

Expert insight: How to support autistic children heading back to class

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Returning to school can present new opportunities along with concerns and challenges.

As families with [autistic children](#) prepare for the new school year, their [concerns could include](#) determining that [necessary accommodations and supports are in place at](#) school, helping children transition from a summer routine to a structured school day and finding ways to support [social integration](#) with their new classmates.

For parents of autistic children, addressing children's [potential anxiety](#) or [sensory triggers](#) and having a plan to manage transitions are steps parents can take to promote a successful start to the school year.

For school communities, fostering an inclusive environment is key to ensuring all children, including those with autism, can thrive both academically and socially.

Autistic children at school

Autistic children represent a distinct group of learners and can face challenges in the school environment, which may not have optimal supports in place for neurodiverse learners.

Autism spectrum disorder is present in [one in 50 \(two percent\)](#) of Canadian [children and youth](#). While all children are unique, and [people on the spectrum](#) experience differences in their traits and levels of functioning, autistic children [can have specific](#) interests, engage in repetitive behaviors and be more sensitive to lights and sounds. Autistic children can also face challenges with social interactions or understanding thoughts and feelings of others. While repetition can help children learn, for autistic children, [routines and predictability are especially important](#).

Challenges receiving accommodations, services

School [absenteeism is common in autistic children](#). While some research attributes this to health conditions in some individuals, some factors may be specific for autistic children who are statistically more likely to face [early adversity](#): the more severely affected a child is by autism, the greater the likelihood they will be exposed to early life stressors.

Limited accommodations or services in the [school environment may also influence children's absenteeism](#). Accommodations could include adjustments to the physical environment, modified assignments or classroom supports. Research about adolescent autistic girls' experiences has documented how [low attendance can be associated with internalized anxiety](#) and a desire to avoid school.

Benefits of collaboration, social supports

Research shows that parents who work in collaboration with educators to support autistic children can achieve many positive benefits. For example, [early family involvement in interventions has been shown to significantly improve long-term academic outcomes](#), highlighting the lasting impact of active parental participation.

Building social supports for autistic children within their communities outside of school can also have positive impacts across many areas. For example, [community organizations](#) offer programming for autistic children and youth that can help them to build [social skills](#), learn skills of daily living and participate in therapeutic recreation. Programs like these are associated with [better social communication skills](#) for autistic children.

Parent, parent-child, advocacy groups

Parent groups can also be effective in promoting positive outcomes for

autistic children and their families.

Parents who participated in clinician-led groups that teach the principles of evidence-based practices such as acceptance and commitment therapy, [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) or mindfulness have reported [experiencing less stress](#).

Alternatively, [parent-child groups](#) can teach parents and children in tandem about [mental health issues](#) such as anxiety, so parents and children can work together to implement interventions at home. The skills taught in therapy are reinforced at home, where the child spends a large chunk of their day. To reach maximum potential, [collaboration with the child's school team](#) can also be beneficial.

Not-for-profit [autism and autism-advocacy groups often provide resources](#) that can also help parents navigate school systems and advocate for their child.

Better sleep

Parents can make changes within the home to reduce stress for children before the school year starts. One area of targeted intervention is sleep. Better sleep quality is associated with [higher levels of resilience](#), meaning that people who sleep for longer periods of time without interruption are better able to cope with difficult circumstances.

Conversely, a lack of sleep is associated with lower cognitive performance, difficulties with emotional regulation and physical health. Autistic children experience [additional side-effects of reduced sleep](#), such as lowered social communication skills. Because of the change in routine, re-entering school can aggravate sleep challenges often faced by autistic children and their families. To help combat this, parents can incorporate behavioral sleep interventions within their child's bedtime

routine to promote healthy sleep.

In a recent study, [bedtime fading and positive routines](#) have been shown to improve sleep quality and sleep duration in autistic children. Bedtime fading involves moving the child's bedtime to as close as possible to when they would naturally fall asleep, and then gradually moving the bedtime earlier over time.

By doing this, the body naturally associates being in bed with falling asleep quickly. Such routines before bedtime can include any calming, positive experiences which occur in the same order over approximately 30-40 minutes before bed. Establishing these routines before the start of school can ensure that children are consistently well-rested once school begins.

Parents' support

Parents and caregivers play a key role in how their children experience and relate to the world around them. Because [autistic children are at higher risk for experiencing anxiety](#) and challenges at school, having a positive relationship with a parent or caregiver is especially important. Research has found that a consistent and encouraging parenting style is a protective factor for autistic children [and can offset the negative impacts of stressful life experiences.](#)

When parents can remain calm and supportive while their child is experiencing "big emotions," [children learn these skills](#) and they can better cope with challenges. Emotional regulation skills can help children to relate more positively when interacting with their peers and the academic demands in the classroom.

Schools fostering sense of belonging

Supporting autistic children at school doesn't only refer to their academic achievement. When school environments promote healthy peer relationships, this can also help children with autism have a [sense of belonging at the school](#) and promote well-being.

[Play-based](#) or [function-based support strategies along with having visual supports and promoting self monitoring](#) at school are promising avenues to promote positive social interactions for autistic children with peers.

These types of support strategies led by [peers in the classroom or teachers](#) can offer opportunities to promote social interactions at school.

Both parents and school communities can play important roles in helping autistic children to thrive.

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