

Understanding End-of-Year Changes in School

A Guide for Parents of Autistic Children

As the school year comes to an end, many families notice an increase in stress, emotional outbursts, exhaustion, anxiety, shutdowns, or changes in behaviour in their autistic child.

This can be confusing, especially when the school year is supposed to feel exciting or relaxed. However, for many autistic children, the final weeks of school can feel deeply unsettling and overwhelming.

These responses are not “overreactions,” attention-seeking, or poor behaviour. They are often the result of a nervous system struggling with rapid change, uncertainty, sensory overload, and loss of predictability.

Understanding why this happens can help parents provide support, reassurance, and stability during a difficult transition period.

Why End-of-Year Changes Can Feel So Difficult

Many autistic children rely heavily on routine, predictability, and familiar structure to feel safe and regulated.

During the final weeks of school, routines often change suddenly and frequently.

Examples may include:

- different classroom activities,
- sports days,
- school trips,
- assemblies,
- transition days,
- substitute teachers,
- reduced academic structure,
- themed days,
- changing expectations,
- classroom packing and cleaning,
- discussions about next year,
- emotional goodbyes,
- and uncertainty about what comes next.

While these changes may seem small to others, they can feel significant and emotionally exhausting to an autistic child.

The Importance of Predictability

For many autistic children, predictability helps reduce anxiety and allows the brain to conserve energy.

Routine answers important questions such as:

- What is happening?
- Who will be there?
- What comes next?
- What is expected of me?
- Will things feel safe and familiar?

When routines suddenly change, the child may feel as though the “rules” of their world have shifted.

This can create:

- anxiety,
- confusion,
- hypervigilance,
- emotional dysregulation,
- difficulty concentrating,
- increased sensory sensitivity,
- or a strong need for control.

Even positive events can feel stressful when they are unfamiliar or unpredictable.

The Hidden Mental Load

Autistic children often work extremely hard to manage the school environment every day.

They may already be coping with:

- sensory overload,
- social demands,
- masking or camouflaging,
- transitions between activities,
- communication demands,
- uncertainty,
- and constant processing of information.

When routines become less structured at the end of the year, the effort required to cope can increase dramatically.

What may look like:

- challenging behaviours,

- clinginess,
- opposition,
- irritability,
- withdrawal,
- or emotional outbursts,

may reflect exhaustion, overwhelm, or anxiety.

Common Signs a Child May Be Struggling

Every child responds differently, but common signs include:

- increased meltdowns or shutdowns,
- difficulty sleeping,
- emotional sensitivity,
- school can't,
- regression,
- increased rigidity,
- more repetitive behaviours,
- physical complaints such as headaches or stomach aches,
- irritability after school,
- withdrawal or exhaustion at home,
- needing more reassurance,
- or becoming distressed about seemingly small changes.

These responses are often signs of stress rather than intentional behaviour.

Why “Fun” School Activities May Still Feel Hard

Activities such as sports days, parties, performances, and transition events are often highly stimulating and unpredictable.

They may involve:

- louder environments,
- crowds,
- changes in timetable,
- unfamiliar expectations,
- different seating arrangements,
- changes to safe routines,
- heightened social pressure,
- or sensory overload.

A child may enjoy parts of the activity while still finding it emotionally draining or overwhelming.

It is possible for a child to feel both excited and distressed at the same time.

How Parents Can Help at Home

Increase Predictability Where Possible

Even when school becomes unpredictable, stability at home can help a child feel safer.

Helpful strategies may include:

- keeping home routines consistent,
 - maintaining regular sleep and mealtimes,
 - giving advance notice of plans,
 - using calendars or visual schedules,
 - talking through upcoming events,
 - and preparing for changes gradually.
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Acknowledge the Difficulty

Children cope better when they feel understood.

Helpful phrases might include:

- “There have been lots of changes at school lately.”
- “Your brain likes knowing what to expect.”
- “It makes sense that this feels tiring.”
- “You don’t have to pretend it’s easy.”

Recognising and validating emotions may help children feel safe.

Streamline Tasks Where Possible

Many autistic children are using enormous amounts of energy simply getting through the school day during this period.

Some children may benefit from:

- quieter evenings,
- fewer social demands,
- reduced extracurricular activities,
- extra downtime,
- sensory regulation activities,
- more recovery time after school.

Sometimes reducing overload helps.

Support Emotional Regulation

Children may need extra help regulating emotions during times of transition.

Helpful supports can include:

- movement breaks,
- time in calming spaces,
- sensory tools,
- favourite interests,
- predictable calming activities,
- co-regulation with trusted adults,
- or simply being allowed to decompress without pressure.

Preparing for the Summer Transition

The transition from school to summer holidays can also feel unsettling.

Some children benefit from:

- visual countdowns,
- talking about what summer will look like,
- creating simple routines for holiday periods,
- discussing what will stay the same,
- and preparing gradually for returning to school later.

Knowing that structure still exists can reduce anxiety.

Working With School

If possible, communication with school can help.

It may be useful to ask:

- whether additional changes are coming,
- if schedules can be shared in advance,
- whether quiet spaces are available,
- or if flexibility can be offered during overwhelming activities.

Small accommodations can make a significant difference.

A Compassionate Perspective

The end of the school year can place enormous demands on an autistic child's nervous system.

What may appear to others as:

- overreacting,
- controlling behaviour,
- moodiness,
- or “not coping well,”

is often a child trying to manage uncertainty, overwhelm, and emotional fatigue as best they can.

Support does not mean removing every challenge. It means understanding what the child's nervous system is communicating and helping them feel safe enough to cope.

With patience, predictability, and compassion, children can move through these transitions feeling more understood, supported, and secure.