



AuSM's highly trained, certified therapists have committed their careers to helping individuals with autism understand their diagnosis and address both the challenges and gifts that it can bring. The AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team sends out a monthly e-mail to answer questions submitted by the autism community. This is one of the past issues of the column. Visit www.ausm.org to sign up to receive the e-mails.

Dear Therapist:

I am getting anxious about the next school year starting, and I think my kid is, too. What can we do to have a successful transition back to school this fall?

– **Anxious About School**

Dear Anxious:

Good question! First, plan for the transition to be hard. Don't plan for an easy September. Assume this is going to be really difficult, and take inventory by asking these questions:

- What causes your child the most anxiety about going back to school? (Ask them!)
- What causes you, the parents, the most anxiety? If you have a partner or a spouse, ask them what causes the most anxiety for them about the transition as well. This will impact what factors each of you are most tuned into during the first days and weeks of the school year.

When you ask your child or spouse what causes them the most anxiety, focus first on listening to and validating each other rather than judging. Be sure not to minimize or downplay your child or partner's anxiety. Don't say things like, "Oh, come on, you know you're going to be fine once you get there" or "That's silly, don't worry about that" or "Well, you may not like it, but too bad." Don't be the parent who always says "Everything's fine" when maybe it isn't. Those types of comments can make a person feel they aren't being heard, and they may dig in their heels at the very moment you'd like them to become more flexible. Presenting quick, simple and easy solutions can make it sound like you think the problem is minimal, or should not be very hard or complicated, when for your child or partner, it probably is!

As H.L. Mencken said, "For every complex problem, there's a solution that is simple, neat ... and wrong."



Respect your child's fears and anxieties by letting them know you're going to think about it, you're going to brainstorm, and together you can look for ideas to make it better. Focus on making a problem better, not on making it go away completely.

Show your child that a successful person doesn't make problems disappear; they just learn how to make them more manageable, and they keep checking back in on what's working and what isn't. Don't set your child up to believe the school year needs to go perfectly or else it's going to be considered a failure.

Every problem can't be solved, but nearly every problem in the world can be improved upon – that is the goal.

Spend some time just listing the biggest fears and anxiety each person has about the school year, and validate each one by acknowledging how the concern makes sense. Then, slowly and nonjudgmentally, brainstorm ideas. Finally, decide on a plan, knowing you will go back and revisit whether it is working well or not.

Also:

Consider setting stricter limits on screens/electronic devices the first few weeks of school so there is more time to focus on how school is going. It's going to be a lot harder to make the rules more stringent as the year goes on. It is easier to be more strict at first, and then ease up once you see your child on track in school. This will also show your child that you are poised to notice their successes and can be flexible, based on how things are going.

Consider clearing other after school/evening distractions by pre-preparing meals on Sunday and not planning any evening meetings or events the first weeks of school unless necessary.

Have firm plans in place about who is doing what chores during that week. It pays to plan and structure more at the beginning and later discover you don't need quite that much structure.



Plan to have regular check-ins or family meetings to assess how school is going after the first day, week, and month. If you need to check in with a call or email to teachers, plan to do that as well. Don't rely on checking the school districts online grading systems as your main feedback about how it's going early on. As most parents know, these may not be up to date (at best) or inaccurate/confusing (at worst), especially the first month of school. Your child's teacher(s) is/are most likely much nicer and have more useful information than the online grading system.

The last couple of school years have been challenging for kids, parents, and especially those impacted by disabilities or other mental or physical health diagnoses. Having a rough September, a rough fall, or even a run of rough school years does not make you or your child a failure.

School just simply isn't easy for every student or family. Remind your child that some of the rockiest roads still end up going the right direction and still end up in the right place. Even when school doesn't go well, remember to keep working on family relationships. Grades are important, and learning is critical, but no matter what happens with school, your bond and relationship with your child is going to be the most important predictor of how their adult life is going to go. Show your child that you love them no matter what happens in school, and remind them that your goal and priority is for them to have good choices and options as adults and to have the life that they want.

– **James Rechs, MSW, LICSW**

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If you would like to submit a question for the AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team, please e-mail autismcounseling@ausm.org or contact us at 651.647.1083.