

Preparing for Kindergarten: Ideas for Families

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A child going to school for the first time is a milestone for every family. When a child has special needs, the process of getting ready is even more important! Everyone (the child with autism, their family, school staff and other students) benefits from good planning, clear information and some important activities in the months before a child begins his or her journey through the education system.

Planning

As kindergarten approaches, parents are encouraged to explore what is available in their area. Most child-care settings offer kindergarten programs. Some children are involved in individual intervention or private therapy. School boards may offer full day kindergarten or all day/alternate day programs. Some schools have before- and after-school programs on site. Some do not. What is the best option?

Each child with autism and their family is unique. What works best for one family may not be a good fit for another. Take time to think about your child's entire school day when planning the transition to kindergarten. What are your before and after school needs? What are your transportation needs? What is your child's ability to adjust to change? Does he or she require a more gradual transition to school? If your child receives programming at home or therapy services, how will these fit in with school attendance? Can the school board provide transportation if you choose a modified school schedule for your child? Transportation procedures are locally determined and may change year to year therefore it is best to be informed about transportation guidelines prior to making any decisions.

Transition to school is a significant step in your child's life. It is important to make your own decisions. Gather as much information

as you can. Visit programs you are considering and start today. The more time everyone has to get ready, the more likely this important transition will go smoothly. Most early childhood or early intervention programs begin planning with families a whole year before school begins.

Many school boards have developed transition to school calendars or brochures. Ask your child's school for information they have about transition to school for children with special needs.

A key part of planning the transition to school is to familiarize your child with the new environment. As your child's transition plan is being developed, discuss ways of getting your child comfortable with the school prior to starting kindergarten.

An important part of preparing a child for kindergarten is practice being in a group setting. These opportunities can be provided in an early childhood setting that follows a predictable and organized schedule of activities and teaches daily routines and expectations in the classroom and on the yard. A child who has attended a preschool program has had the chance to learn to:

- Do some activities on their own
- Follow instructions
- Participate in some classroom routines (circle time, snack, waiting in line)
- Tolerate 20 (or more) other little people in the same room

The child who has learned these important skills is much more likely to be successful in kindergarten than one who has not. Many preschool service providers support children with autism in an inclusive setting: nursery school, child-care centre, drop-in or Early Years Centre, summer camp or a private home program.

Sharing Information

Families know their children best. An opportunity to meet with school board staff, share information about your child and create a transition plan is a key component of preparing for kindergarten. Providing a clear picture of your child allows school staff to better prepare for welcoming your child into kindergarten. Information to share with the school includes:

- Your child's strengths and needs
- Diagnostic and medical information, including any special equipment your child uses
- Skills your child has developed and what you have found helpful in teaching your child
- Your child's favourite activities, likes and dislikes and how to calm your child when he or she is upset, sad or fearful

Families who are uncomfortable sharing a diagnosis or describing their child's needs risk that the school will not be prepared to properly support their child. Parents may be tempted to just wait and see how well their child can adjust on their own but they must avoid this approach when starting school. This is unfair to a child with unique needs that usually become quite apparent within the first few days or weeks of school. At this point, staff and resources have been allocated and it is often too late to arrange additional support.

Collaboration and co-operation are keys to successful meetings and transitions. The more information everyone shares, the better equipped everyone can be.

Classroom Supports

Many kindergarten teachers will have some experience having a child with autism in their classroom. School personnel supporting a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder have access to both in school and school board services. The types of services and accessibility of these services, varies from one school board to another.

At the school level, the teacher can access the school resource teacher, who can pursue involvement of other professionals within the school board or through local service providers.

When planning your child's transition to school, it is important to discuss how preschool service providers can share their knowledge of your child and help support this important transition. Service providers are often willing to visit the classroom to share their experiences and success. Although actual assignment of support personnel is often not done until closer to school starting, parents are encouraged to ask about supports the school is planning to provide as early as possible, providing ample time to prepare.

Classmates

Students in an inclusive classroom will need information too, about how they might be helpful to a classmate who may need more supports or may have additional needs. Many children's books on the topic of disabilities and inclusion have been extremely helpful. Specific coaching about how to encourage play, language or other skills can help other students play a meaningful role in interacting with and including a child with special needs. Be specific regarding the type of information about your child the school is permitted to share with classmates. At the kindergarten level, there is often no need to discuss the actual diagnosis, as this means very little to four year olds. The most important information to share is what children can do and say to support their peer with additional needs.

Challenges

Sometimes, despite the best planning possible, there are surprises and upset. Ongoing communication and open discussion will go a long way to resolving most issues. Talk to your child's teacher, share your observations and concerns and plan what needs to be done, as a team.

References: York Region Early Intervention Services; Transition to School package.

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