



EPISODE # 16

How To Close Out Summer And Prepare For The New School Year

A purposeful conversation with Nicole Bovell

Chantai: Welcome back to another “special conversation” and thank you for tuning on to Parenting Special Needs Podcast. I’m your host Chantai, and today we’re talking with Nicole Bovell about ways to close out summer and prepare for the new school year. Nicole is a long time advocate of the special education community and the author of “The Journey of Special Education and How To Have a Great School Year.” She also has a Master of Arts in Special Education, an Education Specialist degree in teaching and learning, and 22 years of experience teaching and working with students with a variety of disabilities. So, welcome Nicole and thank you. I have to share, first of all, because Nicole sent me (well her publicist sent me) her books. I get quite a few, but this little one was so cute. I’m like, okay I can take a look at that one, but then I loved it. I was thinking, “Okay, thank goodness she sent me a second one because I’m not giving one away.” I certainly enjoyed it and that’s what made me decide I wanted to reach out and speak with you.

CJS: I thought you could share with other people and families what do you think parents can do to prepare for the upcoming school year? What would you recommend?

Nicole Bovell: Well, one of the things I would suggest is reading over your child’s IEP. That is one of the biggest things, and just making sure you understand the IEP before the school year begins. This way, if you had any questions, you could always ask at the beginning of the school year. Sometimes parents wait, and then the school year is halfway over, or they wait until their IEP meeting is scheduled during the year to ask questions, and that’s the LAST time to do that. You want to ask them in the beginning, so you understand what’s going on during the school year.

NB: Then, you also want to kind of close out the summer activities. Anything that your child is involved in like therapy, or even ESY, reviewing that data to make sure you can see what they accomplished during the school year. Then, for the children that have a hard time with transitioning, I would suggest to count down to the school year. Make it exciting and new, and you can have a fun calendar, you can do a party or something like that to celebrate the start of a brand new school year. These are fun really for the kids who struggle with transitioning from one placement to the next.

CJS: Which a lot of our children do, so I think that’s really important. It is more about starting the routine earlier.



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NB: Yes, I definitely agree. Before the first day of school, you should start maybe a couple of weeks before that, making sure they're getting up in time, you could start your whole routine. Children and adults, you tend to get lazy over the summer, and then you've got to get back into the routine when the school year begins. You want to make sure that their routine is starting; not the first day of school, but a week or two before. Then something else is meeting with the child's teacher. A lot of school districts do a "pre-back-to-school" night. The district where I used to work, we called it a "sneak a peak." The parents got to come in the week before school began to meet the teacher and to visit the classroom, so they understood the classroom that their child was going to attend, and also the teacher that they were going to be with that school year. A lot of school districts are starting those things, so it's something that you can look into and check out to see if your school district is doing.

CJS: Okay, no, I love that. I think that's great. You were saying, what about the ESY and the progress reports? I don't think I've ever gotten an ESY progress report.

NB: Well, you should have.

CJS: Yeah, I should have.

NB: Because your child is ... the teacher is recording data during that ESY period. When you are preparing your IEP for ESY goals and objectives, certain goals and objectives are selected. Those are the things that are going to be worked on during the summer. So, the teacher should be taking data on the goals and objectives that are in the IEP for ESY. So, essentially, after the ESY is over, you should get a progress report to see what your child did, or didn't do, during the summer. Every parent should definitely get some type of data, a progress report. Like I said, the school district I used to work at, we had to print a progress report at the end of ESY and it went home with the child on the last day of school.

CJS: Wow. Yeah. I don't think I've ever gotten one. That's not good. I think that's a good point, so I'm glad you said that.

NB: You want to know what they did.

CJS: Right. You mentioned in the book, too, something else I liked about "take the time now", which I thought, was really important, to get organized. I think that's something that we're always, I'll speak for myself, "going to do it." But then, you know, now it's IEP time, and oh my gosh I have to do it, it's tomorrow. If I'm similar to a lot of other parents, what would you recommend there?



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NB: Well, gathering all the documents, your IEPs, you always get a copy, whether it's a physical copy or a lot of times now the schools are giving out electronic copies, so if you're doing this on your computer (having a folder), so you're organizing the IEPs, and any other paperwork...medical documents. Anything that is related to your child. I would say to keep the IEPs unless it's a specific issue, I would say to keep the last three years. Then you can kind of purge after that. Also, you should organize the classwork. All the documents that you have, so you can compare from last year to the current school year. You can see if there's any growth. Because sometimes you may say, "oh there's not really any growth" but then you look back and you can see there has been some growth, or you can prove that there may not have been any growth. You want to make sure you organize all that school work. You're flooded with a lot of documents during the IEP, you get all types of stuff, and you always want to make sure everything's in order just in case you do have a problem you have all your ducks in a row.

CJS: I want to just make sure I'm clear: It would not be just the documents that we're getting from the school with the progress reports and the IEPs, but even samplings of the child's work, so we could see-

NB: Yeah, work samples.

CJS: Work samples. Okay, gotcha.

NB: From year-to-year.

CJS: Right. I think you already talked about transitioning to a new school, or a new teacher; but what about if it's a new school, what about if it's a new teacher?

NB: Well, if it's a new teacher or a new school, again, I would suggest trying to meet the teacher before the school year begins, because if you wait until the beginning, on the first day, your child may have difficulties, may have a meltdown, or whatever is the case. If your school district does not offer that, then I would say that on the first day of school just preparing them and making sure, you know, hey you're going to have a new teacher. You should hopefully know their name, and you can give them their name, and even if they are on a new bus route, maybe getting in your car and riding down the path with them. Pointing out things you're going to see on the bus, you're going to pass this on the bus, just so they can have some type of familiarity, so when the first day of school starts, it's not all brand new.

CJS: What do you think are the most important things that parents should know about an IEP?



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NB: Oh, goodness. I would say the whole thing.

CJS: I agree, but it's difficult.

NB: Yes, I know, it's very difficult. I would say one of the first things is the present levels of performance. That is basically the summary of what your child actually knows, and any struggles that they're having. Their strengths, their weaknesses, what behaviors they're experiencing, if they have a medical issue, if they have any speech issues, OT issues, this is all in the beginning, it's called the present levels of performance. It's all in the beginning of the IEP; because that is basically what's going to drive the goals and objectives. The goals and objectives are from where your child is, their strengths and their weaknesses. You want to make sure you have a clear understanding of where your child is, you know? You've got to know what they know, and you've got to know what they need help with. And then once you know that, you have a clear understanding, then you should be able to ... Because you are a part of the IEP as a parent, you should be able to understand their goals and objectives, because that is basically what is going to be happening in the classroom. That's driving instruction. You want to make sure you have an understanding of what your child is supposed to be learning in the classroom. Then you want to also know their accommodations. Any specific things that they may need help in, any modifications they may need help in the classroom. And then, essentially their placement, because this is where everything is going to be taking place. So, what setting are they in? Are they in a co-taught setting, or is this a self-contained classroom? There's a continuum of services, so you want to make sure you understand each service, so you know when you get to the placement in the IEP meeting, you know when the IEP team is talking about a certain placement, you know what that means.

CJS: Right. Okay. Well, since you were talking about that, too, I had a question because you phrased it differently in your book than I had heard it, and I read it, but I needed to go back and re-read it. But, can you explain the differences between accommodations and modifications? I thought the way that you explained it was really good, and in my 21 years in this process I had not heard it that way.

NB: Yeah, I know. Sometimes people use it interchangeably, and they're two separate things. Accommodation is something that helps your child to learn in the classroom, what everybody else is learning. Your child may need to sit closer to the teacher, and that could be an accommodation, that could help them focus more; or your child may need a pencil grip, with OT, they may have some fine motor deficits and they may need something like that. That would be an accommodation to help them there. That's helping them to learn what everybody else is learning in the classroom, but the teacher is accommodating them in a specific way.



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When you get to modifications, that's when you're changing the curriculum. You're modifying the curriculum. Some states have, with standardized testing, a modified standardized test. For instance, in math, they may instead of just a simple word problem, they may add some pictures, specific pictures, for the modified standardized test, because you're modifying that word problem in order for them to solve it. That's why they're two separate things.

CJS: All right. I'm just going to throw this out there because I asked somebody the other day and they didn't know, but I thought maybe you might know, neither one of us knew. Do you know if they've ever modified the GED?

NB: I've never heard of them modifying the GED. I thought it was still the same.

CJS: It may be, that was a "throw out there" question...

NB: I've never heard of the modification of the GED.

CJS: The reason I'm asking is because a couple years ago they changed it so our kids could get standard diplomas, or modified standard diplomas, but still everyone is going to graduate now with a standard diploma. My daughter was just on the cusp of that. I was talking to a mother the other day, and her son didn't get it. He just graduated, kind of, with a diploma that said, basically, "you were in school." He didn't get a degree. She was saying she tried the GED, but he couldn't pass the math test, and it was just so stressful. It made me think, for those older population of kids that are out there with no certificate, it's hard for them to get jobs, maybe they should modify the GED.

NB: I definitely agree. I'm going to look into that after this, because that's a good question. I've just never heard of them modifying it.

CJS: And I don't think they have. I just figured ... back to what you were saying, just so I can clear it up in my own mind, accommodations would be the pencil grip and different things that they need to make them more successful in the classroom. Modification would be where they're altering the curriculum, such as using a different curriculum, like unique learning systems or different things like that, that help them process it or understand it better?

NB: Yeah. Because you want them basically to be successful with their curriculum, but they just may need a little tweak, a little tweak about it in order for them ... They're still learning, it's just they may need a little tweak in order for them to understand it better.



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CJS: Got it. This issue too, I think, I was telling you, we were talking about the pros and cons of public versus private schools. Do you have any experience, or advice, or tips you could share on that, or the different school settings based on your experience?

NB: Well, based on my experience, I think there are pros and cons to both. Right now, there are a lot of private therapeutic schools opening for special needs students, and one of the pros about that is everybody's on the same page. All the teachers, they understand...the type of environment, they understand special needs children. But when you're in a public school your child is in a classroom in a public school, so everybody's not on the same page. So, when your child is going out to specials, they're going to gym, or they're going to music, a lot of times, unfortunately, these teachers, they don't understand special needs children; especially when it comes to behavior. I've had a lot of issues with, just in my experience with the students that I had, if it was any type of behavior some teachers didn't understand behaviors that were because of their disability, and then behaviors because it was the child. Those are two separate things. When you're in a private school that is just for special needs children, it's a great thing because like I said, everybody is on the same page. When you're in a public school, unfortunately, everybody is not on the same page.

But then you have to ... the flip side is, with private schools you typically will have to pay for it, unless, some parents can get the public school district to pay for it, but that process is not an easy process, because you have to prove that the public school district is not providing your child FAPE (a Free, Appropriate, Public Education). In order to go down that route, if when you're in an IEP meeting and you guys are in disagreement, then you most likely are going to have to file due process in order to go down that route. It's one of those things ... You always have the option of sending your child to a private school, and I've just recently ... I've had three parents that I've been as an advocate for, they want the school district to pay for the private school, but it's one of those battles that you've got to be prepared to walk down.

CJS: Yeah. Wow. Okay, that is rough. I was going to say too, is there not in New Jersey ... there's not scholarships? I know in Florida, there are two different scholarships that people can apply for to kind of get to go to a private school that benefits your child.

NB: There are. There's also, in New Jersey, they also have public special needs schools, which is a good thing. It's more for students who are on the lower spectrum, but they do have ... They are public schools, so if you need it, if your child needed to go to a specialty school they have that in New Jersey also.



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CJS: I see. Okay, so let's see. I think you've answered a bunch of my questions. If we want to get back to telling our listeners, all right, I'm going to throw it out there, three tips ... I'm trying to figure out, let's close out summer because it's July, which it'll probably take us until the end of July and August to do whatever you suggest, if most of them are like me, which I'm assuming they are. So, what would be your top three tips to get people ready for the new school year, for parents to get ready for the new school year?

NB: Well, again, I'm going to say it, my number one tip is to read over the IEP. Whatever the last IEP was, make sure you read over that, and part of the IEP is the ESY progress, and hopefully ... you said you never received it, but hopefully other parents have received ESY progress, so you have an understanding of exactly where your child left off at the end of the school year, so you know where they're going in the beginning. One of the reasons I also say that is just in case the school year begins, and say, for instance, your child's IEP is not being followed, maybe they're in a different placement, or maybe they're not getting the accommodations they were supposed to be getting, you wouldn't know that if you didn't know what was in your child's IEP. Unfortunately, some parents they don't really pay attention to that. They just kind of leave it up to the school district, but that's something that you need to do. The second tip I would say is to prepare your child for that transition; especially if it's a new school, if it's a new classroom, then you want to make sure you're preparing them. Over the summer talking, "oh you're going to have a new teacher, you've got to go to a new school." You can use a social story if your child responds to social stories, just to make sure that they understand that they are going to school. Also, you can have fun with going school shopping, or something just to make it fun and entertaining; especially for the little ones, to get them excited. The third tip is organization, like we talked about; just organizing everything so you have everything in order. You don't want to start the school year just kind of all over the place, you want to start it on the right foot.

CJS: Yeah. No, I think that's excellent. No, I appreciate it. Where would people find out more about you?

NB: You can visit my website at www.beyondspecialeducation.com. You can go on the website, and there is a bunch of information about me, other resources. And, if you are in the New Jersey, New York area, I also do a lot of advocacy consulting for parents.

CJS: Great. And you have your book, because I'm telling you I really loved this little book; it was short and "to-the-point" its simple and I can do it. We're all crazy, busy parents and we try to do the best we can, and sometimes you just need that reminder. I liked that your book was simple, and that you



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also ... Honestly, you guys, I know she's not telling me ... We didn't get together because I'm plugging her book, even though I'm plugging her book. But, it's 50 pages, and I like the page that she gave me tips at the end, like okay do this, and it was like, okay. As a mom, even though I've been in the game a long time, I like that gentle reminder and points.

NB: Yeah, that's why I kept it really simple, because a lot of this stuff is so confusing. A lot of parents just have so many questions. I just wanted to keep it really simple, so parents can really ... It's easy to read, easy to follow, so even if you do have more questions after it, this will give you a good foundation in order to get started with the school year.

CJS: I have to recommend ... I appreciate what you do because that's exactly what you did. It was like okay, gosh, I feel like I can start off on the right foot. She talks about inclusion in here, and a lot of things, just to make people aware, in a simplified way, to get going and take action, and everything. So, thank you. Check out her book you guys, you won't be disappointed. I can't thank you enough for sharing with us. I know this is my first time meeting you, so thank you for having a conversation with me.

NB: Thank you for inviting me. I really appreciate it.

CJS: All right, well, thank you so much for sharing with us today.

NB: Thank you for contacting me.

CJS: Thank you all for tuning in and listening, I hope you will take action on the three tips Nicole recommend so you can start your child's school year off on the right foot.

Chantai: Thank you for listening
I can't wait to connect with you again next week. Until then... bye for now.

Talk to you soon