

# Starting School Off Right

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**Beginning the school year on a positive note doesn't just happen. If you want your relationship with the teachers and those working with your child to be a productive one, you might as well get started off on the right foot.**

**W**HEN I WAS A KID, I remember my big worries about the first day of school. At the top of the list was my fear of the bouncing hot dogs that were served every Thursday in the cafeteria. They were clearly not edible, which meant a long afternoon with a grumbling stomach. Hot dog worrying was followed by rubber shoe worrying—big, thick, black, not cool rubber shoes. They were thrust into my hands any day my mother saw even just one cloud in the sky.

There wasn't much I could do about the hot dogs except cross my fingers and hope that they weren't there. But the rubber shoes—now that was a different story. Before each school year began, I carefully scoped out the neighborhood to figure out which yard would serve as the ideal stash spot for my rubber shoes. I would always find a bush that saved me from boarding the bus with them on.

My rainy day shoe problem was solved with a little creativity, planning, preparation and a positive attitude. How I dealt with those rubber shoes turned out to be a really good life lesson. In fact, I still use it at the beginning of each school year. But now it's the beginning of school for my exceptional son.

For many of us with exceptional children, the first day of school presents all sorts of anxieties that make the rubber shoe dilemma look like, well, child's play. New teachers, a new education plan, new classmates, and maybe even a new school are a lot to take in for any child, and certainly for one who often finds new situations overwhelming.



**Non-verbal communication like facial expressions and body language convey as much to other team members as words. Mrs. Addison (left) and her son's teacher share a lighter moment in an update meeting.**

Think about the beginning of school the way my mother approached rain. What was my mother really doing? She was teaching me how to think ahead and be prepared for the unexpected. Though the shoes were uncool, her heart was in the right place.

Beginning the school year on a positive note doesn't just happen. If you want your relationship with the teachers and those working with your child to be productive, you definitely need to get started off on the right foot. And the right foot is the one that steps forward with a positive heartset, proactive mindset and is committed to establishing good team habits right from the get go.

Your child's success is highly dependent upon the effective functioning of the team that supports him. The team is not just his primary teacher, though you may see and communicate with him or her the most. The core team is made up of the people listed on your child's IEP and includes teachers, therapists and specialists. But it is also the lady behind the lunch counter who serves your child's lunch each day, the recess monitor and the office staff. All of these individuals can play an active role in supporting your child and working towards his goals. If you want the team—

both the core team and the others involved with your child—to be successful, they can be. It may happen with or without you, but there is a far greater chance of success if you take an active, positive role in supporting the team. After all, you are a critical part of it.

### **You are an Integral Part of the Team**

Most likely you and the school team already know this. But being integral is one thing, being integral and valuable is another. The level and manner of your involvement can significantly impact the team's attitude, interest and decision-making abilities throughout the year.

Sit back for a minute and think about the words you would like used to describe your contribution to the team at the end of the school year—supportive, participatory, open-minded and collaborative? If these are some of the words that came to mind, you are already in the mindset of an effective team player. Now the beauty of today is that the school year hasn't started yet. You still have time to become a team player who can be a tremendous benefit to the team.

A parent who is seen as an asset to the school-based team often has these qualities:

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- Believes she has responsibilities on the team and takes them seriously,
- Comes from a place of acceptance rather than of judgment,
- Is nurturing, supportive and genuinely interested in team members' concerns,
- Thinks win-win, even when there are points-of-view different from her own,
- Is open-minded, communicative and collaborative, and
- Has realistic expectations.

### Take Your Job Seriously

Our son Jack has not had the smoothest of school experiences. It became clear very early on, that I would not be one of those mothers who walked her child to the bus stop, chatted nonchalantly with the other moms, and then waved good-bye to her child and looked forward to six hours of whatever work filled her day. My morning was more like this: drive Jack to school (he didn't want to take the special needs bus), walk him into school, get a small stomachache if and when he did something other than walk to the classroom and hang his coat on the peg. I spent the next five or so hours working in my consulting practice, but not just working. There was always a little pit in the bottom of my stomach, wondering and worrying if things were going okay at school or if I would be called to help handle an emergency. There were a couple of years where I spent more time at the school than I did at my desk.

Your involvement as the parent member of the team may change a bit each year, depending upon the type of year that your child is having. A tough year will call for more involvement; a good year will call for less.

Though you may have a sense of your level of involvement, your role and responsibility on the team may not be as clear to you. The teacher instructs, the therapist provides a specific service, the social worker works on social skills and perhaps serves as the day-to-day coordinator. If the team supporting your child this year is new to you or different from the one that developed the IEP, you might want to sit down with them, or a few key individuals from it, to clarify their expectations of your role and responsibilities.

### Three Key Responsibilities of Parents

There are three key responsibilities that should be considered the minimum requirements for a parent's responsibilities on the team; however, there is no

reason to think in terms of least responsibility. Though there is a school team leader, you too, can play a leading role. The more initiative you take, the greater your value to the team.

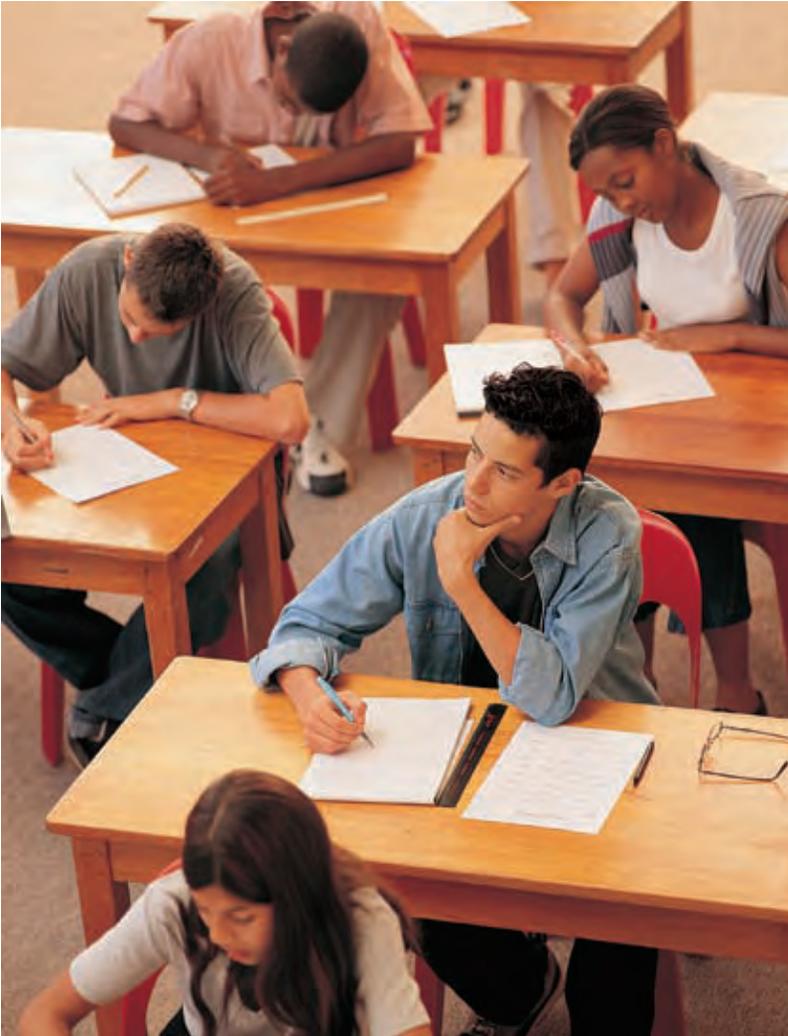
#### 1. *Being the Coordinator of Information*

You have more information and more sources of important information about your child than anyone else. What you see regarding your child at home, in the community and with outside therapists is invaluable information for the team. You may discover strategies that are particularly effective, be the first one to spot an emerging issue, or have a better sense of some major behavior or social themes. You need to share this information with the school team in a clear, concise way. A short memo that consolidates your observations and those of others who are working with your child outside the school can be extremely useful.

Giving the school-based team a snapshot of your child's activities during the summer, highlighting the

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major issues and his or her achievements, and perhaps reviewing the IEP to see if any issues need to be immediately addressed, can save them time and guesswork in the first few weeks. This will be a busy time while they are getting to know your child along with 18 or so other students. You are a fountain of important information that can move the “getting to know you” process smoothly along.

I like to prepare quarterly memos for the school-based and outside teams that give them an overview of my child’s progress. Asking team members to briefly write down or tell me the key goals that they are working on, gains that have been made, issues that have cropped up, and any concerns they have, allows me to coordinate the information for the team to see. You may want to provide phone numbers or e-mail addresses in the memo so that team members can contact each other. If you do not have the skills needed for this kind of communication, suggest the idea to the team and work with them to identify the best person for this job.

### *2. Establishing the Communication Link*

Your amount of communication with the teacher depends upon your child’s functioning level. Even a child with mild AD/HD will run into some kind of glitch from time to time. Don’t wait for the issue to find its way to you. Ask your child’s teacher her preferred mode of communication and then use it prudently. I have been able to head off bad ideas and homework headaches by e-mailing Jack’s teacher early in the morning. She checks her messages before the day begins and we are in sync before Jack’s head pops through her classroom door.

### *3. Getting Your Child Ready to Learn*

Have you ever thought about what shape your child goes to school in? Is he tired or well rested, is he anxious and worried because of what is going on at home, or is he relaxed and refreshed? Our job as parents is to teach our children good life habits. Letting your child eat what he wants, do his homework “whenever,” go to bed when he feels like it and spend his free time however he pleases is not teaching or modeling anything. Training children with AD/HD who have a naturally harder time with the basic concepts of good habits—structure, time management and organization—is a necessity if you want them to be able to manage themselves later on in life.

If your child is working on specific behavior goals, they should be addressed at home and at school. Everyone needs to be on the same page, and doing this from day one makes sense. Sitting down with the teacher and any other key members of the school-based team early in the school year to review how the behavioral, emotional and social aspects of your child’s plan will be handled gets all of you operating and responding in the same way. When the same thing is being done at home and at school, the messages are reinforced and your child can hear them more strongly.

### **Show the Team that You Care**

Tangible ways of showing the school team that you appreciate their efforts can be easy and have huge benefits. They can be as simple as bringing muffins to a meeting, writing unexpected notes of thanks or just telling the teacher when you notice a gain.

There are other times when you may want to really recognize that they have done something particularly special. For example, there was the time that Jack lost the retainer he had only worn for two weeks when it was thrown out with his lunch in the school cafeteria. It was spaghetti and meatballs day—not a good day to

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lose a clear, red, four-inch appliance. The lunchroom monitor and one of Jack's teachers offered to join my son in the hunt for the retainer. The three of them donned plastic gloves, turned over the large grey bin, and began the search. The retainer was not found.

The next day I delivered gifts of bath salts to the two teachers with a note that said, "Thank you for going way above and beyond the call of duty."

Teachers go above and beyond the call many times that you do see, and many times that you don't. Be free with your praise, letting them know that you appreciate all they are doing on your child's behalf. A little note of thanks goes a long way.

### Heartset

The heartset is the feeling that you have towards someone or something. If you begin the year off with an approach to the teacher that smacks of distrust and negativity, how do you think she will feel? It is true that respect is something that is typically earned over time. But if you take this approach with the school-based team, it may take you a good three or four

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months to get to this point. In the meantime, if you are questioning, second-guessing and sending other verbal and non-verbal messages that do not reflect trust or respect, you could actually sabotage the team.

This is one of those situations where you need to take a leap of faith and start off the relationship by giving respect freely. This does not mean that you should turn off your antennae and follow blindly. Be alert, be aware, but start off the year giving the team members the benefit of the doubt.

When my son was entering first grade, everyone was concerned about which teacher he would have. Jack had just completed a horrific year of kindergarten with an experimental combining of two special needs classes that were team-taught. One teacher took a leave of absence in the middle of the year and the other had an extended illness. The class was out of control and so was Jack. The school team knew we expected the most stellar of teachers for Jack's first grade experience. What we got was Mrs. Gresia, fresh out of college.

The first week, she sent home the communication journal filled with complaints. I began to get nervous. Negative feelings started creeping up and I began to not like her. I called my liaison at the board of education and explained my concern. She said she understood my nervousness, given the previous year's experience, but how about sitting back and giving her a chance. In the meantime, my liaison went in to give a little guidance to Jack's teacher. Mrs. Gresia ended up being one of the most remarkable teachers Jack has ever had. But had I become negative rather than putting a little trust in her before I truly felt it, I could have ruined the whole year for Jack.

### **Mindset**

Your mindset is the compilation of your perceptions and attitudes towards something. For example, Johnnie

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walks into the first day of fourth grade and his teacher groans. She has heard about Johnnie from his previous teachers. The news has not been good. Before Johnnie does a single thing, his new teacher has already formed an impression, which has become an attitude, and a negative one at that.

Like heartset, it is important that your mindset be in the right place from the first day of school. You come to school each year with the baggage of the previous years' experiences. You can't help it. It is just part of the deal. What you can help is what you do with it. Being led by attitudes created in a different time and place is not fair to this year's team. Most likely you are used to being in a "fighting" mode, fighting for solutions and perhaps services with the school, fighting for cooperation and self-responsibility with your child, and maybe even fighting over it all with your spouse. Lots of negative attitudes can easily develop without your knowledge.

Heartset and mindset are closely connected. How you feel about individuals affects your attitude towards them, and your attitude affects your feelings about them. It doesn't matter which comes first, heartset or mindset, but it is important to realize that each influences the other.

The beginning of the school year is a good time for a little introspection. Look at how you think and feel about the school, the teachers and the team supporting your child, and clean up any bad attitudes. Maybe you believe that you have good reasons for thinking about them the way you do. It doesn't matter. A good relationship is the backbone of a good team. If you want to have a good relationship with the team, you need to change the way that you think about them.

### **Getting Off on the Right Foot Makes the Journey Easier**

I never did get used to the hot dogs and you probably won't ever get used to the surprises and struggles that the beginning of school can present for your exceptional child. The better you work with the school team, the more support you will feel and the more coordinated the effort for your child will be. What better time to start the collaboration than the first day of school? ■

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