

7 BACK-TO-SCHOOL TIPS: Start the Year Off Right

1. Build Alliances

The old saying, "There is strength in numbers," is still true today. If challenges arise during the school year, it is helpful to know you have others you can turn to. Now is the time to nurture alliances with teachers, support staff, parents, students and others who impact you and your child. Call or send a thank you note to those who provided "bright spots" during the previous year. Mention how you appreciated their involvement and how you look forward to their future support. Contact others you would like to include among your supporters in the coming year and let them know the important impact they can have in your lives. Be sure to offer your support to others in return.

2. Review Your Child's IEP

Many times Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are written in the spring. Your child's new teacher this fall may have no idea which learning goals are priorities for the coming year. Before school starts, read through the IEP to refresh your own memory. Talk over the learning goals with your child, especially those old enough to advocate for themselves. Then make sure each classroom teacher working with your child has a copy and understands the IEP's intent. An IEP's strength lies in the parents' and teachers' understanding of it and active participation in implementing it.

3. Create a "What Works" Portfolio

All parents should consider creating a "What Works" portfolio. It can be used to smooth your child's transition each new school year. The portfolio should contain positive descriptions of your child. Include a profile describing your child's strengths, interests, favorite activities, and learning priorities for the year. Include tips about physical assistance or communication with your child if these are needs. Describe behavioral supports that work or ways to structure situations to avoid behavior challenges. Make a list of tasks, roles, and responsibilities for a teacher's assistant, if applicable. Describe classroom arrangements that help support your child (i.e., seating and positioning needs, noise-level tolerance, climate comfort levels, etc.). Include samples of your child's work and describe any accommodations or modifications that were made to the original assignment. Share the names of students who are friends with your child and give tips on facilitating connections with other students. Finally, include a photo or brief video showing your child participating with other students and being supported successfully in the classroom.

4. Request a Meeting

Call your child's teacher and request a meeting to share insights and information about your child. This is your chance to begin developing a positive relationship with your child's teacher and to establish yourself as an active team member in your child's education. This is a great time to review your child's IEP and "What Works" portfolio. Most teachers will appreciate your involvement and the knowledge you can share about how your child learns best. Consider this initial meeting as a "marketing" opportunity for your child. End the meeting with plans for on-going communication with the teacher. Will you make contact daily, weekly, or only "as needed?" Will you communicate using notes, telephone, email, or in person? Establishing this routine reinforces your involvement.

5. Visit the Classroom

Making a presentation to your child's classmates can be a great way to begin developing positive connections between other students and your child. Be sure to present your child as the "star" of the presentation. Consider starting with a story that is fun, educational, and sparks discussion. There are many books that speak about differences or disability in a positive way. Some examples for elementary-age children include *A Bad Case of Stripes*, *Different Just Like Me*, and *Special People, Special Ways*. Explain how your family views your child's disability and what makes your child unique. Answer their questions honestly and address any fears. (Can he play with me? Will I hurt her? How do I talk to him? etc.) Kids are natural helpers so let them know what they can do to be a friend and support to your child. Finally, remind them that we are all more alike than different.

6. Stay Involved

After laying the groundwork, you can help ensure your child's success by being involved at school throughout the year. Consider joining the PTA or Building Accountability Committee, volunteering in the classroom, helping in the lunchroom or library, or assisting with special events. The more active you are, the more impact you can have on your child's school, the people who work there, and the education your child is receiving.

7. Continue Your Own Education

Because you are your child's most important ally, it is essential that you develop the skills to help your child create a rich and meaningful life. Maybe you would like to learn more about your child's developmental and educational needs, how to write and implement a good IEP, or how to advocate for your child. PEAK Parent Center offers a variety of resources to assist parents to increase their knowledge and skills: consider attending a PEAK workshop or conference, check out a book from PEAK's family library, or call a Parent Advisor at PEAK for free one-on-one advice. Call 1-800-284-0251 or in Colorado Springs (719) 531-9400.