

Ten Things You Can Do Before Day One

Every student on the autism spectrum will enter your classroom bearing a backpack full of worries. If those worries can't be put down on Day One, then toting that heavy load will become a way of life at school, a learned behavior. Each day these students will return burdened and compromised by the worries on their backs. Instead, seize this moment to help them offload their worries by preparing a classroom that exudes comfort, clarity, and consistency, even on Day One.

Here is a basic list of ten things you can do before Day One to lighten the load for students on the spectrum.

- 1. Reach out to families.** Well in advance if possible, send home a copy of the questionnaire on page 49 (available to download at www.barbaraboroson.com), asking about strengths and challenges, what helps and what makes things worse. Encourage parents or caregivers to get in touch with you to discuss any specific concerns. Consider carefully whatever anecdotal information emerges from these contacts as you plan for Day One and beyond.
- 2. Talk to colleagues** who have had experience with these specific students so that you can benefit from both their successes and failed efforts, and so that you can hit the ground running.
- 3. Display basic classroom rules in clear, simple language.** Students on the spectrum may not intuit your rules, but once they learn them, these students may be your best rule followers. (Find out why rules rule in Chapter 3.)
- 4. Prepare a visual schedule for the first day.** Always let these students know what to expect in advance. (See how and why to do this in Chapter 3.) Send a copy of the first day's schedule home *before* Day One; and better yet, do #5!
- 5. Arrange a visit** before the hustle and bustle of Day One. For students on the spectrum, first impressions are *really* lasting impressions, so make it a good one. (Visit the section on visits in Chapter 3.)
- 6. Set up the classroom** with sensible, plainly labeled spaces that have clear boundaries. (Find out why this matters in Chapter 10.)
- 7. Avoid seating these students near expectable distractions or sensory provocateurs**, such as the gerbil cage, the bunsen burners, the windows, the microwave, and so on. It may all be perceived as much louder, brighter, and smellier by your students than it is by you. (Get a sense of sensory considerations in Chapter 4.)
- 8. Keep classroom decorations to a minimum**, at least for a while. In the beginning, less is definitely more. (Learn why less is more in Chapter 4.)
- 9. Designate a small corner of your classroom as a Cozy Corner or Sensory Space**, if possible. Soften it up with basic comforts: a small rug, a beanbag chair, a few stuffed animals, an assortment of friendly books and magazines, or whatever you've learned might comfort your specific students. This can become a comfy place for any student who needs to decompress a bit, but for your students on the spectrum it may be a sanctuary. (Get in touch with sensory corners and sensory tools in Chapter 4.)
- 10. Brush away your doubts and polish up your confidence.** You can do this. (Find out why you should believe that in Chapter 2!)