



Communication eases school angst

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I was kidding some youngsters recently, telling them that school was starting right after the coming weekend. As you would expect, they were horrified! Perhaps you, as a parent of a special-needs child, are equally nervous about the approaching school year. Here is some advice I hope you and your children find helpful.

Preparing a well adjusted child to return to school can be extremely stressful. It is not uncommon for students entering a new school year to experience elevated levels of anxiety due to pending separation from parents and meeting new friends, fears about bullying, not to mention self esteem issues related to their appearance, clothing, hair style and that horrible middle school acne.

Expecting a child with a mental illness to cope with these on top of their own problems such as impulsivity and hyperactivity, difficulty following directions, poor problem solving skills and low self-esteem can be overwhelming for everyone involved. This stress is intensified at the beginning of the school year, and if parents and teachers are not communicating, the result is almost always the dreaded call from the principal saying the parent needs to come to school to pick up their child.

According to Krista Kutash, Ph.D., Professor and Deputy Director of the University of South Florida's [Research and Training Center for Children's Mental Health](#), the relationship between the parent and teacher is one of the most important components of behavior management in the classroom. My experience is

that many parents wait for the teacher to initiate the contact.

"If things are that bad, why didn't the teacher call me earlier" and "the teacher does not treat my child fairly" are common responses I hear in my practice. The result of a lack of communication is usually weeks or months of stressful relations, lowered self-esteem, increased discipline problems, and lost academic time. If you make the first contact, you, the teacher, and your child will all benefit.

What to say? First, it is important to have a better understanding of the prevalence of mental illness, and then I have listed some suggestions for that conversation.

In my opinion, based on 15 years of experience working with schools, the vast majorities of teachers appreciate, value, and respect the confidentiality of mental health information that is shared with them. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), about 2 million children suffer from ADHD, which means on average at least one student in every classroom is suffering from this. If you add in those with depression, oppositional defiant disorder, and anxiety, it is safe to say that your child is not the only one having problems in that teacher's classroom. The stigma of mental illness is something we are all concerned about, but the risks associated with not communicating with your child's teacher, in my opinion, is too risky to chance.

To create the best opportunity for success for your child, consider the following suggestions before school starts:

1. Make a list of your child's strengths and share them with his teacher.
2. Make sure your child is in good physical and mental health. Obtain a

physical and discuss your child's mental health needs. This is especially true if you stopped a medication over the summer. Finding out one month into school that a medication was stopped, when it could have been restarted prior to school starting, is one of the most frustrating things a teacher can experience.

3. Write a letter to your teacher prior to the start of school telling about your child's summer, interesting experiences and learning opportunities they had, and any significant events such as moves, divorces, or losses. This will help the teacher be more sensitive if your child is having problems adjusting.
4. Give medication as prescribed every day and notify the school if your child refuses to take medication, if you are having trouble getting medication, or if they start a new medication.
5. Plan to reestablish the bedtime and mealtime routines at least seven days prior to school starting. According to John Bates, Professor of Psychology at Indiana University, Bloomington, "Sleep is sometimes a miracle cure". He found in his research that both sleep patterns and amount of sleep are directly linked to a student's ability to get along with others, respond to an adult's attempt to teach them, and engage in difficult tasks. For more information, visit his website at <http://www.indiana.edu/~batessdl/>.
6. Offer to provide information regarding your child's diagnosis to

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- help educate the teacher. If you need information, your therapist or doctor will usually provide this information for you to share.
7. Sign a release of information between the school and your mental health provider. Next to you, your children spend more hours of the day with their teacher than anyone else. Opening these lines of communication will be beneficial to everyone.
 8. Take advantage of all the extra help a school can provide your child and your family. Most schools have a social worker or counselor who can help your family deal with stressors such as a divorce, loss of insurance leading to interruptions of medication, or a family move. These services are usually free, and some agencies offer services within the school. If not, they can help refer you to someone in the community who can help.
 9. Thank the teacher in advance for his willingness to help your child learn, and invite them to call anytime it is needed. Share that you realize his or her job is difficult and that you hope the sharing of this information will make teaching your child a bit easier.
 10. Always remember that your child's disability is just a small part of who they are. Celebrate their successes, treasure the good times, and do your part to support your child's education.

Doing these things will maximize the opportunity for your child to overcome the many challenges they face when returning to school. A child's self-esteem and educational advancement can be directly tied to the amount of

positive interaction they have with school personnel. The motto I live by, which I learned from my parents who have over 50 years of combined teaching experience, is that the best way to minimize the negative time spent with a student is to maximize each and every positive experience. Help your teachers do this. Keep open communication with them, be committed to working to support your child's education at home, never hesitate to ask for help, and be active within your child's school. Just going to school and eating lunch with your child early in the school year can help with these adjustments.

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