



by Laurie Frydenlund

Starting the School Year *Right*

Helping Children with AD/HD and/or Learning Disabilities



THE START OF A NEW SCHOOL YEAR is a time of anticipation and renewal for most families. For parents or caregivers with children struggling with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) and/or other learning disabilities, anticipation can easily slip into high anxiety. They wonder how new teachers, classmates, school schedules and responsibilities will impact their kids. Summer can be a time of relaxation with no pressure for the child to conform to classroom behavior standards or the rigors of daily academic challenges. Returning to the daunting prospect of the classroom and the expectations children will meet there can give a parent a feeling of impending disaster. Don't panic! Here are some coping strategies that have worked for many families to help start the year with comfort and hope. These strategies fall into three basic categories: orienting teachers, preparing the child and preparing the family

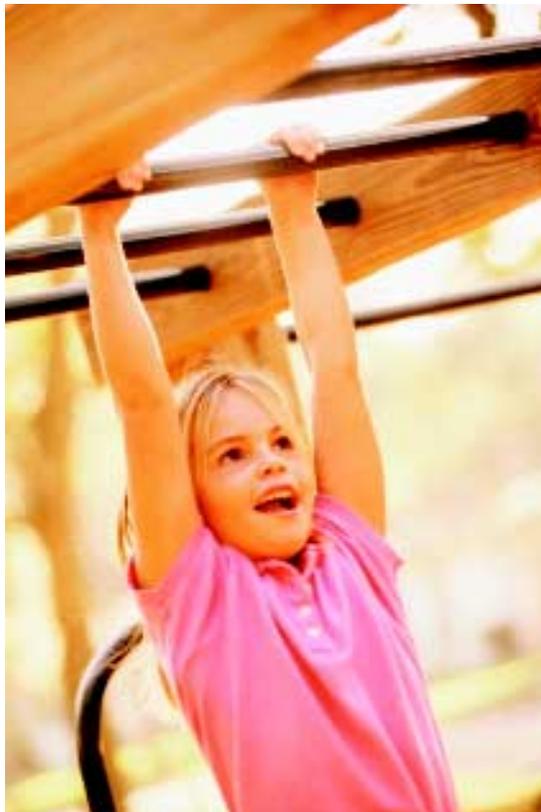
Orienting Teachers

Parents should work with the new crop of teachers each school year. Teachers need to be provided with information about classroom accommodations that have worked in the past, rewards and discipline that have helped the child function well and any new developments that have arisen over the summer months. If the child has only recently been diagnosed with AD/HD or learning disabilities, teachers need to be aware of the diagnosis and any interventions being utilized. If he or she has changed medications or behavior modification strategies, teachers can be the best allies in

achieving and determining effectiveness. Parents should ask to bring the child and meet with the teacher(s) before school begins. They should bring a list of all current medications and tutoring and counseling schedules. The following questions should be answered at the meeting:

- How will we communicate daily? An organizational planner is a great tool if used consistently and with oversight.
- What accommodations or tools can we develop together to help my child in class?
- When can we meet regularly to review and adjust classroom accommodations and tools?
- How can assignments be modified so my child does only what is critical and necessary?

For kids who see the world differently than most of their peers, an introduction to the “new” prior to the first day of class can be an enormous asset.



Accommodations or tools parents can develop with the teacher include having the child sit in front of the classroom to maximize attention, having tests given orally, having the parent serve as scribe for the child for homework assignments.

If the child has an individualized education plan (IEP) or 504 plan in place, many of these accommodations will be outlined in the plan. The parents, child and teacher can spend the meeting time discussing the contents of the plan, what modifications and accommodations are provided and the basis for revisiting and revising these based on the child’s classroom performance during the year.

Teachers and parents must partner to find the best possible solutions to the challenges of the classroom, both behaviorally and academically. Parents and caregivers must be proactive in extending understanding and help to teachers. They can’t expect teachers to be experts about each child’s differences, but teachers have a strong desire to see every child succeed in their classrooms.

Begin the year with positive, open communication and maintain that communication throughout the year. Many problems can be avoided or their effects diminished by good communication. The gift of an appropriate book about the child’s conditions would not be out of place. Teachers love to learn.

Preparing the Child

For kids who see the world differently than most of their peers, an introduction to the “new” prior to the first day of class can be an enormous asset. This introduction is especially important for children with directionality issues and children making the transition to a new school. A trip to the new location should include the following:

- Touring the campus (including cafeteria, gymnasium, office, bathrooms, etc.)
- Personal introductions to key school personnel (principal, counselor, nurse, etc.)
- Short meetings with new teachers
- Locating the locker and practicing the combination
- Verifying drop-off and pick-up procedures

Parents need to schedule this time with the school office and explain that they would like to come in with the child before school begins so that he or she can become comfortable with new surroundings.

Being familiar with aspects of new routines can greatly diminish anxiety for kids, but perhaps the most helpful preparation is to talk honestly and openly with them about their learning and behavior differences. When children have truthful information, they can more readily work toward overcoming the deficits that have encumbered them, becoming part of the solution to their own problem. Parents can help children be their own advocate in the classroom, in the hallway and on the playground, by explaining, in terms they understand the following:

- What their disabilities are (how their brains are different)
- How AD/HD and/or the learning disabilities affect them
- What interventions (tutoring, counseling, etc.) may be used to help them, and how long they will last
- How to *graciously* remind teachers and other school personnel about accommodations and behavior programs currently being used
- How to use organizational tools and checklists

Giving kids good information can empower them to be more responsible about the choices they make during the school year and help them develop important skills they will need in life.

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Suggested Resources to Help Navigate Through the School Year Ahead

Websites for parents and/or educators:

www.chadd.org

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

www.help4adhd.org

The National Resource Center on AD/HD, a program of CHADD sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.ldonline.org

Learning Disabilities Online, great site for parents, teachers and kids

www.schwablearning.org

Schwab Learning, well-researched information regarding all aspects of AD/HD and LD. Check their archives for topics of interest.

www.sparktop.org

SchwabLearning's Web site for kids ages 8–12

www.interdys.org

International Dyslexia Association (IDA), includes a list of certified tutors.

www.lidaamerica.org

Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA), excellent summaries of current research regarding LD and AD/HD

www.rfbd.org

Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic

www.teachingld.org

Council for Exceptional Children, Division of Learning Disabilities, excellent site for teachers

www.ncl.org

National Council on Learning Disabilities

Books

Look What You've Done! Stories of Hope and Resilience for Teachers and for Parents

By Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Delivered from Distraction By Edward Hallowell, M.D. and John Ratey, M.D.

(see book review, Feb 2006 *Attention!*®)

Parenting a Struggling Reader

By Susan L. Hall and Louisa Cook Moats

Keeping a Head in School

By Mel Levine

Overcoming Dyslexia

By Sally Shaywitz, M.D.

Videos

ADD from A to Z By Edward Hallowell, M.D.

Could it be Dyslexia? Dyslexia: Testing & Teaching and Classroom Accommodations

By Susan Barton

Editor's Note:

La traducción al español de este artículo comienza en la página 40.

The Spanish translation of this article begins on page 40.

Preparing the Family

Preparing the family for the new school year can be as intimidating as filing tax forms, but with a bit of proactive thinking and organization the whole family can head toward a successful year. Because children with AD/HD and learning disabilities often lack internal organizational structures, they need to have these systems developed for them. Several of these strategies may be helpful and can be used to help all members of the family:

- Post a large family calendar in a prominent location. Keep the calendar updated with all family commitments and classroom projects. Check the calendar regularly.
- Designate a place for everything, and keep everything in its place: backpacks, homework assignments, pencils, keys, cell phone, etc.
- Make a chart for your child's morning routine. Include items like brushing teeth, making the bed and eating breakfast. Post the chart in a prominent place: bedroom, bathroom or kitchen.

- Post a list near the door that includes everything your child needs for school: backpack, tennis shoes, homework, lunch, etc. Encourage him or her to check the list right before leaving the house every time.
- Set out clothes in a designated place before going to bed.
- Make sure all alarm clocks function and that your child will have enough time to complete the morning routine at his or her pace—don't rush mornings.

Create a Homework Plan

Another great strategy for starting the year off right is to establish a homework plan before school starts. Discuss with your child how to handle daily homework time. Encourage his or her input about location, supplies, supervision and time frames. Agree together on how to begin the homework process for the year but revisit your decisions after the first two weeks to see if adjustments are needed. Your child will probably need at least some oversight in the following areas regarding homework.

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- Maintaining a daily assignment planner that includes quiz and test dates. The teacher *may* need to check this daily; you *will* need to check daily. Update the family calendar with project and test dates.
- Organizing assignment materials for each class. A three-ring binder with colored pocket files (a different color for each class) works well. Encourage your child to place all materials in the correct pocket immediately upon receiving them. Check often to make sure he or she is keeping up with this task.
- Using spiral notebooks for note taking and assignments rather than loose-leaf paper. Notebooks are much easier to keep track of and can be color coded.
- Going through papers regularly and throwing out what is no longer needed.

Make sure all alarm clocks function and that your child will have enough time to complete the morning routine at his or her pace—don't rush mornings.

Check Web sites for additional ideas that may work for your family. If what you are doing is not working, be flexible: tweak it or try something different. Don't get caught in a negative spiral of defeat. ■

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