BACK TO SCHOOL CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

Crafting a successful start to the new school/college year for pupils who have Down's syndrome

Preparing your child

Use social stories or picture booklets to help familiarise your child with the school building, staff, timetable etc and maybe take a trip to see the outside of the school.

Make a transition book – see examples of this from Sarah and her daughter Zoe, and Sharon and Tanzie here. [link to new resource re transition books]

For younger children, read picture books together about starting school.
Mark off days on a calendar so that the child can see when they are returning to school/college.

Let your child make choices about their uniform, for instance choosing their school bag/shoes or which trousers or dress they would like to wear. Some stores offer special opening hours with a quieter atmosphere for children prone to sensory overload with bookable times.

Talk about school/college in a positive way, sounding excited about the year ahead.

In the few days before going back to school/starting school:

Try and meet, or at least obtain the names of the people who will play a key part in your child's day. If you can, get photos so you can familiarise your child with the people they will be coming into contact with.

When starting a new school year, don't assume that best practices and information about your child will have been shared with the new teacher and LSAs. Get in early to ensure that there is a continuity of interventions. For instance if your child has medical support/care needs, organise nurses go in to deliver training etc.

Make sure you understand the timings for the day and what this means for you, talk to your child, produce a visual timetable or use whatever resources you can to support them.

Try and hook up with classmates (old or new) for a short introduction or a reminder.

Ease up on snacks! Snack time at school is pretty limited.

If they're opting for packed lunches rather than school dinners maybe get involved with trialling some new packed lunch options. Making them as well as eating them.

Get a couple of early nights in (normal school bedtime) before school starts, plus a 'normal' morning routine of get up, breakfast, get dressed.

Let younger children dress in their uniform and make a school corner where they can role play 'schools'. For older children, encourage them to get their uniform ready and prepare their school or college bags in preparation for the return to school.

Write (or talk about) a 'worry diary'. Any new school fears can be noted down, privately if preferred. Just writing things down can sometimes be enough to take away the sting and you will know how to support them.

Have something ready for your child to say when the inevitable question 'What did you do over the summer holidays?' and not just where you went on holiday. Maybe something like 'I learned how to tie my laces.' Or 'I helped change a nappy'. You could produce a holiday book like the one Sharon and Tanzie produced here. (link to new resource)

Consider making and sharing an 'All about me' document or a one page profile. You can see an example here.

Practical planning

Create morning and evening routines that prepare you for what the school day will look like for your family.

If you are taking your child to school/college, plan the journey to school/college so that you know how long the journey will take, where to park and how your child will get into the school/college.

If your child will have transport to school or college, make sure you know who the provider is and if possible, see if your child can meet the driver and/or escort in advance.

Try on new school uniform (and wear in school shoes).

Have fun buying new stationery and pens.

Label all items of clothing and shoes.

On the first day back

Introduce yourself to your child's teacher and Learning Support Assistants if you have not already met them.

Relax and make time for yourself. Maybe plan to meet a friend or immerse yourself in a new book.

Looking ahead

Arrange to meet your class teacher a few weeks into term, to see how your child is settling and to discuss targets and how you will work together.

Use a planner to help you stay on top of school/college work and activities/trips/themed days. Mark important dates such as your EHCP annual review meeting, deadlines for responses from the local authority etc.

Now is the time to get on top of your paperwork. Set up a folder with all of your child's documentation and reports in, in sequential order.

Find out about after-school clubs and activities that your child can join in with.

Schedule some playdates or hanging-out sessions for after school/college and weekends.

Remember every child is different and their physical and medical needs vary. Some children will tire easily and they may benefit from early finishes for a few weeks. Do not plan too many activities for them after school as they might need more rest than usual.

Have something special lined up part way through the Autumn term, just in case the new environment is a bit overwhelming. It doesn't have to be anything flashy or expensive, just a shopping trip, or a morning at the swimming pool.

Continue to schedule in time for your own well-being.

Most importantly understand that approaching a new school year is equally exciting and nerve wracking for children and parents, but that everyone goes through it and everyone finds a way through it that suits them best. Your way might be different to everyone else's that you know, but that's fine.

Thank you to the following parents for contributing to this checklist:

Jane Goveas, Nancy Gedge, Ali Futcher, Sarah Sutton, Rachel Maw, Ramandeep Kaur and Hayley Newman.

DOWN'S SYNDROME ASSOCIATION
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