

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #161: Back to School: You've Got This!

Mallory: Obviously these transitions bring up a lot of emotions for parents. And we know that a lot of you listeners might be having some fears or some worries about back to school. Like, will your child, like their teacher? Will their teacher be understanding of their ADHD and know how to support them? Or will you be getting constant phone calls from the school when something goes wrong in the classroom?

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Lori: After a long and much needed summer break, welcome to season two of the shining with ADHD podcast.

Katie: Yay! We are really excited to be back. And it honestly seems like just yesterday we were counting down the days to summer, and I was barely surviving the chaos of the end of the last school year. And then I blinked, and now we're just starting a new school year.

Mallory: Well, it felt like more than just a single blink for me. Between less structure, vacations, time changes, it's taken a toll and I am ready for some routine again. But I'm also feeling all the mixed emotions because my youngest son is about to start kindergarten. The

baby of The Childhood Collective family; all of our kids collectively, the youngest is gonna be in kindergarten.

Lori: It's so crazy. Yeah, I know. And I'm feeling sad because my oldest is going to be in fifth grade. It's her last year of elementary school.

Mallory: So hard to believe.

Lori: I'm also feeling all the emotions. Like, all these transitions are just sad.

Katie: Yes, it really is. I feel like, Lori, you and I were just nanny sharing and sharing all the sleep tips and figuring out how to best freeze our pumped milk, and now here we are with fifth graders, and it just, it brings up all the things.

Mallory: Yeah, well, obviously these transitions bring up a lot of emotions for parents. And we know that a lot of you listeners might be having some fears or some worries about back to school. Like, will your child, like their teacher? Will their teacher be understanding of their ADHD and know how to support them? Or will you be getting constant phone calls from the school when something goes wrong in the classroom?

Lori: Yeah. So we know the transition back to school can be so stressful with so many different unknowns, but we also know that there are some things that you can do and start thinking about right now to really set your child up for success, starting into this new school year.

Katie: And that is why today we want to share with you our top three tips for a successful start to the school year. And in this episode in particular, we're going to be focusing more on things that we as parents can do in collaboration with the school to make it an easier transition. If you're looking more for home tips, things like sleep and starting up those morning routines and that sort of thing, definitely check out episode 120, which is from season one. We can officially say that now. And we'll go ahead and link that in the show notes. And just as a quick reminder, if you do enjoy this podcast, please, please, please consider leaving us a five star review. That's a huge important factor for us as podcasters. It's how we grow, it's how we share the podcast. A lot of it is review. And so please take a minute and remember to leave us a review.

Mallory: Yep. So let's dive right into our tips for easing that transition back into school. Our first tip is to write a letter, probably an email, to your child's new teacher. And I know that there can be a lot of hesitancy with parents to do something like this. They don't want to set the stage in a bad way, in terms of should I disclose my child's diagnosis? You know, we have plenty of information about that, but we do find that when you're very upfront with where your child's strengths are, where their needs are, it's going to help them set the school year off on the right foot. So what do you want to include in a letter to your child's teacher? Like I mentioned, a great thing to talk about is your child's strengths and their interests. Give them a little information about what really makes your child tick. Why do you love your child? What do other kids, other teachers love about your child? Start on that strong and positive note, but you also want to share areas where your child needs a little extra support, what they struggle with. And then historically, past school years, what kind of accommodations and interventions have really worked well for them, what's helped them with those areas of challenge? Another really important thing to include in this letter is the best way, the way that you're hoping the teacher will communicate with you. Are you hoping that you're going to send emails, text, a phone call, in-person meetings every so often? In addition to establishing kind of that method of communication, also establish the frequency of communication that you're hoping for. In some cases, there are some teachers who are willing to send you a quick email every day, and some kids honestly need that level of communication between their parent and their teacher. Some teachers may prefer to, and maybe you prefer to get like a weekly update on how things have been going. Maybe your child doesn't even need that frequent of check-ins. But the more you're kind of able to lay it out for the teacher, this is how I'm hoping we communicate, this is how often I'm hoping we can communicate, this is what we've done in the past, you're just kind of laying it out there for the teacher what your needs are and what you're hoping for.

Lori: Yeah, and the best way for your communication. I know, like, I'm going to prefer a text or an email, and then asking the teacher about, like, what's the best way to communicate with them about what's going on in the classroom is really so important.

Mallory: Absolutely.

Katie: And we talk a lot with our audience, which is mostly parents, but we also have a ton of teachers who are in our community, and many of them are teachers and ADHD parents

themselves. And we've asked many times, you know, what is helpful to you as a teacher and really trying to get to the heart of, like, what are they looking for? And I think the fear that a lot of us have on the parent side is, I don't want to be annoying, I don't want the teacher to think that I'm that mom or like the high maintenance one. But what the teachers consistently say is, communicate with us. Because oftentimes teachers don't hear from parents and they might be noticing, wow, this child is really having difficulty sitting still. Or every time that they line up for recess they bounce the basketball instead of holding it. And the teacher has no context for this, right. They don't know necessarily, like, what's going on. And it almost might feel like, I don't know if I should reach out to the parent or what's going. It just, it makes it so much clearer when you sort of take that initiative and set the stage like, hey, I'm here to work with you. I'm so excited for my child to be in your class this year, and I really wanted to let you know a couple things. And I know for me, you guys give me a hard time about this, but I'm a talker and I have a lot to say. It's actually very hard for me to write a short email. It's much easier for me to write a very long email. But keeping in mind, too, you know, keeping, respecting the teacher's time and doing the work to edit a little bit and think of like, okay, what are my main key points? And this is an ongoing relationship. It's like a first date. So you don't have to say all the things that you ever want the teacher to know, but give them a nice kind of quick overview, recognizing that they're starting off the school year, too, with a lot of students, but it's very helpful to them. And again, I think that the fear being, I don't want to be annoying. On the flip side of that, know that the teachers are clearly telling us, like, hey, I, we need more information. We don't know how to help support unless you give us a little bit of what has worked or what you notice about your own child.

Mallory: Yeah, you're so right, Katie. Anytime we post about sharing diagnosis with your child's teacher or sharing information with your child's teacher, inevitably our DM's are flooded with teachers who are like, please share, please tell us, please don't keep us in the dark. And we love that. And so yes, the resounding message we're getting from teachers is communicate over, not communicating. And if your child does have a formal plan in place, an IEP or a 504, this would be a great time to also just include that. Teachers should be getting that, behind the scenes, but it doesn't hurt to include it. Or if your child has a behavior plan, bringing it to their attention that your child does have this never hurts. Then your teacher, it's, you know, on the teacher's radar. And another thing that you can include is a recommendation that we make often is to ask before the end of the school year, ask that year's school teacher to write a letter with while your child is still in their class and

everything is fresh in their brain about what your child did well this year and what supports they've really needed to be successful. If you asked your teacher, last year's teacher to write that letter, share that letter now with this year's teacher. This is what last year's teacher said.

Katie: Yes. And if you didn't, that's okay. Maybe at the end of this coming up school year, we'll remind you again and you can get that, get that going because it is really helpful. You know, the teacher just has that insider knowledge of what happened in the classroom and what was really successful. So no worries if you didn't, but we'll try to remind you again.

Mallory: And we also have an episode from season one, episode 141 about talking with your child's teacher about your child's diagnosis. If you want a little bit more guidance on how to navigate all of that, go back, listen to episode 141. We'll link it in the show notes. That one has a lot of great information for you.

Lori: And our second tip for some of you, I think this is going to be important, is to get a meeting scheduled really early on in the school year to either maybe update your child's 504 or IEP or if you haven't created a plan yet, then we want you to think about maybe creating a formal plan, for your child. And we have kind of a blog if you're kind of like, I don't know the difference between a 504 and an IEP. Just check the show notes, for a link to that so if you're kind of lost on what those things are. Again, we also have our online course, *Shining at School*, where we talk all about the differences and what to look for for your child and what plan would be best. But a plan really helps to set your child up for success for that school year by giving them accommodations in the classroom that kind of level the playing field. So again, kids with ADHD might need tasks broken up into kind of smaller pieces. They might need individual follow-up when multiple instructions are given to the whole class. A lot of them are struggling to focus during those times so having the teacher go over and kind of repeat those instructions or give them one-by-one can be helpful. So there's lots of accommodations that can be great. Again, we have a free accommodations guide we'll link in the show notes that can give you an idea of what some of those accommodations might be that you include on a plan. If your child really struggled behaviorally last year at school and you were getting constant calls, there were lots of challenges. Maybe you guys had a behavior plan in place. Remember that that behavior plan is probably gonna have to shift and change a little bit when you have a new teacher in a totally different classroom and maybe a totally different schedule in a totally different grade. So if that behavior plan was in place last

year, you probably want to schedule a meeting early on to talk about any changes that might need to be made to that plan based on the teacher's preferences and how they run that particular classroom. Because there can be a lot of differences from teacher to teacher. If your child maybe just got an evaluation and just got a diagnosis of ADHD, maybe it happened over the summer, but they don't have a plan yet, you can talk with a school. Sometimes you can make a meeting happen the week before school starts, when teachers are back. You know, when I worked as a school psychologist in the schools, we would have meetings scheduled before school started to maybe talk about 504 plans, to talk about kids that were having challenges that we might need to do an evaluation with. So that's also a time if you're kind of like wanting to get a head start and have a plan in place before school starts, and to get your child's schedule in place before school starts, to talk with the school about, you know, if there are any changes that can be made or if you can get that plan started you know, right away.

Katie: Yes. And I think that there may be situations where you're not able to get an appointment or a meeting before school starts, so don't be frustrated if that's the case. But definitely emailing the teacher and the other people that would be involved in your child's team to start to get that ball rolling and that can be really helpful. And just in the meantime, that's why we said, you know, write the teacher an email about your child so that they do have some foundational knowledge. And every situation is different. I think, you know, in my kids' school, last year's teachers meet with the future teachers and talk about each kid. And ideally, in my mind, they have like a whole day dedicated to just my children, but I'm sure that's not the case. But they do talk through some of those peer dynamics and, okay, yeah, this is a group in general that's generally pretty strong readers, or this group needs more help in this area, and then that can be great. But obviously, everyone's situation is unique. So some people are starting in a new school. The transition, like we talked about from fifth grade into middle school, like, for both of mine and Lori's daughters next year is going to be a big jump. Depending on where you're at, where you're coming into this with, maybe your teacher has more knowledge of your child or maybe they don't. So you might have to customize it a little bit based on your specific situation.

Lori: Yeah. And we just actually got a message from a parent today that was saying, you know, many times when kids have a 504, IEP, one of the great benefits of that is that as a school team behind the scenes you can kind of hand select teachers for those particular kids

that you think a child is going to do better with. That really is one of the great advantages. I don't know that all schools do that, but many try to. And we had a parent that said there was a situation where they wanted to have a particular teacher and they were set up, and then it got changed at the last minute. So if you're finding out, hey, the teacher that you were thinking you were getting got changed, really take some time and advocate for that. And again, coming at it from a perspective of not just, I want my child to be successful, but from the school's perspective. And, you know, again, as working as a school psychologist in the schools, my job became so much harder when kids were with a teacher that it wasn't a good fit. Whereas if I put a child, I remember placing a child in a particular classroom and I was like, I know that we're not going to have as many difficulties just because this is a really strong teacher who has a really great classroom management system. And again, it can be really beneficial and advantageous to the school, too, to have a good teacher-student fit as well. So if you feel like your child does have a plan, you know that they've had some challenges in the past, really advocate for that.

Mallory: And I also just want to mention, too, absolutely advocate for your child, but if there has been a last-minute switch, you know, hear the school out. There could be a reason why that switch was made that not necessarily all parents are privy to. Like, perhaps they know that that teacher is going to be going on maternity leave.

Lori: Yes.

Mallory: And they know that your child really needs a constant teacher for that school year. So there can be some, if a switch is made last minute or your student, your child ends up with a teacher that you weren't expecting, you know, hear the school out about maybe they have an explanation for why that decision was made. Because there can be some reasons behind the scenes that parents just aren't aware of that they've decided at the last minute that this teacher might be a good fit.

Lori: Yes, absolutely.

Katie: So our third tip is to make a plan of how you're going to check in with the school one to two months within the beginning of the school year. And this might look a little bit different if you already have an IEP or a 504, then you can call a meeting at any time. A lot of parents don't know that, so you might schedule that meeting in advance. If you don't have a

plan in place, or maybe you're at the point where your child hasn't even had an evaluation yet and you're just really concerned and you're thinking that they need to have an assessment, still make a plan to check in with your teacher a month to two months, probably closer to one month into the school year. And that can be whatever level of formality feels the most comfortable for you. For me, a lot of times it's an email. Hey, I just want to check in. You know, she's really loving math class. That's never happened before, but I might say something along those lines and say, yeah, she's really enjoying this. And it seems like art has been going really well, and what are you noticing? How are things going? And it gives the teacher an opportunity to bring to you any areas of challenge. And like we talked about before, sometimes teachers are hesitant to say anything. They might be feeling like, oh, it's not that big of a deal. But what can often happen is it's not a big deal until it is a big deal. And almost at that point, you're like, really, I'm just being brought to the table now? Like, why did you not tell me this much, much sooner? And I have a personal story with my son, who, loves music. He plays the drums, he plays the piano, he was in a musical. He loves music, okay, and he comes from a really musical family. But at the end of last school year, we were getting ready for the spring concert, and I got an email from the teacher, the music teacher, just a couple days before the concert, saying, oh, my gosh like, he isn't singing during the during the performance practices. And, you know, it's a huge problem, like, he might fail music. Granted, my son is, like, in first grade, and it was really difficult for my husband and I because the first question we had is like, what? How? When did this happen? How long has this been going on? And again, I think the teacher has a lot on her plate. She has many, many students to take care of. But it sounded to us like it had been happening for quite some time, and we honestly had no idea. And so it kind of puts you at a disadvantage when you're sort of behind the curve going, wait, what? We're now at the end, and it's this huge crisis I didn't realize. So when we're proactive and we open up the dialogue with the teachers, again, it can just be incredibly helpful in allowing them to share, okay, this is what's going well. And then you can talk through changes, and again, that's going to look different depending on your situation. So the change could be, my child gets no services yet, and I think we might need to look into an evaluation or getting them into more accommodations, more of a plan. If you already have a plan in place that is not set in stone. And so there might be things that need to evolve and change. Maybe overall, your child is behaving really well at school and really succeeding, but PE is tricky. Or in my case, apparently, music is the hard one for my kid. I don't know, I'm, like, offended personally at this.

Lori: But I do feel like for a lot of our listeners, kids do really well with that consistency and structure. So they might do well in their classroom, but then it's the specials and recess and lunch that is where we see all of the issues. And a lot of times it's because those teachers maybe don't have a good understanding of any of the things that the main teacher knows about. So, yeah, I think it is really common to have music and art and some of those areas be more of a challenge for kids.

Katie: Right. And I, you know, in that particular situation that I was talking about when I asked him, like, why aren't you singing? His honest response to me was, I think I am singing. And so, you know, at that point it becomes about educating the teacher and saying, hey, you know, I really appreciate your concern and your email and I'm here on your team, like, let's figure this out. And also he's not being defiant. He really genuinely thinks he is moving his mouth and I'm going to work with him on moving his lips so that it looks like he's singing. That little stinker, I swear this kid has aged me! But I think that again, it's a collaboration and it's so much easier to collaborate when you're not to the point of extreme frustration. It's much better to kind of start out and be like, hey, how's it going? Oh, a small bump in the road? Great, let's problem solve that. Rather than them coming to and be like, this is a pothole and we're all panicking.

Lori: Yeah. And I think teachers a lot of times feel like from their perspective might feel like, oh shoot, I'm doing something wrong that they're having these things happen every day just like we do as parents. It's like, oh my, I must be doing something wrong in my parenting that my child is like climbing all over everything and hitting everything. Again, it's, you know, sometimes you have to go to the teacher and allow them to be open about those things.

Mallory: Yeah, sometimes they don't want to bother the parents. They don't want to trouble the parents with it, they just want to solve it. So then you aren't getting the message until it is a big problem and they've realized they can't solve it. So by you reaching out proactively, you're setting the stage to say, hey, this kind of stuff is important to me and I do want to hear about it.

Lori: Yeah.

Mallory: So for our fourth and final tip for setting your child up for success this school year, this one does have to do a little bit more with you and your child, is practice and teach your

child how to advocate for themselves. How to be a good self-advocate. How to stick up for their needs. And this is hard for a lot of kids, because a lot of times at the school, they're having to advocate for themselves with their peers, but also their teachers with adults and that can be challenging. But to help your child be a really good self-advocate, first they have to have an understanding of what things they're good at, what they do well, but also what things are challenging and what kind of things help with those challenges. So you have to have open conversations with your child about this. So they're not just, they need to understand, this is hard for me, but this helps me. So it's important for me to advocate for that level of support at school. And this is going to take a lot of practice. Again, you have to kind of talk about these things, bring these things to light, and then you probably have to do a lot of practicing at home with how to in a way that's going to be well received by adults and peers, how to tell them what you need, right. It's this delicate balance.

Katie: Yes. And it's also a lifelong skill. Like, it's like, I'm still working on this as a grown up, and a mom, and a professional. It's like, what do I need in this situation? And knowing and then speaking that is a lot. It's a lot of steps, but we can definitely help our kids. And that might look like, oh, these kids are too noisy, I need to sit at a quieter desk. Or I really need a fidget, something that I can maybe stick a piece of Velcro under my desk that I can just touch and it helps me to focus when I'm trying to listen in that pesky math class. But I think, you know, again, that's going to look so different. But helping our kids even be aware of what those needs are and then what are some of the options can really help them to feel more comfortable, to advocate for themselves.

Mallory: Absolutely.

Lori: There's a cute book, *My Busy, Busy Brain*, which we had a podcast with the authorization, but I like that book in particular. One, because it kind of talks about and teaches kids a little bit about ADHD, but it's all about advocating at school and having those conversations with teachers if you're struggling. So it's a cute book to maybe look at, too, with your kids. We'll put that in the show notes.

Katie: Yeah. That's author Nicole Russell, and what she said to us when we interviewed her was so incredible because the girl in the book is really good at standing up for herself and we said, what inspired you to write this book? And what she said was really beautiful. She said, I wrote the story about the girl I wish I could have been as a kid. Because she didn't feel like

she could speak up or get her needs met. And so she sort of wrote this hero, heroine, who was able to stand up for herself and get her needs met. And it was just beautiful. It really, it touched us when we heard her say that, I was like, oh, that's incredible. And that's the kid we want all of our kids to be.

Lori: Yep. So here's our takeaway today. If you are feeling anxious about your child's transition back-to-school, just know you're not alone and I know many of our listeners are right now. But remember to communicate, collaborate early in the school year with your child's teacher or the school staff to create a successful start to the school year. And as always, we are here to support.

Katie: Thanks for listening to *Shining with ADHD* by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!