

# Tough time for special-needs kids

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Phillip Antone, 17, of Middletown and his mother, Karen, pick fresh vegetables from the kitchen garden on the grounds of the Impact Oasis Trail Center in Monmouth County. / Gannett NJ photo/MARY FRANK

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**MIDDLETOWN** — While the moms of other teens are working on their back-to-school shopping lists, Karen Antone settles down at a laptop at her dining room table to draft a list of a different sort.

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Addressed to her son Phillip's teachers, the document is an amalgam of details about the 17-year-old: Social interaction is tough for the teen, she writes, so he should be encouraged to work with his peers.

If he gets a little frustrated, a joke or funny face may bring him back on track — Phillip's got a great sense of humor, Antone adds.

It's among a dozen other fast facts she includes about the boy, who's autistic.

## Did you know?

**There were nearly 218,000 students** classified with special needs ranging from autism to visual impairments, from learning disabilities to brain injuries, in the state's public schools as of October 2011.

**That's nearly 16 percent** of the public school student population, and does not account for

"Every year I send a letter in," Antone said.

"Transition was one of the big issues Phillip had; now it's focus and attention. By them knowing what he likes, it helps to motivate him when he could get stuck at times."

The teen, a Boy Scout and cross country team member who's starting his senior year at

"We try to tell parents that the best way to prepare a child is to try to take as much of the mystery out of the expectations (for the child) as possible," Kinsell says. "Not knowing what the expectations are is the scariest part for a kid — any kid."

She recommends parents of special-needs students ready them by bringing them into school before the first day to meet the teacher, aide and other faculty and staff. Parents and teachers may show the child where their classes and seats are and run through their schedule with them physically, Kinsell says.

She says this kind of planning is especially helpful for kids who have difficulty with separation, communication or making friends.

"In a brand-new situation, it happens across the board — autism, behavioral challenges, a child with a mental health diagnosis, ADD or ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) — they'll either shut down or act out because they're scared, because they are trying to communicate something," Kinsell said.

"Those are the kinds of things you want to try to put into place before the shutdown, the tantrum or whatever else might happen."

At home on a recent Sunday afternoon, Vera Piasecki has scattered across her kitchen table a half-dozen binders filled with information from the school's individualized education plans, or IEPs, for her 5-year-old daughter, Hannah. The mom of three is hole-punching dozens of evaluation results and printed emails between herself and the district about her daughter, who has Down syndrome.

"I have two older kids who are 'typical'; all I do for them is get the supply list, buy the supplies and shoot them in to school," Piasecki said with a laugh. "But with Hannah, there's much more to think about."

On Piasecki's to-do list are checking on whether there will be a car seat on the bus for her daughter, who's just shy of 3 feet tall, and making sure she's not overburdened with too many therapies on the same day.

Plus, a lot changed for Hannah over the summer, and Piasecki will have to get the girl's aide up to speed. Hannah's wearing glasses now, for one. And she's also out of the training pants she'd worn last year, Piasecki said.

"The organization has to be continuous — you always need that point of reference, in print, to go back and say 'This is something we said we were going to work on, and we're not seeing any result or this isn't happening,'" Piasecki said. "But at the beginning of the school year there's always an uptick in everything, especially the communication."

Donna Stump, director of special services for Brick Township Public Schools, recommends parents also talk about "what-ifs" — unexpected scenarios that might arise and cause upset or, worse, a meltdown.

"For example (a parent might tell the child): 'I am going to pick you up from school today, but if I am late, it is because I got stuck in traffic. Just remember I am on my way, and don't get upset,'" Stump said.

She said, too, that it's sometimes important for parents to take a step back, breathe and relax at this, one of the most potentially stressful times of the school year. Children can pick up on the anxiety, so parents should reassure kids that school will be a positive experience, she says.

"Sometimes parents are more apprehensive than their children," Stump said. "I wish that I could tell all parents how much educators care about their children and help them understand that children are resilient and quickly adjust. When parents and teachers work together, everyone wins, especially the student."

"It's helpful when parents have something to offer," says Antone, who also is co-leader of Middletown Township Friends of Different Learners. "A suggestion, a solution: Here are some possible ways we can make this work."