

Children's National: CASD CHAT

Adapt to the New School Year



The start of the school year can be exciting, but can also bring on challenging situations and behaviors for some of our children as they transition from summer break back to school.

One important characteristic of children that are struggling is their susceptibility to overload. Sometimes the trigger to overload is obvious: there is a big change in their schedule, which includes changes in where they spend most of their time (school versus home), who they spend their time with (other students and teachers versus family members), possibly how they dress and what they eat. If this seems to be part of your child's difficulty, providing some additional structure may facilitate success in adjusting to the change, paired with a reduction in demands outside of school. Below find some tips and resources to help you get the 2017-2018 school year started on the right foot.

1. **Create a schedule with your child for the week, including the weekend-** this is a task for when your child has had a break and is not overloaded.
2. **Identify where he/she has a choice** (clothes, lunch, etc.) **and what is not a choice** (homework, riding a bus). Even within the no-choice options, determine if there is a choice (homework before or after snack).
3. **Identify strategies that may provide the child some relief and avoid overload and list on the schedule:** 30 minutes of play when he/she gets home, quiet time or snack after getting off the bus, etc. Your child will likely have different needs on different days- sometimes physical activity and other times alone time- and you may be able to tell what would be helpful. Offer a couple of options and let them choose.
4. **Avoid bombarding your child with questions about his or her day.**

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- After your child has a few minutes to relax, ask a few specific questions, such as "what was your favorite activity of the day?" or "what did you do in art?"
5. **Explore challenging situations after your child has had time to decompress and point out positives** in their day to lift the mood and refocus on the positive.
 6. **Give your child your full attention when he/she is ready to share.** Many parents find that the car ride home or bedtime is when their child opens up.
 7. **Turn off competing electronics when you are trying to communicate with your child,** but have a paper and pencil to jot notes when talking. This also reduces the social demands.
 8. **Put a time limit on homework and identify the reward for working for that length of time-**approximately 10 minutes/grade is used by some schools, but ask the teacher.
 9. **Provide brief breaks during homework, and avoid overly long homework periods-** while high school students spend hours on homework, elementary school students should not.
 10. **Reward success!** Acknowledge that going to school is tough, that you will help, and chart the child's success in using identified coping strategies, with a reward for a predetermined number of successes.

However, even if students have learned to adjust to the changes associated with the start of a new school year, other factors that may contribute to overload may be more challenging to identify and include the following:

- **An increase in the number of transitions.** Switching classes can provide a welcome break for many students and can be an important movement break for kids with ADHD. While the change may just be walking across a hall with other peers, for some students, it means crisscrossing the building more than once and moving against a sea of other students doing the same thing.
 1. **Explore with your child how many transitions they have and the complexity of the transition.**
 2. **Discuss what is difficult for them-** anxiety over being late for class, difficulty accessing their locker, being bumped by so many other students, etc.
 3. **Using the Goal-Why-Plan-Do-Check strategy from Unstuck and On Target, explore ideas of how to problem solve.** Begin with brainstorming- write down all the possibilities and how they would help. Develop a plan for implementing them and check in daily to determine success.
 4. **Consider when assistance is needed from the school and follow up in writing.** Options could include allowing the student to leave class a couple of minutes earlier, or having a buddy to walk with.
- **Sensory overload.** It is difficult to prepare for the intensity of the sensory aspects a new school year brings, in terms of noise and the number of people encountered.



1. **Problem solving with the school may be needed.** Some students wear ear plugs for loud environments, such as the cafeteria or gym, or avoid them (eating lunch with a small group of peers elsewhere).
 2. **Having a place to retreat to can be very important for some children, with planned breaks** during the day to ward off overload. Consulting with an OT may be helpful.
- **Long days.** Some children have overly long commutes to attend school. Besides contributing to fatigue, some commutes have the added challenge of additional transitions (before and/or after care programs) or the inherent challenges of riding a bus (loud, socially challenging).

1. **Step back and look at your child's day to understand where these additional challenges may be to identify potential solutions.** If there are no options, work with your child to identify what may reduce the stress (i.e., ensuring seating on the bus that is safe; identifying a quiet space at the before/aftercare program)
2. **Ensuring adequate sleep is often a challenge.** Helping the child ensure they are ready for the school day by preparing the night before (book bag, clothes, lunch, and even breakfast items) teaches organization skills and may also allow him/her to get a little extra sleep.



- Finally, **modify expectations for the child when he/she returns home.** Your child may find the effort to get through a school day leaves little energy for anything else. While extracurricular activities are important, attend to the frequency and intensity of programs.

It may be helpful to move some demands/activities to the weekend.

- **Get help.** Professionals who have experience with children with autism spectrum disorders can provide additional support and help in addressing challenging situations and behaviors.

For additional resources, please check out Pathfinders for Autism's [Back to School Parent Tip Sheet](#), where you can find some more ideas!

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