



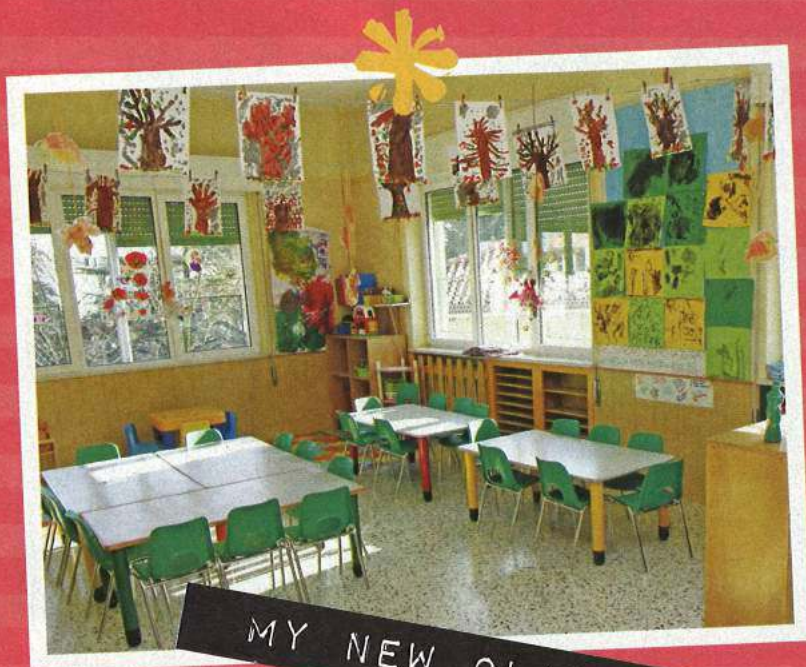
# Special Needs Strategies

Navigate the new school year successfully with children who need a bit more help

BY CHERYL ALKON

**B**efore Emma Sage Hintz began sixth grade last year at Woodglen Middle School in Lebanon Township, N.J., she really wanted a *Monster High* backpack.

Her mother, Tara Marie Hintz, who had shepherded three older children back to school over the years, worried that others would tease Emma, who has Down syndrome. »



MY NEW CLASSROOM

### FUN WAYS TO PREPARE FOR THE CHANGE

- Create picture books with images of your child's new school and classroom.
- Set up playdates with new classmates during the summer.

"I counseled my daughter that an animated backpack might not be 'grade appropriate,' but she insisted that that was the one she wanted," Hintz, of Califon, N.J., says. "She used that backpack all year with great pride and in the end, none of her peers cared less that her backpack might have seemed a bit childish for sixth grade."

The experience showed Hintz that she could step back a bit from her own fears. "I was so proud of her for her individuality," she says.

All parents want their children to thrive and learn. But when those kids have special needs that stem from physical, developmental or emotional disabilities, parents often wonder, what's the best way to navigate the transition to ensure a smooth school year for everyone?

#### KNOW YOUR KID

The key is to understand your child's challenges. For example, anxious, distracted and rigid kids require different approaches, says Carolyn Dalglish, the author of *The Sensory Child Gets Organized*, which helps parents establish routines and visual aids to organize family life.

"If your kid is more distracted, he might do well initially at school because they thrive on new experiences, but the novelty might have worn off by mid-October," she says. An anxious child might be more fearful around the first day of school and need more support through the first three weeks of school, she says. "Once they understand the routine, they will settle to a better spot."

#### PREPARE FOR THE CHANGE

Don't think of the back-to-school period as a one-week transition. It can take several months for a student to feel comfortable in a new school or grade.

In August, students need to prepare for meeting new teachers, new people and following new routines.

Certain strategies, such as creating picture books (known as social stories) about a new school, can help children. E-mail your child's new teacher or

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— TARA MARIE HINTZ, parent

school principal over the summer and ask if they can send you digital images of the classroom and school building. Print these out, staple them together and have your child decorate a special book cover. You can look at the book together so your child can learn about the new school. You can also make a

help establish friendships that can last into the school year and beyond.

In September, the focus should be on textbook and paperwork management, ensuring all materials get to and from school. By October, homework strategies should be addressed, says Dalgliesh.

visual daily schedule (check with the new teacher for details) so that your child will know what to expect once school starts.

You can also set up playdates with new classmates either during the summer or in the first weeks of school. This will

Older kids benefit from having a common homework station with a whiteboard or a laminated form that shows them what assignments they have coming up and lets them check them off as they're completed, says Dalgliesh. Also, kids can wear a white rubber bracelet ("because paper is white," says Dalgliesh) to remind them to bring home important paperwork instead of forgetting about it at school.

### LEARN THE SYSTEM

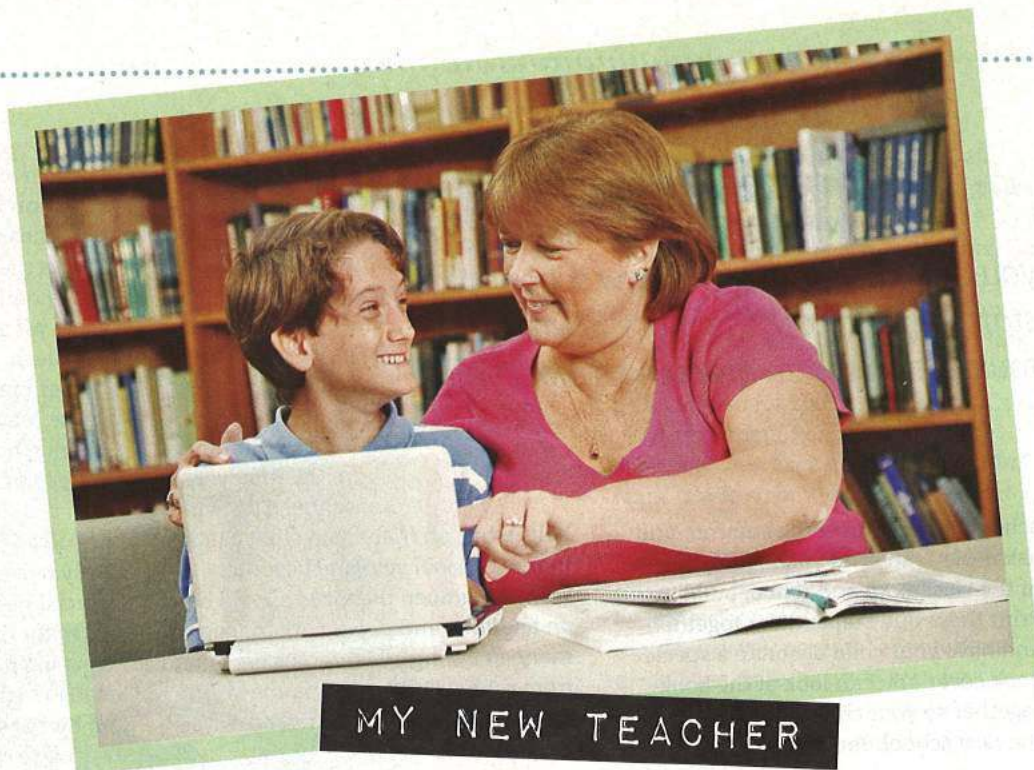
By necessity, parents of kids with special needs have to be active advocates for their children. Part of that is learning how the school operates, who is involved in their child's education and what systems are in place to foster learning. »



## ONLINE RESOURCES

- **Do2Learn.com** has free downloads of activities, academic materials, transition guides and more.

- **LDOnline.org** has resources for parents and teachers about everything from study skills to IEPs.



"To get oriented to a new school, take advantage of everything," says Mary Beth Klotz, director of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) projects and technical assistance at the National Association of School Psychologists, based in Bethesda, Md.

Attend school orientations and open houses. Look into joining the parent-teacher organization as well as any special education committees that might exist in your school or district. It can also be helpful to re-read your child's Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or 504 plan if one is in place, as well as his or her educational record, which is a separate file that includes grade reports and any related reports.

### MEET AND GREET

Schedule a meeting with new teachers, the school principal, even the school nurse, gym teacher or the bus driver or tour the school ahead of time, says Julie Steinberg of Westfield, N.J., the parent of a son with cerebral palsy. "It's a way to communicate any special plans, as well as to ensure everything is going smoothly," she says.

Also plan to attend all meetings with your child's IEP team, a great way to better get to know the people who work with your child on a daily basis.

When students reach middle

school, ask them to attend their own IEP meetings, says Ronni Aronow, a college transition expert for kids with Asperger's syndrome, ADHD and other developmental challenges. "That way, they can ask for what they need, and can say what strategies have worked and what didn't, so nothing is a mystery," she says.

### FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

Each year, a child should be learning how to self-advocate, communicate, find problem-solving resources and set academic, social and emotional goals with his/her parents, says Aronow.

Parents should support and cultivate their child's independence, particularly as students get older. "Kids have to learn by making mistakes, especially when they are still young," she says. "It's important to learn to do things in a supportive environment" so students can eventually do things for themselves after graduation.

But first, enjoy where you are.

"Back-to-school is magical," says Tara Marie Hintz. "It is no different for your children with special needs. It may take a little more preparation, but the time you put into getting the new school year started positively, the more it will set the foundation for an amazing school year." ●

## LETTERS OF THE LAW

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that all students with special needs are entitled to the same education available to students without disabilities through the public school system. To accomplish this, the school and student's family will determine whether the child is eligible for an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), which specifies the support needed by the student — such as occupational therapy or psychological services — in order to receive a free and appropriate public education. Students who don't qualify for an IEP but still need support may receive a 504 Plan that can provide additional accommodations.