

"Parents should realize that it doesn't take an army to make change. It's about people willing to forge closer relations with school board members."

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 **INTERVIEW**

Pete & Pam Wright Redux

by Sheryl Knapp



Pete and Pam Wright produce the Wrightslaw special education website, books and newsletter, and conduct advocacy training programs for parents around the country. Pam is a psychotherapist; Pete, a prominent attorney, won the 1993 landmark Shannon Carter case before the U.S. Supreme Court, benefitting children with disabilities. In an interview last year with Smart Kids' Sheryl Knapp, the couple went on the record about the state of

special education. They sat down again this year with Knapp to share their views on the latest Supreme Court rulings that impact students with LD and the increasingly pervasive trend to intervene first and then evaluate—a strategy promoted by IDEA 2004 known as Response to Intervention (RTI).

SK: *Before we talk about Response to Intervention, what do you think are the most significant recent developments that impact students with learning disabilities?*

PETE: Two Supreme Court cases have been decided that were not pro-child. The first was Schaffer versus Weast, where the court ruled that the burden of proof is on the party that is requesting a change in the status quo. So if there's an IEP and the parent wants more services, they have the burden in the due process hearing of proving that their proposal is the appropriate option. The other case was Allerton versus Murphy, with the court ruling that parents are not entitled to recover their expert witness fees if they prevail in a due process hearing—although they are of course able to recover their legal fees.

SK: *As for RTI, are you finding that schools are*

doing a better job interpreting and implementing it than they were a year ago?

PETE: We are seeing a lot more emphasis on the concept of RTI, but what does that really mean? So many school districts seem to say, "No, we cannot do the comprehensive evaluation until we have tried RTI." That's like saying, because you have a stomachache, I will tell you to take two aspirin a day, and if that doesn't work a week later we'll try 10 aspirin a day, and if that doesn't work we'll try a bottle a day... and once we know that none of those work we'll go in and do a comprehensive diagnostic assessment with a gastroenterologist specialist.

SK: *Are the schools using RTI as a diagnostic tool in itself then?*

PETE: More like a delay tactic, used to postpone evaluations.

(continued on page 2)

Wrights Redux *(continued from page 1)*

PAM: In theory it sounds good: We'll give an intervention and after two weeks we'll measure. But the success of this will depend upon having teachers who are proficient in understanding and measuring progress, skills and reading methods—and that's not happening. That's going to take a lot of time to happen. I think that's going to be the real Achilles heel of this program.

SK: *So you don't think that RTI is making schools implement more research-based practices?*

PETE: I think that's certainly the intent, and there are districts that are probably doing that, but those aren't the districts we hear about. We hear about those that are using it to delay even doing an evaluation to see what the kid's needs are.

PAM: Change in schools takes a lot of time. I always think about trying to turn the Queen Mary around in the middle of the ocean; you don't just turn her on a dime. To train millions of teachers in these things when there's no real desire to do it, and in many cases I think it is a real problem. There's some good news possibly on the Reading First programs, where any state or district that accepts those funds has to use a research-based program, and for a while everything became research-based. Well, every manufacturer and publisher of programs just claimed that—often relying on anecdotal evidence—and nobody asked to see the research.

But actually kids' scores have been going up in reading nationally, since No Child Left Behind came in around 2002.

SK: *Do you think this improvement is attributable to NCLB?*

PAM: Oh yes. We've seen big changes across the country. Yet states like Connecticut have objected to the idea of testing kids annually—and I'm thinking, you mean you're not testing kids every year? All states should be testing kids, and it should begin when they're first starting school. Get in when they're in kindergarten and there shouldn't be a problem when they're in third grade. NCLB is supposed to be reauthorized this year and I don't think it will happen because Washington is so polarized. There are some attempts to water it down on one end and the other end wants to tighten it up. It will be interesting to see what happens.

SK: *Any final comments?*

PAM: The US Department of Education put out

the word to all the states that, on state assessments, teachers can no longer read the reading test to a child and have the child respond—otherwise known as a read-aloud accommodation. I've received many emails from teachers from all across the country regarding this issue.

PETE: Teachers were sincerely concerned that their students were not going to be able to pass this test because this accommodation was being taken away, and they wanted us to intervene. They didn't realize that the issue here was to teach the kids to read rather than read to the kids and call it a proper accommodation on a reading test.

PAM: If you read it and they answer then you are testing their listening and memory skills, but you're not testing reading. Maybe now, if a child doesn't pass but has passed before because of the accommodation someone will say, "We'd better be getting these kids in kindergarten or first grade" because by the time these results are coming out the child is in middle school.

SK: *We closed the last interview with Pam offering parents advice on how to advocate most effectively for their children—most notably that they should "keep their emotions in check and not throw in the towel" and "not let their children stop believing in themselves." Is there anything you'd like to add?*

PAM: Parents should realize that it doesn't take an army to make change. It's about people willing to forge closer relations with school board members. Invite them to go to breakfast and educate them. Doing that in a very systematic way makes a huge difference. School board members often don't have a background in education, and need to rely on the superintendent and other administrators who are going to tell them what they want the school board members to know in order to make decisions.

Sheryl Knapp is a literacy consultant and advocate specializing in learning disabilities. She is currently working toward her Associate level certification in the Orton-Gillingham methodology with a Fellowship of the Orton-Gillingham Academy.

Correction: In the last issue Knapp was misidentified as a Fellow of the Orton-Gillingham Academy.

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SKLD encourages parents to consult with specialists to determine the most effective course of action for their child.

Determining Eligibility: The Evaluation & Recommendation Process

by Eve Kessler, Esq.

The purpose of the evaluation/recommendations process is to identify a child's specific learning strengths, needs and concerns and to make recommendations. A problem-solving process, it involves collecting information from various resources, such as informal and formal observations, reviews of background, schoolwork and records, discussions with parents and professionals, and standardized and specialized testing. Following are tips to help you:

■ Make sure you understand at the outset **the purpose of the evaluation**: Why is it being given? What areas will be evaluated? What information will be gained? What specific tests and subtests will be used and why? Are the evaluations administered in a language, form and manner likely to yield accurate informa-

tion about your child's abilities academically, developmentally and functionally?

■ Whether you or the district initiates an evaluation and whether it is to be performed by someone from the district or by an independent professional, be familiar with the **qualifications of the evaluator**. Get recommendations from people you respect before deciding whom to use, and make sure you have input into the choice.

■ When reviewing an evaluation, **ask yourself**: Does this sound like my child? How does this compare with other evaluations? What is getting in the way of my child being able to learn? How does this impact my child's ability to be successful in school?

■ To ensure your understanding, **get a copy** of the evaluation

and recommendations and discuss them with evaluators prior to the IEP meeting. It is helpful for the evaluator to attend the IEP meeting and discuss his own report with the team.

■ An Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) is an evaluation conducted by a qualified examiner who is not employed by the school district. Parents may obtain an IEE at their own expense at any time, but they have the **right to request an IEE, at the district's expense**, if they disagree with a district's evaluation or recommendations. If the district pays for the evaluation, it is the property of the district and becomes part of your child's educational records. If you pay for the evaluation, it is your property and the results need not be shared with the school-based team.

■ If parents request an IEE at the district's expense, the district must, without unnecessary delay, either initiate a **due process hearing** to prove that its original evaluation is appropriate, or ensure that an IEE is provided at the district's expense.

■ If you share the results of the IEE with the team or if the

school pays for the evaluation, the **team must "consider" the results and recommendations** when making decisions regarding your child's educational program.

■ If new to a school system, consider informing your child's school of **past evaluations, services and supports**.

■ Prior to the IEP meeting, **provide the school with copies of the evaluations you plan to discuss**.

■ **Inform school personnel** of any services your child receives independently, outside of school. Ask that providers collaborate so everyone is on the same page.

■ Understand that the end result of the evaluation process is a **team decision** regarding eligibility and services.

■ **You are a key member** of the team and your input is valuable.

*Adapted from A Web Guide to the Special Services Partnership, published in 2006 by SPED*NET Wilton (CT) and available online at www.spednetwilton.org. Kessler is President of SPED*NET Wilton and an author of the guide.*

(((IN THE NEWS)))

Supreme Court Victory for Parents Overturning a Federal Court decision, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of parents regarding their right to sue a public school district over their child's special education needs without legal representation. Traditionally, lower courts have barred parents from appearing without a lawyer in cases filed under IDEA.

Computer Program Alleviates ADHD Problems According to a recent article in Education Week, Swedish researchers have found that a computer-based training program helps sharpen the working memory skills of children with ADHD, and in the process alleviate

some associated problems with attention, impulse control and problem-solving.

Cause or Coincidence? Cautious optimism accompanied a report of consistent gains on state test scores since the enactment of No Child Left Behind. Using three years of data, an evaluation study by the Center on Education Policy showed that test scores rose in most states. Unfortunately the upward trend does not include students with LD, results for whom were not included due to methodological limitations. The report further noted that the law cannot be identified as responsible for the improvement as there was no way to isolate the impact of any single initiative, many of which had been initiated by states prior to NCLB. The entire report is available online at www.cep-dc.org.

BOOK  EXCERPT

On Their Own

by Anne Ford with John-Richard Thompson

Writing in her new book about addressing the future for our children with LD and ADHD, Anne Ford is the friend we wish we had—someone who's been on the journey ahead of us, who speaks honestly but with compassion about the issues facing us as our children finish high school and prepare to leave home. Below are excerpts from On Their Own: Creating an Independent Future for Your Adult Child with Learning Disabilities and ADHD, a compendium of advice gleaned from Ford's own experience raising Allegra, who is now an adult living successfully on her own.

Here is a checklist of realities I have struggled to learn and accept:

■ ***I'm not alone, even though I think I am***

For some reason, parents of LD children and adults all too easily believe they are the only ones going through something like this, that no one understands, and they are destined to go through it all alone... The reality is that we are alone sometimes—even in two-parent households. Yes, there are hundreds of thousands of other parents undergoing similar trials, but right then, in the moment after you've hung up the phone after a heated argument or just learned of yet another unexpected difficulty, no amount of imagined

camaraderie helps ease the situation.

■ ***I don't know what I'm doing or if I'm doing the right thing***

This is a feeling that hovers in the background all the time. Well, guess what? No one is perfect. You're not. I'm not. No one is, and not every decision we make will be the best one, or even all that good. The reality is that no one else in your situation could do a better job than you are doing right now.

■ ***If you need help, ask for it***

Oh, what a hard lesson this was for me. I spent far too many years thinking I could handle things on my own without help from family, friends, or the professional community. Now it's quite the opposite, especially when it comes to professionals. If I don't know something, I ask. If I don't feel qualified to handle a situation or advise Allegra, I find someone who can. Don't be shy.

■ ***You don't need to know everything***

When asking for help, try not to get tangled up in insecurities about your own lack of knowledge about LD. I spent 12 years as chairman of NCLD, I raised a daughter with LD and wrote a

book about it, and I still have trouble explaining Allegra's disability when someone asks. I sometimes meet parents who understand every bit of obscure jargon and can expound at length on the very latest of research findings. And me? A phrase like "nonspecific nonverbal, global disabilities" leaves me standing still, blinking, trying like mad to appear as if I know what the heck it means. I am not denigrating these parents. Obviously, it is preferable to know as much about your child's particular situation as possible; but if you don't know or can't quite understand it, have faith that there are professionals out there who can help you.

■ ***Not everyone will understand your experience***

This is a reality that feeds our occasional sense of isolation, but it's a fact that sooner or later we all need to come to terms with. Not everyone understands our situation. Friends and relatives may nod and make sympathetic sounds, but it's almost impossible for anyone to really know what you're going through unless they have a child with LD of their own. Rather than waste emotional and intellectual energy on wishing they understood, try to channel that energy in positive ways. You can start by trying to release any lin-

gering resentments. Ask yourself this: Would you understand if the situation was reversed? (First, impulsive answer: "Of course I would!" Second, more honest answer: "Well, maybe not.") No matter how compassionate, no matter how sympathetic, only another parent in a similar situation truly knows what you are going through.

■ ***Wanting to rip someone's head off is normal, if not advisable***

Now that you've followed my advice and become a serene and tranquil person free of all resentments, what about those times when someone says something so outrageous and hurtful that you feel you really have no alternative other than to kill them and bury them in the backyard? This is when your best friend hears that your son finally has a girlfriend and reacts with a shocked, "Really? But what would she see in him?"

My personal pet peeve is when someone casually compares Allegra to someone much more disabled than she, for example someone with severe mental retardation. This often comes with a bit of unwanted advice. "Have you thought about sending her to an assisted-living home?" asked one oh so helpful friend, who knows Allegra has been doing quite well living on her own

for the last 10 years.

What do we do in such situations? Grit our teeth. Bear it. Try to remain calm and civil. Maybe try to explain the situation in a way that might help them understand, even if they are impervious to such explanations.

Then again, sometimes it's fun to just let them have it.

■ *No matter how bad things get, someone else has it worse*

You will always be able to find someone with a situation far worse than yours. I could list countless examples, but so could you. Think about it.

■ *It doesn't end*

This used to be something I refused to accept. I clung to the idea that a cure was just around the corner and someday all the difficulties would disappear. I still cling to a version of the idea in which Allegra's LD doesn't completely disappear, but we'll learn to accommodate the challenges and lessen their impact to a manage-

able and even negligible level. Wishful thinking? Maybe. But maybe not, which leads me to the next reality.

■ *Don't give up the fight*

Days, weeks, and even whole months will come along when you'll want to surrender, throw in the towel, and say, "I've had it, I quit!" This is how it happens for me. "I can't do this anymore," my interior voice says. "I'm tired—I'm really tired. I've been doing this every day for almost 35 years. I have a child who has been hovered over all her life, and now I feel like I've created an adult who still expects to be hovered over and not challenged. It would be nice if someone else could take over some of this." And so it goes, mostly when I am physically tired, but it only lasts a little while, usually overnight. The urge to surrender comes and goes. The pressures build, and with them comes fatigue, and then my mind wanders into self-pity or thoughts of escape...

Well, okay, fine—for a while. But sooner or later things settle down and the urge to surrender fades, and I once again face the daily challenges and continue to do so until the next time. Often, all it takes is for me to hear her voice.

It's a roller coaster, isn't it, this parenting thing we do? Ups, downs, unexpected curves, and sometimes unexpected heights.

■ *Learn to laugh at it all*

Remember in Reader's Digest, the section called "Laughter Is the Best Medicine?" How true that is. Humor has been a saving grace in my family, with Allegra's own sense of humor at the forefront. While all the rest of the uncaring, uncomprehending world swirls around us, we have learned to take refuge in a simple laugh at our own foibles and difficulties. I truly

don't know what life would be like for us if we didn't have this as a buffer.

Excerpted from ON THEIR OWN: Creating an Independent Future for Your Adult Child with Learning Disabilities and ADHD by Anne Ford with John-Richard Thompson. Copyright © 2007 by Anne Ford. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Newmarket Press, www.newmarketpress.com

Special Author Appearance

Ford will be discussing her book at an author's breakfast, presented by Smart Kids, on **October 18th** at the **Stamford (CT) Marriott**. For those interested in coming to the event, email info@smartkidswithld.org



THE PARENT-CHILD BOND: LEARNING TO LET GO

By the time a child reaches the final years of high school, parental encouragement or the lack of it is a given fact. It has either been there and been effective, or it hasn't. Hopefully, the first applies to your situation, but if not, is it too late? If you have come to the party late and only now realize what you should have said or done to make things better, is there action you can take to remedy the situation?

The first thing you can do, starting today, is to stop the behavior you now realize may have added to the problem. . . .

Genuine encouragement is not only desirable, it is critical. It is the most valuable thing you can give to your adult child. Let others in his world hand out the criticism and blame, as they invariably will. Your role should be that of encourager-in-chief and to be the one person your child feels understands him best. Even when you have an opinion that you feel you simply must express, you can do it in a way

that helps rather than impedes. . . .

If you already have the kind of relationship in which your child tells you everything, good for you. That can certainly make things easier, especially during difficult times. The ideal is to develop a relationship in which you talk about everything, and feel comfortable asking any question, no matter how personal. This is not an easy thing, especially for those unused to such direct communication, but you want your child to be able to talk to you about anything at all. If you can't answer your child's questions, find someone who will. Don't get overwhelmed or embarrassed or bogged down in judging the situation, and don't let it go. If a sibling or another relative can give a better answer, by all means let them try. Maybe a psychiatrist or social worker can provide the answers. It doesn't matter who, so long as the child gets the needed answer.

SKLD PROGRAM

Negotiating the College Process

by Eve Kessler, Esq.

Navigating the college process is a daunting task for any high-school student. But for students with learning disabilities or special needs, it necessitates an even greater amount of planning and preparation.

Start Early

The planning process ideally should begin in the ninth grade. Students must be part of their transition planning, attending IEP or Section 504 meetings, becoming familiar with their test results, and understanding how their disabilities impact their learning and the compensatory strategies they've developed.

You and your child should meet with the high school guidance counselor and college placement advisor early in the year to discuss the transition process and familiarize yourselves with your responsibilities.

Prepare for Admissions Tests

Accommodations, especially those needed for test-taking should be clearly delineated in your child's IEP or Section 504 Plan and recommended in the most recent psychoeducational evaluation. An up-to-date evaluation, less than three years old, must include a DSM IV diagnosis and specific recommendations targeted to address each learning challenge. If put in place early, accommodations such as extended time, a quiet environment or use of a computer will be more easily accepted for standardized college admissions tests.

Try Out College

Your child might consider a summer pre-freshman preparation program to help her understand college culture and the difference between high school and college

workloads. It will also give her an opportunity to try out her self-advocacy skills—for example, seeking out teachers for additional help as soon as she begins to struggle. If self-advocacy proves to be a problem, find ways to practice the skill before she's a true freshman.

Identify Schools

Your child must love the school and the school must be a good match for her. For example, would she prefer a vibrant city campus or a small rural campus?

There are no special education and IEPs in college. Classwork itself cannot be modified, but support is available.

Determine what accommodations your child might need and match them to those the college offers.

Some schools have formal

support programs that provide tutoring, priority registration, etc. and call for separate applications. Others offer informal support that requires students to articulate their learning disabilities to each teacher and access the services themselves. Services may include tutors, notes or note takers, readers, scribes, tape recordings of lectures, assistive technology, psychological counseling and study skills workshops.

It will be up to your child to learn whether services are provisional or guaranteed, and what documentation is required to access accommodations. She will also have to make the initial contact, register with the Office of Disability Services, and put a plan in place.

Finally, a foreign language waiver can be considered. Many colleges allow substitutions as long as the student takes five academic subjects.

SKILLS FOR COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENTS

Before College

Learn about yourself and how you learn. Are you an audio, visual or kinesthetic/tactile learner? (You'll need auditory skills to succeed.)

Improve your study habits—and be prepared to study hard.

Know grammar and basic math skills.

Develop your own shorthand for note-taking.

Improve writing skills for taking essay tests and writing papers.

Work on self-confidence. Take on tasks that appear to be harder to build self-confidence.

You are your own advocate. Learn to talk to teachers and ask for what you need.

At College

The keys to success in college are organization, time management and having realistic goals.

Register with the Office of Disability Services right away. Better to have paperwork in place and never need it than to need it and not be able to access it.

The first semester is a transition. Have a study plan. Set a goal to pass your classes and avoid academic probation.

Seek help as soon as you begin classes. Know where your tutoring center is and who can give you the extra help you need.

(Adapted from the recommended skill list of Manhattanville College Disability Services)

*This article is based on information presented by Educational Advisor Geraldine C. Fryer, CEP, Jean Baldassare, Director of Disability Services, Manhattanville College, Purchase, NY, Dr. Fran Apfel, Director of Disability Services, Norwalk (CT) Community College and parents Joan Blackman Weaving and Nora Jinishian, at a presentation sponsored by Smart Kids. Eve Kessler, Esq. is President of SPED*NET Wilton (CT) and a Contributing Editor of Smart Kids.*

MY
SAY

From Kindergarten to College

Learning to Let Go

by Judi Bernstein

When my son was in kindergarten I told his teacher that something wasn't right. He was the only child in his class who couldn't fill in the rhyming word. I was told I was the overbearing mother of an only child and that it was just developmental; he'd catch up.

For first grade, I followed my instincts and sent him to a private school. He couldn't rhyme or recognize sight words, had difficulty with sequencing and was very aggressive. When he was evaluated, they told me he'd have to go to a special school for kids with LD. But Alec said, "You're not going to make me go to a different school, are you?" I told him and them no, and hired a tutor to work with him three days a week after school.

When we moved to a new community the following year, Alec was reevaluated. He had trou-

ble with memory, word retrieval, sequencing, handwriting, math and reading. I was told he had NLD and dyslexia. When I asked, "But what will I tell my child?" the school psychologist said, "You'll tell him he has learning disabilities."

I didn't want to do that. I'd been told I had learning disabilities as a child, and I was afraid he'd be as broken by his educational experience as I was. Instead I told him he was a bright, smart, funny kid and that it was a good thing we learned early on about his different learning style so we could teach him in the way he needed to learn.

I did everything in my power to alleviate the pressure so he wouldn't be afraid to go to school. In middle school, I read him just enough of a new book to get him

into a story. I scribed for him. We worked on social skills. When he got anxious, we'd talk about the "what ifs." What if I can't get it right? What if I get lost? We'd get in front of his anxieties by talking them out ahead of time. And when we locked horns, I told him I'd back off and become his consultant, letting him take control since he had proven to be responsible, smart and able to navigate his bumpy road. It was time to start letting go.

Alec is very competitive and his friends were hugely successful. When he wanted out of Special Ed, I agreed. I knew he could advocate for himself, and I'd have done anything to earn the money needed for a private tutor. When he was told he couldn't take algebra with his friends in eighth grade, he asked to take an algebra readiness test and went in every morning before school for extra help. He completed algebra I in eighth grade and moved on to geometry in high school. That was the beginning of his success.

In high school, we kept him in Special Ed for the first months with the same accommodations as before, including extended time, a laptop in the classroom and an agreement that his teachers would not call on him unless he raised his hand. But it soon became clear

that he knew how to learn. He charmed his teachers and was successful even in honors calculus and AP physics—with many early-morning visits for extra help. I'd never have believed he'd make the honor roll every term.

The high school guidance department tried to dumb down his choice of college, but he was determined to apply to every college offering a major in theater lighting. He got into every school he applied to with the exception of his safety and one school at which he was wait-listed. I had to let go of my concern and let him do what he has a passion for.

Alec will be a senior at DePaul University this fall. He has done well in every course except rendering, due to his visual-spatial issues. As he left to design lighting for a touring opera company in Italy this summer, he got word from DePaul that he has received the Susan & Bob Wislow Scholarship—an award based on criteria including professional potential, discipline and collaboration.

As Alec moves forward along his career path, I suspect he will continue to find the success he has experienced in the past. In my view, this is primarily due to our support for his intellect, his independence and his passion.

States Receive Federal Grade for IDEA Compliance

States recently received their first federal report cards judging them on how well they implement IDEA, particularly the \$10.5 billion program that provides students with specialized programs to fit their educational needs. The AP reported the following results:

- Just nine states were in full compliance with the program—Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Michigan, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia and Wyoming.
- Remaining states were labeled as "needs assistance" or "needs inter-

vention." If they don't improve within a few years, they could face the loss of federal aid.

- Ensuring that students with disabilities have a smooth transition from the public school setting to college or into the work force proves problematic. The law says 16-year-old special ed students are supposed to receive help developing plans for life after public school. The department concluded that more thought and work needs to go into those plans.
- State oversight regarding local school districts' compliance was found to be weak.

Preventing First-Day Stress

by Beth Margolin

Starting a new school year often is accompanied by feelings of excitement mixed in with a sizeable dose of first-day jitters. Here are five ways to minimize day-one stress and help your child start the school year off right:

1. Don't over-promise

Every school year I feel the need to talk up how this year will be the best one yet in order to spark some excitement and reduce anxiety in my child. Don't do it. Each year is a bit more challenging, so it's better to remind your child how he overcame certain difficulties last year, and discuss upcoming

hurdles as challenges you can work through together.

2. Check out the school and the teacher

Along with your child, visit her school a few days before the semester begins to do a walk-through. Go to her classroom and acquaint (or reacquaint) her with the building. Perhaps you can even schedule a five-minute greeting with her new teacher. Seeing the school and her classroom beforehand will help prepare her mentally and eliminate some of that first-day-of-school stress.

3. Speak with the teacher

Don't let your child be a learning disability on a piece of paper. Call his teacher as soon as school begins, and share with her the things that have worked and not worked for your child in the past. The teacher may already know that he shouldn't read out loud, but tell her how much he loves to share his vast knowledge in science or art.

4. Find a friend

Get on the mommy hotline to see if you can find out who is in your child's class. One friendly face,

even if it's not a great pal, can help reduce the stress of the first day.

5. Build in free time

With more homework, sports, religious school, music practice, and tutors, it's easy to over-schedule your child. Make sure you set aside a few hours a week to do nothing. She may use that time to talk with you about what's going on at school, so you can continue to be there to support her.

Beth Margolin's son is starting fourth grade this fall.

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