

Autism Parenting Magazine

Issue 66

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RELIEVE
STRESS
AND
ANXIETY**

**Ways
Rhythms
Can Help People
With Autism Get
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Editor's Letter

If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.
— Dr. Stephen Shore

This is one of my favorite quotes. No two people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are alike—everyone has unique qualities, personal challenges, and distinct needs. While the amount of information regarding autism has exploded over the past decade or so, finding the right combination of therapies to help your child can still be tough. That's why it's so important to research the many strategies available. Many times, it's a matter of discovering your child's abilities and needs, and then developing a combination of approaches. Finding this special balance for your child, and your family, will make all the difference in your daily life.

This month, we reached out to several doctors, occupational therapists, autism specialists, and parents in search of practical therapies and strategies to help your family create a sense of calm and balance. If you are looking for the latest professional guidance on autism, this is an issue you won't want to miss!

Does your child with autism experience high levels of stress and anxiety? Studies indicate that children on the spectrum can benefit from fidgeting, especially when using items which provide heavy work or tactile sensory input to the hands. In fact, people of all ages can use hand fidgets to improve focus, self-relegate, and create a calming influence. Please take a look at the piece *The Best Fidget Toys to Relieve Stress and Anxiety* as an occupational therapist and owner of a sensory toy subscription service shares some of the most popular fidget toys geared for children.

Another challenge many children with autism face is getting enough sleep at night. We reached out to Jeff Strong for his professional advice, as he is the creator of the auditory brain stimulation therapy Rhythmic Entrainment Intervention (REI) and the cofounder of Brain Shift Radio. Take a look at Jeff's insightful piece, *Valuable Ways Rhythms Can Help People With Autism Get to Sleep*, as he provides guidance on ways to use musically variable rhythms to help calm and ultimately promote sleep. The article includes free audio downloads for our readers as well.

It can be difficult sometimes with all your daily obligations to find time for physical activity. We all know exercise is beneficial to the whole family, but did you know how valuable it is for children with autism? Studies indicate that physical activity not only increases social interaction, attention, and positive behaviors, but it also reduces stereotypic behavior, aggression, and stress. Please take a look at Josephine Blagrove's piece *The Importance of Activity and How to Include it in Daily Life* as the program director of an autism center and mother to twins with ASD shares the many ways you can easily include physical activity at home, the community, and in the great outdoors. Again, it's all about finding that unique balance for your family.

Adding movement and therapies to your child's day will also help with the transition to school this season. For tips on supporting a child with autism through this often stressful time, take a look at Deb Hopper's piece called *Simple Ways to Transition Back to School With Autism* as the occupational therapist



shares a combination of sensory (bottom up) and cognitive (top down) approaches. Children don't react the same way to stress, so it's vital to find the right balance.

Just as no two children with autism are alike, the same can be said for autism families. There are those extended families who embrace a child with special needs—and then there are those who are unsupportive or actually deny an autism diagnosis. It can be painful for those who feel left behind by their families.

Growing up in a strict and conservative first-generation Korean home in the United States, Sunny Jang has been made to feel alone, shunned by her family and tight-knit community because of her young son's autism diagnosis. Please take a look at her article, *Why Can't We Talk About Autism in the Asian-American Community?*, as Sunny describes the loneliness the mandated silence has made her feel.

We also have a poignant piece this month called *What I Don't Tell You As the Mother of a Special Needs Child* provided by Tulika Prasad. In her very personal piece, the mother of a young, nonverbal boy with autism passionately requests that people recognize, accept, and support their challenging journey. This is definitely an article you will want to share with friends and family.

Over the past few months, we have been proud to present new regular features to *Autism Parenting Magazine*. In addition to our section reserved for amazing new products in *ASD Marketplace*, and our tribute to special advocates with our *Autism Warrior* column, we will regularly feature Dr. Debra Moore's professional advice. We are thrilled to have her join our team as she has worked extensively with people on the autism spectrum as a psychologist. Debra coauthored *The Loving Push: How Parents and Professionals Can Help Spectrum Kids Become Successful Adults* with Dr. Temple Grandin. Be sure to read her piece, *Simple Ways to Avoid "Learned Helplessness" With Autism*, as she shares expert strategies to help you and your autistic child.

And of course, we will continue to provide the wise words of financial and special needs planner Ryan F. Platt, update you on the latest books with *What's New on the Bookshelf?*, and share delicious recipes from dietician Elouise Robinson of the Autism Food Club.

We wish you success as you seek the calm and the balance you and your family needs.

Amy KD Tobik
Editor-in-Chief

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Simple Ways to Transition Back to School With Autism

By Deb HOPPER

Returning to school can be stressful for all children, but especially for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families. While summer activities such as visiting new places, staying with extended family, and attending school holiday care can be enjoyable, they can also be extremely disruptive for children with autism. We need to take this into account before we even start to plan how to help children transition back to school.



When considering how to best start the transition back after each holiday break, you can help set your child up for success by creating a sense of safety amidst all the changes. It is also worth taking a moment to understand the two basic ways we can help to lessen a child's anxiety.

Firstly, the priority for reducing stress, anxiety, and fear that can accompany the return to school is to

help your child's body and sensory system to physically calm and relax. Encourage your child to play, move, climb, jump, and get lots of movement; provide both muscle and resistance (proprioceptive) movements, and those that promote deep touch pressure input. The right mix for your child will be different from his/her friends. Some children seek out and prefer deep touch pressure, whereas others seek out muscle and resistance activities to help calm

and ground themselves. If you're not sure of the best mix for your child, an occupational therapy sensory assessment can help guide you through this process.

Secondly, once we have helped children calm their nervous systems through activity (bottom up approach), we can support them and reduce their anxieties by developing a plan for what's going to happen (top down or cognitive approach).

This article outlines the seven top tips for supporting a child with autism through this stressful back to school transition time, using a combination of sensory (bottom up) and cognitive (top down) approaches.

1. Increase activity options

The school holidays often allow for more flexible time and can be an opportunity to explore new activities. Encourage your child to be active and to try new active pastimes. This might include experimenting with different ways to jump on the trampoline, or trying a new mini trampoline inside (if outside is not an option); swinging or climbing on the tree at the park; or experimenting with different ways to use a fitness ball for exercises both in- and outside. Whether you have a backyard with lots of space to play, or an apartment with little or no yard, there are many creative ways to encourage children to be active.

2. Develop a written routine

Create a sense of routine and safety around what's coming throughout the holidays. Use a calendar, a whiteboard, or other visual means to write out what's happening from day to day. Children I work with often create a calendar for the holidays (month to a page) and write the big events that are happening each day. This might include:

- Going to school holiday care
- Going to grandma's
- Going to the zoo
- Home day

Having an overview of what's coming up over the week gives children knowledge and a plan for what to expect over the next few days. Ex-



tending this calendar for at least the first two weeks of school term shows them visually when an event is happening (e.g., Is it happening tomorrow, or in two weeks?), and if they cross off each day as they go, they develop a sense of passing time and anticipation of how long it is until school starts.

Extending this calendar into the school term also allows a child to see the new routine at a glance, and helps orientate him/her on what's new or coming up. Include after-school activities as well, such as soccer or swimming lessons, so the child knows what's in store.

3. Review past visual strategies

In addition to having a monthly calendar as an overview, it is a great time to use any visuals you have used with your child in the past and set up new daily schedules or visuals for upcoming holidays, as well as the school transition. This might be a simple list using words describing what the day holds, board maker pictures, clip art, photos, or other pictures. Choose a medium that your child understands.

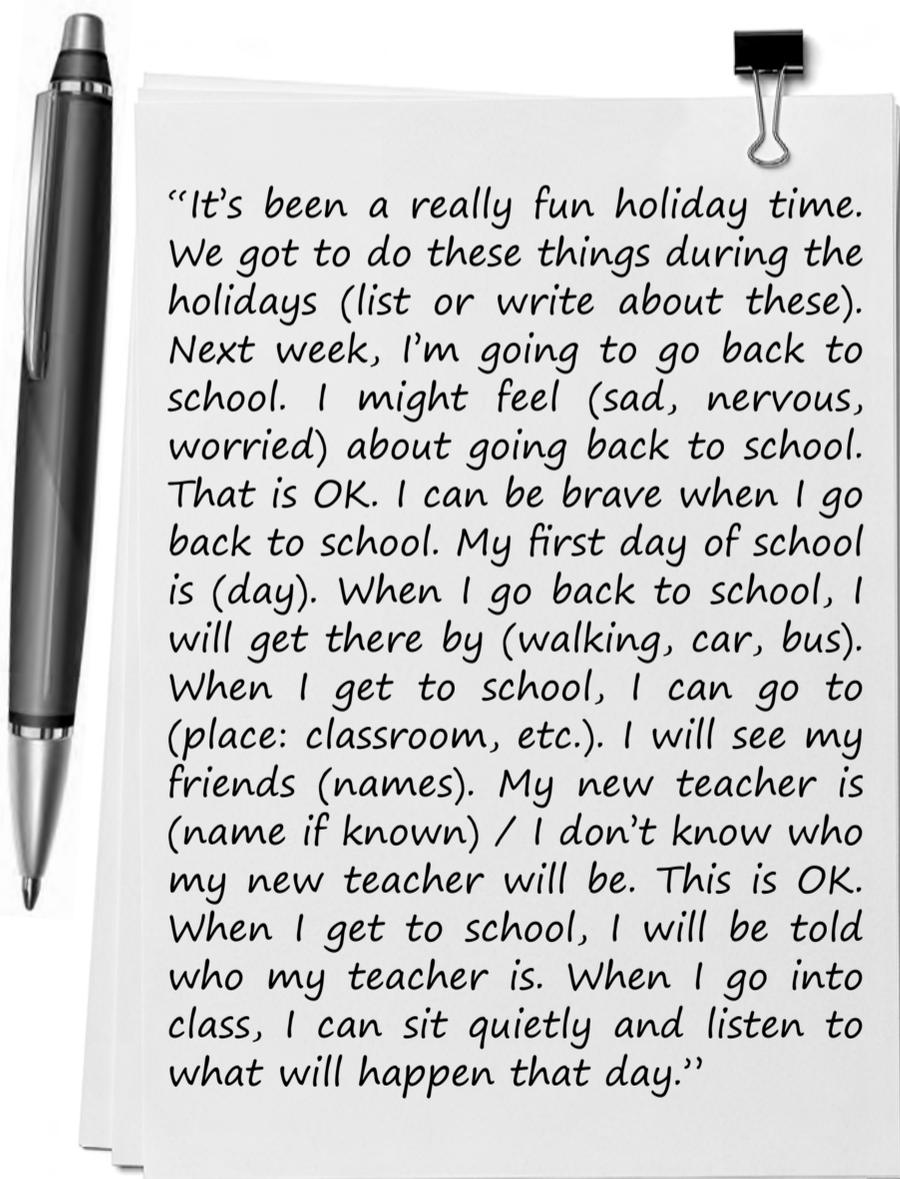
Create a space with easy access where the routine for each day can be displayed. Write down or use the pictures to show what happens as part of the morning routine, as well as what will happen during the day and the evening. Some children need more detail, and some need less. Chat with your occupational therapist or speech pathologist for guidance, if needed.

Once you have this list or visual, your child can tick things off as they are completed, or he/she can pull off the visual marker and put it in a “finished” box.

Often, the end of the school year is extremely busy and some of our strategies, such as these visuals, may be forgotten or not used as extensively. Getting ready at the beginning of a school year and starting afresh is a great way to support your child for the new school year.

4. Write a social story

Social stories combined with photos or clip art are a fun way to talk with your child about what’s coming up and how he/she might feel about any approaching changes. They can also provide strategies that help a child feel safe about the new changes. A simple social story might start with:



“It’s been a really fun holiday time. We got to do these things during the holidays (list or write about these). Next week, I’m going to go back to school. I might feel (sad, nervous, worried) about going back to school. That is OK. I can be brave when I go back to school. My first day of school is (day). When I go back to school, I will get there by (walking, car, bus). When I get to school, I can go to (place: classroom, etc.). I will see my friends (names). My new teacher is (name if known) / I don’t know who my new teacher will be. This is OK. When I get to school, I will be told who my teacher is. When I go into class, I can sit quietly and listen to what will happen that day.”

Add in photos of teachers, friends, the front gate of the school, the school bus if possible, or use clip art to decorate and convey the meaning of the story visually.

5. Create a sensory-safe space

Use the time off from school as a chance to create or review a sensory-safe retreat space for home. This might be a bean bag in a corner of the bedroom, a small inside play tent, or a large cardboard box. Place comfortable cushions, favorite toys or teddies, visual oil timers, fidget toys, a heavy or weighted blanket, or other sensory calming toys in this space. Encourage your child to use this during the holidays to practice, and once school starts, encourage him/her to have retreat time before or after school so he/she can be grounded and self-calm.

6. Share helpful strategies with teacher

Ensure your child understands that the sensory safe place is not a “time out” or discipline space, but rather a time to feel safe and calm. Once you have discovered what your child finds helpful for a retreat space at home, share this information with your child’s teacher so he/she can create a sensory-safe or retreat space in the classroom. Be sure to include successful strategies as well.

7. Consider fatigue with transition

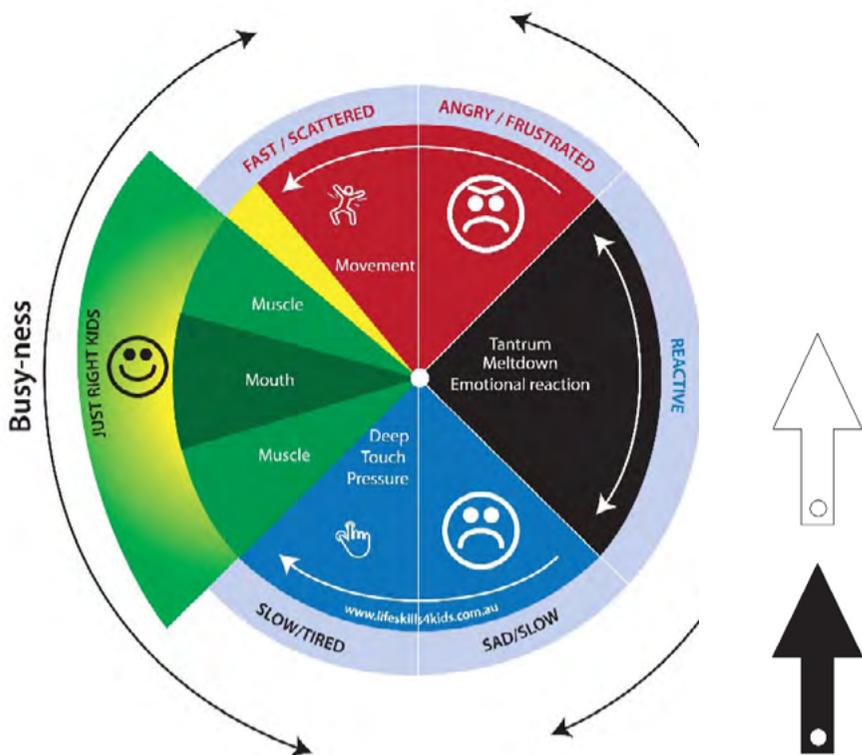
Monitor your child’s tiredness during the holidays and in the return to school. Many children become very tired during periods of transition, and may not sleep as well or for as long as usual because they are nervous and excited. An earlier bedtime might help if they are becoming overtired, or some deep touch pressure exercises, such as squishing them firmly with an exercise ball, or using massage to help them relax and get to sleep more easily.

8. Encourage communication

Help your child understand and communicate how he/she is feeling. Use a feelings thermometer or other visual chart to determine whether your child is feeling happy, sad, calm, worried, or angry. A great way to do this is to use a model such as the “Just Right Kids” Model of Self-Regulation. Children turn the arrow to show exactly how they are feeling, and use the colors to describe their emotions (e.g., I’m feeling blue, green, red, or yellow). More information on this is provided below.

How to Have Just Right Kids

www.justrightkids.com



Helping children to transition back to school can feel a little overwhelming in the anticipation. As parents, look after yourselves, keep yourself active and fit (bottom up approach), and pick some ideas from this article to create a plan for how you are going to support your child (top down approach). If you are feeling overwhelmed, talk to your occupational therapist or other professional, your child's teacher, or your support network. You are not alone; you can do this and you are doing a great job.

Deb Hopper is a practicing occupational therapist with a private clinic in Forster on the NSW Mid North Coast. Deb understands the day-to-day struggles that children, parents, and teachers face and is passionate about helping children achieve their full potential. Her process empowers parents and teachers to understand emotional regulation, and she provides practical strategies that help children to overcome the issues that impact their learning abilities. With over 20 years of experience as an occupational therapist working in mental health and pediatrics, Deb is often called upon for media comment. She is also author of multiple International Amazon No. 1 Bestsellers. Deb has won multiple business awards which reflect her passion to help children. For more information on the Just Right Kids Model, please visit the website.

[Website](http://www.justrightkids.com)



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- Visit www.aikoandegor.org to learn more about the app, watch animated videos, and **sign up for our e-newsletter**.

The app is developed by See Beneath, a San Diego-based nonprofit co-founded by autism experts with years of experience in autism research and intervention.



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