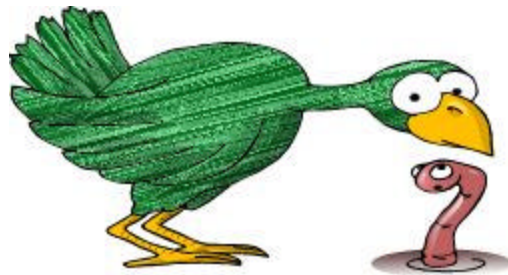


Getting Ready to Go Back to School – in June????

(An Organizational Guide for the Harried Parent)



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Introduction

It's getting close to the end of the school year, and if you and your child have had a rough year, you're probably counting the days until school is over (and so are the teachers!). There's so much to do – some parents are busy getting ready to send their children off to camp for the summer, others are busy getting ready for special end-of-year events such as dances or graduation parties. Who has time to even *think* about the next school year, right?

Wrong! It may be those little things that you don't do now that will make it more difficult for you and your child when school re-opens in September.

The purpose of this article is to share some ideas with you about what you can do now and over the summer to make the transition next September easier for your child (and for you). The ideas represent some strategies that stood me in good stead in the past or that I've found to be helpful in my work with my young patients, and I share them with you in the hope that they may help you, too. These suggestions are not based on any research but represent my experiences as a parent of two children with disabilities that impacted their education and my experiences as a psychologist working with young patients and their schools.

I know that if you're like I was as a parent, come June, you're exhausted and just can't wait for school to be over. I also know that if you're like me, the last thing you want or need right now is more things to take care of. But I also know that if you're like me, you desperately want to see your child get off to a good start in September and have already experienced what happens when the school year starts and the teacher(s) aren't prepared for your child or don't understand his or her special needs or symptoms

So get yourself organized early and hope to reap the benefits of your work in September.

And then have a great summer!

Leslie E. Packer, PhD

Things to Do in June Before School is Over

1. *Get specific feedback from your child's teacher about his or her major problems, major strengths or resources, and any techniques that were particularly effective.*

Call your child's treating physician or psychologist and inquire whether they would like this year's teacher(s) to complete any behavior checklists or report forms. This information can guide the treating professional and next year's teacher(s). If your child's treating professional(s) have a particular form or scale that they'd like completed, send it to the teacher as early in June as you can. Be sure to enclose a stamped envelope that is addressed to your child's doctor(s).

2. *If you have given the teacher any articles or materials on TS or your child's disabilities, ask the teacher if s/he can forward it (or them) to next year's teacher or if s/he would prefer to just return the materials to you so that you can forward them.*

In some cases, providing teachers with written materials can be helpful if they haven't been trained in understanding your child's diagnosed conditions, but it's generally not helpful (and unrealistic) to swamp teachers with a lot of general information about disorders. They will find it more helpful to have specific information about your child's challenges and how the diagnosed condition affects your child – and what strategies they can use in the classroom that have been effective for your child.

3. *If your child is continuing in the same school next year, ask this year's teacher if s/he can talk to next year's teacher and share his or her observations about special needs and effective strategies.*

Teachers generally do this anyway as part of their usual practice, but if you have any doubts, make an actual request for this communication.

4. *If your child is changing schools, ask the Director of Special Education (if your child is classified) if you can arrange for your child to get an individual tour of the new school before this school year ends so that your child isn't as anxious all summer about a new building. If it's possible for your child to actually meet next year's teacher now, that would be very helpful, too.*

If your child isn't classified for special education purposes or doesn't have a 504 Plan, you can simply call the principal of next year's school, explain the situation, and make the request. Most school districts are cooperative about arranging for an orientation tour, but may not know your child's teachers for next year by this point.

5. *Before school ends, send a brief letter to next year's teacher(s). If you don't know the teacher's name yet, send it to the guidance department for the receiving school or the building principal with a note asking them to deliver it to your child's teacher's mailbox once assignments are determined.*

In that letter, tell them that you just want to introduce yourself because your child (mention your child's name) will be in their class in September. Tell them that because s/he has Tourette Syndrome (or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, or whatever your child is diagnosed with), and the symptoms change over time, you will be sending them specific information over the summer as it gets closer to the start of the school year so that they will have an

updated description of his or her symptoms and problems. Be sure to keep an up-beat tone to your letter, and say that you're looking forward to collaborating with them in educating your child.

6. *Before school ends, send a letter to this year's teacher(s) thanking them. Yes, I know that there are exceptions, but most teachers are extremely industrious and have probably made a lot of effort to help your child. That effort should not go unrecognized or unappreciated. In fact, if your child's teacher was outstanding in their support or efforts, you should consider sending them a letter and sending a copy of that letter to the building principal and the board of education. Such letters are a welcome addition to the teacher's personnel file. The same applies to any school support staff or specialists who you feel did their best to help your child.*

7. *If your child is changing schools, ask the school nurse whether any medication records are being forwarded, and if so, will any notes about side effects or cautions be forwarded.*

As a parent, I was stunned to discover that all of the helpful information I had provided my son's school nurse did not get sent forward when he switched schools. Don't assume. Ask.

8. *If your child is taking a medication holiday or break for the summer vacation, find out from the prescribing physician when you should contact him or her to resume or re-- initiate medications. Since some medications take time to build up in the system, you don't want to start again the first day of school unless the physician advises waiting.*

Things To Do in July

1. *Take a break – you need one! Just as we are so conscientious about taking care of our children, we need to take care of ourselves. If your child is in camp, can you and your spouse or S.O. get away for a little vacation? What can you do that will give you something that will help you relax and feel a bit refreshed or renewed? Just do it!*

2. *Towards the end of the month, spend an hour or so to see if you have whatever literature you might need to send to next year's teachers. If you have a young child and found it helpful to provide books like "Taking Tourette Syndrome to School" (or any of the "Taking...") series, make sure you have copies for next year if the school hasn't already ordered its own copies.*

Things to Do in August

1. *Teachers come in to school before school re-opens to set up their classes, etc. If you can get a letter to the school during August, it will give them a chance to read it when they are less under pressure, so write to your child's new teacher(s) in mid-August.*

In your letter, mention that your child has Tourette Syndrome (if he or she does), but also include any other diagnoses (such as ADHD or OCD). While a general definition of TS is helpful to include (involuntary movements and sounds), it is generally more helpful to identify specific tics or symptoms that your child has had and currently has so that the teacher(s) will recognize them as tics.

Similarly, describe any repetitive intrusive or obsessive thoughts your child has or any rituals. If there are specific interventions or strategies that past teachers have reported to be helpful, be sure to include them too. It can be very helpful to the new teachers to know what does work as well as what was tried and definitely hasn't worked. If your child has had peer problems, can you briefly describe them for the teacher? If you have a young child who seems to really struggle in particular settings (such as unstructured recess or in gym), be sure to mention that, too, along with any helpful suggestions.

Keep the letter up-beat, but emphasize that because symptoms can change quickly and because the child's symptoms often vary dramatically between the home and school settings, ongoing communication and mutual support are the cornerstones of helping your child succeed in school.

Whenever I wrote to my son's new teachers in August, I always made them a promise: that I wouldn't believe everything he told me about them if they wouldn't believe everything he told them about me! Start to see yourself as the teacher's partner in the effort of educating your child.

If you have a child who frequently undergoes medication changes, you might include a brief statement in your letter that explains that your child has – and will probably continue to undergo – medication changes and that you will keep the school nurse apprised of any changes during the school year, even if medications are only taken at home.

If you know what medications your child will be on in September and know certain side effects and accommodations that are needed, mention them in this letter. If those medications and side effect accommodations are also included in the child's 504 Plan or IEP, you can mention that it's covered in the IEP or 504 Plan, but you wanted to make sure that the teacher knew about these problems.

When my daughter was in high school, she was heavily medicated for over a year, and those medications affected her concentration and memory. The medications also necessitated her to have her water bottle with her at all times. In my letter to her teachers, I would mention that so that they would understand that what appeared to be attention or memory problems were due to medications and that they could allow her to demonstrate her knowledge by using recognition tasks as opposed to free recall on tests. As my daughter grew in her understanding of her condition and medications, she was able to advocate for herself.

- 2. If your child is changing schools and the new school's personnel have never had a staff development on your child's condition or disorders, contact the receiving school and request that they arrange for one in September.*

A general staff development (or "in-service") is usually low-level and not specific to your child. While it may be a good introduction or overview to the disorders, it generally won't provide your child's teachers with the kind of knowledge of your child and interventions for your child that most parents want. A more effective approach may be to arrange for a phone conference between your child's new teachers and your child's (outside or private) treating professionals who know your child well. This type of consultation or meeting can usefully be written into your child's 504 Plan or IEP if everyone agrees that it is important and appropriate for your child.

- 3. If your child is changing schools or if you know your child will be on a new medication when school resumes in September, take a moment to send information on the medication to the school nurse.*

- If your child is continuing on an established medication, you can tell the nurse what, if any, side effects your child is known to experience from the medication(s).
- If it is a brand-new medication for your child, inform the nurse that you have no idea what to expect and hope that the school will keep you or the physician apprised if any possible side effects are observed. If you have literature on the medication that lists common side effects, it is helpful to pass it along; not all school buildings have current Physician Desk References and you cannot assume that the school nurse will have information on your child's medication if it's newly FDA-approved.
- Also remember that if your child will be taking medication during school hours, you will need to provide the medication in a labeled prescription bottle and you will need a signed note from the physician asking the school to administer it. Since many physicians take vacation in August, leave yourself sufficient time to get any prescriptions you might need for when school re-opens.
- Ask the school nurse to alert all building personnel who will have contact with your child about any medication side effects or medication-related problems as the school year progresses. Inform the nurse as to whether you wish to be contacted directly about any observed side effects, or if you wish the nurse to contact the prescribing physician directly.

NOTE: keeping the school nurse informed of all medications and changes is really important, even if medications are not being administered in school. Throughout the year, keep the nurse apprised of all changes, and ask her or him to notify the other school staff. This is especially important if your child is getting sleepy or irritable from medication or is having difficulty concentrating from medication.

4. *Set up a daily routine and start using it during the last two weeks or so of August and into September. Too many parents let the kids continue to stay up late or run a bit wild and then have difficulty getting them into a better routine when school re-opens.*

Figure out a schedule of responsibilities and leisure time that will work for your family, have a family meeting to discuss it and modify it as needed, and then start following it. The schedule should incorporate a reasonable bedtime and wake-up time for Mondays through Fridays, to ease the transition back into a school schedule. In conjunction with this:

5. *If you're going to implement a behavior management plan, now is the time to do it.*

Establish behavioral goals for the child in terms of their responsibilities. Develop some agreed-upon reinforcers for successfully meeting goals. While young children tend to focus on material reinforcers (rewards), do not overlook opportunities to use activities as reinforcers. For example, you can contract with the child that if he cleans his room (to some agreed-upon standard), you will spend 20 minutes reading to him one-on-one in the evening. For an older child, you might have a reinforcer be the opportunity for the two of you to just do something together that the child wants to do. Remember that it is the child who really determines what is a 'reinforcer.' If they're not motivated to obtain it, your behavioral plan isn't going to work. Also keep in mind that such plans should have goals that require some effort but are reasonably achievable, and that the plans are not static – as the child masters the goal and is able to sustain some level, the goal or expectation can be gradually increased.

6. *Try to avoid last-minute shopping for school supplies and clothes. The kids will be nervous enough as opening day draws closer. The more you can do in advance and at a leisurely pace (a bit at a time), the better. Spend a day with each child, if you can, organizing dresser drawers with their school clothes and organizing their desk or area where they will do their homework each day.*

7. *Reminder: is it time to resume medications for your child?*

Important Note: Many parents don't know this, but a district's Committee on Special Education (CSE) actually works a 12-month year. If something comes up and you need to convene the CSE over the summer, you can. Some people may be away on vacation, but they do still have a responsibility to convene if you send a formal written request.

When School Re-Opens in September

1. *Send your child off to school on the first day in comfortable clothes.*

For some reason, we all tend to buy new clothes and send our kids off in new clothes for the first day, but many kids aren't comfortable in their new clothes and would actually be more relaxed and less stressed out about school re-opening if they are in familiar clothes.

2. *Write to the teacher(s). Tell them that you'd like to hear from them after the first two weeks of school so that you can find out how your child is doing and talk to the physician if any changes or adjustments might be needed. If there has been any change since you wrote to them a few weeks earlier, provide a brief update.*

3. *Maintain a daily routine at home. Keep to the schedule you established in August about homework and responsibilities. And whenever possible, try to keep in touch with reality: if you know that your child will need short breaks between assignments, plan on them and have your child plan on them.*

The more you've planned out and agreed upon in advance, the less stressful things will be. A chart on the refrigerator that the kids can consult may save you thousands of repetitions of what they're supposed to do next. Do not overlook mentioning the obvious on such refrigerator schedules/plans: in our house, I literally listed "have breakfast, get dressed, brush teeth, brush hair," etc. on the chart so that I could avoid the interminable, "Mom, I forget – what am I supposed to do now?" At each step, the children were told to check off the task they had just completed and go to the next task. Successful completion and checking was rewarded on a pre-arranged schedule. And it worked: I no longer had to repeat the same directions like a shrillish drill instructor every morning!

One additional piece of advice about scheduling: do not over-schedule for the first few weeks: try to keep the stress levels down and remember that even positive events or outings can be stress-exacerbating. Estimate how much time you think a task or activity will require, then multiply it by 2 and allow that much time on the schedule. If the child completes the activity ahead of schedule, they can feel good about themselves and go on to the next activity or take a short break: they get to choose.

4. *Plan some one-on-one time with each child. For younger children, it might be scheduled time that you can read to them or play with them. For older children, it might be shopping together (just the two of you) or some other activity.*

5. *Plan some adult leisure time away from the kids during September – an evening out with some friends, a movie, special dinner – it can be anything, but it should be something that gives you a break and a reward for all the hard work you've done.*