

Is My Child Ready for School?

Two conversations every family should have when school is on the horizon

Before you read another word:

If you are reading this, your child is somewhere on the path to school. Maybe they are 3. Maybe they are 6. Maybe they are already enrolled, and the question is whether what is happening now is working.

Every family we work with arrives at the same question, usually quietly, often at 2 a.m. "Is my kid ready for school?" And underneath it: "Am I doing the right thing?"

Let us say this out loud at the top: school is the goal. The Tuesday morning that runs smoothly. The school day that ends in a story they want to tell. The friendship at recess. We are on your side of that goal.

This guide is built to help you have two conversations that the parents who walk into school best-prepared tend to have:

- One conversation with your therapy team, about whether your child is ready.
- One conversation with the school, about whether the school is ready for your child.

You do not have to memorize anything, or worry about bringing this up. You just have to ask!



01

What "ready" actually means

Why academic skills are not the whole picture, and what is

Most families arrive at the readiness question thinking about letters, numbers, the alphabet, can-they-write-their-name. Those matter. They also are not the part of readiness that decides whether school works for an autistic child.

The research on school success for autistic children is consistent on this point. Academic skills, on their own, are poor predictors. The stronger predictors are different. Most of them are not taught at a desk.

The skills that actually predict school success:

- Adaptive behavior across home, school, and new settings (not just the places they already know)
- Communication in new environments, with new people, not just at home with family
- Self-regulation through transitions, schedule changes, unexpected events
- Generalization, the ability to take a skill from one teacher, one room, one day and use it in another
- Doing more things on their own, the slow work of building independence with less hands-on support

These are the foundations. They make the academics possible.

Eight readiness domains, in real moments:

When we talk about readiness at our centers, we mean eight areas working together. None of them on their own is the answer.

- Communication — asking the teacher for help, telling a peer their name
- Independence — opening a snack, hanging up a coat, finding their cubby
- Play skills — joining a game already in progress, ending a game even if they don't want to
- Learning readiness — sitting through circle time, switching from one activity to the next
- Social skills — sharing, taking turns, reading the room
- Emotional regulation — making it through a hard moment without it taking over the day
- Flexibility — handling a substitute teacher, a different chair, a changed routine
- Eating and toileting — eating in a noisy cafeteria, asking to use the restroom

02 The reframe: it is not ABA vs. school

Why the question is not which one, but what combination

The 12-hour day

A child who is in school from 8 to 3, followed by ABA from 4 to 6:30, is working a 12-hour day. What that day actually costs:

- Fatigue that erodes learning at school and at therapy
- Regression that shows up in the afternoon and the evening
- Diminished benefit from both settings, not more progress

More hours does not mean more progress. The wrong combination cancels itself out. The honest question is not *"ABA or school?"* It is *"what combination will let our child actually benefit?"*

Five paths to school

We see autistic children land in one of five places. Most move between them over time. What matters is the right match for now.

1. **General education, minimal support.** Full-time gen ed, light therapy if any, focus on social skills and enrichment.
2. **General education with supports plus targeted therapy.** Gen ed with IEP/504 supports during the school day, plus therapy after school. School is the anchor.
3. **Blended school plus therapy.** Some days are school, some are therapy. Both teams talk to each other. The classroom decision matters as much as the hours.
4. **Therapy-first with school readiness focus.** More intensive therapy now to build the foundation, with school entry intentionally delayed. This is not falling behind. This is the foundation.
5. **School-age intensive support.** For school-age children who still need a high level of support, a highly specialized or partial-day school setting paired with intensive therapy.

None of these are failure paths. They are matched paths. The wrong match, even at the right age, is what creates the hard adjustment families want to avoid. The right match, even when it looks different from the neighbors' kid, is what makes school work.

03

Conversation one: with your therapy team

Questions that help you and your clinicians make the readiness decision together

This is the conversation most families do not have, because they assume their therapy team will raise readiness when the time is right, or because the concept of school is so naturally tied to age, that the decision seems natural.

Whether your child is in our care, or in someone else's, your therapy team has watched your child do the work of skill-building day after day. They have data you do not have. They have read of dozens or hundreds of kids who came before yours. They have informed opinions.

Here's what you can ask them during your next parent meeting:

Where is my child, honestly?

"Where is my child, today, on each of the eight readiness domains? Where could they be in another six months, nine months, a year?"

"What does your data show me about their progress in the last 90 days?"

"What is the one area where they are still building, and what would it take to support that growth?"

The strongest therapy teams answer these questions with specifics. Domain by domain. Numbers if they have them. Stories if numbers do not capture it.

What does the next six months look like?

"If we agree school is the goal for next fall, what does the next six months of therapy look like clinically? What changes about the plan?"

"What skills will we be specifically working on to prepare for school, and how will you measure progress?"

"Are there things we should be doing at home, in the community, on weekends, to build generalization?"

03

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The honest case, both ways

"Make the honest case for school in the fall. Now make the honest case for waiting. What are you weighing?"

"If this were your child, what would you do?"

This is the question that separates clinicians from technicians. A good clinician will tell you what they actually think, with caveats, with humility, with respect for the fact that you are the one making the call.

What do you want me to know that schools will not tell me?

"What do you most want me to know walking into the IEP meeting that the school is unlikely to volunteer?"

"What do you worry about most for my child in the first six months of school?"

"What would you watch for as an early signal that things are not working?"

How will the two teams coordinate?

"If my child goes to school, what would consultation between you and the school look like? Are you willing to attend the IEP meeting? Observe the classroom? Be on a release of information with the school's behavior team?"

"How will your services flex around a school schedule, so we do not end up with a 12-hour day?"

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act gives you the right to bring outside experts to the IEP meeting. The exact regulation: 34 C.F.R. § 300.321(a)(6) allows "other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child" to attend, "at the discretion of the parent or the agency." You do not need school permission to bring your child's BCBA, speech-language pathologist, or occupational therapist. You decide.

04

Conversation two: with the school

Questions that help you identify a school built to support your child

This is the conversation parents tell us they wish they had known how to have. The school is set up to give you a tour, walk you through their program, and answer the questions you bring. The quality of the answers you get back is almost entirely a function of the quality of the questions you ask.

We organized these into seven clusters. Bring this list. The team will not be offended.

Cluster 1: Who will be in the room with my child?

"What autism-specific training has the lead teacher completed, and when?"

"What training has the paraprofessional or one-on-one aide had?"

"Is there a board-certified behavior analyst on staff, on consult, or available to the team? How often?"

"How long has this team worked together?"

A general education teacher with no autism-specific training paired with a paraprofessional with no autism-specific training is the quiet source of most placements that go sideways. The school does not have to assign you a clinician. But you have a right to know what training the adults in the room actually have.

Cluster 2: The classroom environment

"May I observe the proposed classroom for at least one full morning before we finalize the plan?"

"What is the class size, and what is the actual adult-to-student ratio across a typical day?"

"How is the sensory environment set up? Lighting, noise, visual clutter, transitions between activities?"

"Where are the quiet spaces, and how does a child access them when they need to?"

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Cluster 3: How they think about readiness

"How does this school define a 'successful' first year for an autistic child?"

"What does it look like when a child here is struggling, and how is that addressed in the first weeks, not after a problem has compounded?"

"Tell me about a child you have supported recently whose profile sounds similar to mine. How is that family doing now? Without names."

The way a school answers the third question is often the most telling part of the meeting. A school that has thought carefully about supporting autistic children has stories to tell. A school that has not, will pivot to generalities.

Cluster 4: Communication systems and supports

"What communication systems is this team trained in? PECS, AAC, visual schedules, social stories, scripted supports?"

"If my child uses an AAC device, how is it maintained, who programs it, and how is it integrated into the school day?"

"How do you preview transitions, schedule changes, fire drills, substitute teachers?"

Cluster 5: Data and progress

"How will data be collected on each IEP goal? How often, by whom, with what tool, and reviewed by whom?"

"How often will I receive progress reports, and what will they actually show me?"

"May I review the related services log at any time, to confirm that the minutes in the IEP are the minutes my child is receiving?"

04

Conversation two: with the school

Questions that help you identify a school built to support your child

Federal law requires schools to inform parents of their child's IEP progress "at least as often as parents of non-disabled children" are informed. If the rest of the school's parents get progress every quarter, you get it every quarter. You can ask for more frequent updates, especially in the first year.

Cluster 6: When things get hard

"What is the protocol when a student is overwhelmed or in distress? What is tried first, second, third?"

"What is your policy on physical restraint, time out, and isolated time out? When are they used, who is trained, and how are families notified?"

"If my child has an incident, what is the timeline for notifying me, and what does the formal documentation look like? May I see a sample with names redacted?"

The answer to this cluster matters. A school that has a clear, written, parent-facing protocol is a school that has thought about behavior support. A school that improvises is a school where one bad day can become a defining one.

Cluster 7: Coordination with our outside therapy team

"Are you open to coordinating with my child's outside BCBA, SLP, or OT? What does that coordination look like, in practice?"

"Will the school sign a release of information so my therapy team and the school team can share progress data both directions?"

"May my outside BCBA observe in the classroom periodically, as a support to my child? Can we put that into the IEP?"

Federal IEP law (34 C.F.R. § 300.321) lets you bring whoever you want to the IEP meeting. Whether outside clinicians can observe in the classroom is a separate question that varies by school. Some are welcoming. Some are not. The ones who are welcoming tend to be the ones whose autistic students do best.

05

Readiness goes both ways

The school will evaluate your child carefully. You get to do the same.

Most families assume readiness is a question about the child. Sometimes the harder question is whether the school is ready for the child.

A child who is ready in every measurable way can struggle in a school that does not have the staffing, the structure, the training, or the values to support them. The reverse is also true. A child whose evaluation scores look uncertain can thrive in a school built around them.

You are allowed to evaluate the school as carefully as the school evaluates your child. This is not optional, and it is not impolite. It is the conversation that decides whether the first year of school becomes the story your child tells with a smile.

Quick signals that the school is ready

- They invite you to observe more than once, in more than one setting
- They name specific autism-relevant training the team has had
- They have a written behavior protocol they are willing to share
- They have a clear answer for what happens when things get hard
- They are open to outside clinicians being part of the picture
- They tell you specific stories about specific children who have done well

Quick signals to press harder on

- Vague language about "individualized support" without specifics
- Reluctance to let you observe before you commit
- "We have not had a student quite like that before"
- "We do not allow outside clinicians in the classroom"
- Generic talking points about "inclusion" without naming what it looks like in practice
- A behavior protocol the school will describe verbally but not put in writing

None of the second list is a deal-breaker on its own. All of them are reasons to bring a clinician with you on the second visit, or to continue to ask follow-up questions until you're comfortable with the answers.

06 What we can do alongside you

The decision about when and where school happens is yours to make. The work of preparing for it, evaluating it, and adjusting if it does not go as planned, does not have to be yours alone.

If your child is in our care

Your BCBA can sit with you and walk through this guide. They can join you at the IEP meeting, no extra paperwork required. They can observe the proposed classroom, where the school allows it. They can adjust your child's services to fit the new schedule when school starts. They can hand you data when you need it, and stay quiet when you do not.

If you are not in our care

If you are weighing services, considering a Prep School option, or just trying to figure out which conversation to have first, we will sit with you for fifteen minutes on the phone with no expectation.

Prep School: a bridge between therapy and school

Our prep school program is a half-day therapeutic preschool experience for autistic children, designed to build the routines, confidence, and foundational skills that help children thrive in classroom settings and beyond.

You don't have to choose between academic learning and therapeutic support. With us, your child gets both. It's a program that feels just like school, but is thoughtfully designed for children who need more support than most classrooms can offer. We help build confidence, friendships, and foundational skills in a warm, therapeutic environment.

Interested in our services? With 16 locations across Chicagoland, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Houston, we'd be happy to help support your child's growth and development.