got at a conference
- A glossy picture of the Green Bay Packers, J.D.’s favorite football team

Portfolios can be in paper, audio, or video form, formal or informal, a few pages or dozens of pages, include only current information and artifacts or serve as a cumulative record of the student’s life.

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