

Asperger Syndrome - Classroom Success Next Year

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Do you want next year to be different?

If you want the coming school year to be better for your child with Asperger Syndrome, whip out a sheet of paper. Now, let's do a review of what worked this year and what you'd like to see carried over into next year. What did Jimmy like about school? What did Mary do best in? What did the teachers do that worked? What did you and your child do that worked? What do you want to make sure you capture and repeat next year?

Okay, now for the dark side. What didn't work? What do you really want or need to change? The first step is to write out what the problems were, then brainstorm about what you can realistically do to make next year different - and better.

Keep in mind actions that you and your child can take over the summer, such as social skills training.

Probably the single most important external factor affecting how your child does in school is his or her teacher.

The best teacher-student matches for kids with Asperger Syndrome tend to be instructors who have a lot of structure in their classroom, but who are also flexible. Structured but flexible? This is not a contradiction.

Here's an example. Mr. Johnson's a math teacher who always has the day's homework assignment written on the board. He gives clear instructions and due dates when he assigns projects. He has a quiz every Wednesday and a test every Friday.

While Mr. Johnson provides structure, he understands that Jack (who has AS) has a problem wanting to talk at great length whenever he answers a question. Mr. Johnson is willing to work with Jack on signals just the two of them know that help Jack realize it's time to stop talking and give someone else a turn. In other words, Mr. Johnson provides the structure that Jack needs to understand the assignments, but he's also flexible enough to accommodate and help modify some of Jack's Asperger Syndrome-related behaviors to help him learn and minimize class disruptions.

So, how do you get your child into a "Mr. Johnson" class?

Strategy.

First, talk with your school counselor, principal or other appropriate school official about student-teacher assignments. Schools do this at different times: before this year ends - during the summer - at the beginning of the next school year. Whenever your school makes these assignments, it's best to get your input in early.

Take your list of what will help your child learn - and what will hinder learning - when you talk with your school contact. Your approach is that you want to provide the school input for their teacher selection. Things tend to work best if you don't ask for a specific teacher or teachers. Show the school that your child will learn best - and have fewer problems that could result in class disruption - if he is matched with teachers with certain attributes. Then list the attributes and the advantages.

You're a salesperson, showing the school contact why it's in the school's best interest, as well as yours, to make a good teacher-student match. If the school has already made a match that doesn't look workable, this approach could help convince them to change things around before the school year starts. It's in everyone's interest to have the year go smoothly.

Once a teacher is selected, move heaven and earth, Mars and Pluto to get a meeting with the teacher (or key teachers if your child has more than one) before the school year starts. At that meeting, offer information to help them understand your child and make things go smoothly. You're not telling them how to do their jobs, you're providing information they can use to make decisions.

Always counsel from consequences -- and experience.

"Andy really responded well when his teacher called on him first or second." "Sally tended to get very upset when her teacher had the students pick their own cooperative learning partners." "Kumar has tended to learn best when his teachers have used visual aids and the lessons weren't purely verbal."

Be careful not to overwhelm teachers with information and don't forget that your child is only one of a classroom full of kids that a teacher will need to manage. Teachers tend to be stretched very thin these days. Some students with AS have the help of in-class special education teachers and aides, but many are in classes with one teacher at the front of the room. Ask the teacher to call you if problems arise and not to wait for regularly scheduled parent-teacher meetings.

You may need to educate a teacher about Asperger Syndrome, but don't offer a stack of books. Start with a single article or video that a teacher can read or view in less than an hour. (My wife and I made a 44-minute video for this purpose after having to explain our son's AS to new teachers each year.)

Most teachers tend to appreciate your sharing information with them if you take the right approach. It's a mixed blessing that there's a dramatic increase in cases of Asperger Syndrome being diagnosed. No one wants more kids to have AS, but the increase means teachers are gaining experience in teaching them. And you may just find a Godsend of a teacher who wants more reading - or is interested in attending seminars or conferences on AS as part of their continuing education training.

It also helps if your child can have a school "safe harbor." This could be a counselor or other person at the school that your child can seek out if he or she becomes overwhelmed and needs an understanding soul to help put things back on track. Setting up this safe harbor before the school year starts - and helping your child understand when and how to go to this person -- can be a lifesaver.

From the time our son was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, we worked closely with his schools and sought out compatible teachers. There are a lot of great teachers out there and we were lucky to be able to help maneuver our son into some of their classrooms. An investment in skillful, tactful lobbying for the right teachers can make a tremendous difference in your child's school year.

A final thought. Especially in the younger grades, the teacher is often the person who can most

influence whether a child with Asperger Syndrome is accepted by the rest of the class. Our son Drew (who has AS) had some very rough times in his K-12 journey. Kids with AS often are among the last ones picked for teams - and this hurts. But in one class, when the kids were picking academic teams, they would clamor that they wanted Drew on their side, because he always knew the answers. You can imagine what this did for his self-esteem.

Find a teacher who can help other children see and respect your child's strengths, and you've given your child and that teacher something they can hold onto not just for a year, but for the rest of their lives.

*Dan Coulter and his wife, Julie, are the producers of the video, "*ASPERGER SYNDROME: Success in the Mainstream Classroom*". You can find more articles about AS on their website at: www.coultervideo.com"

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