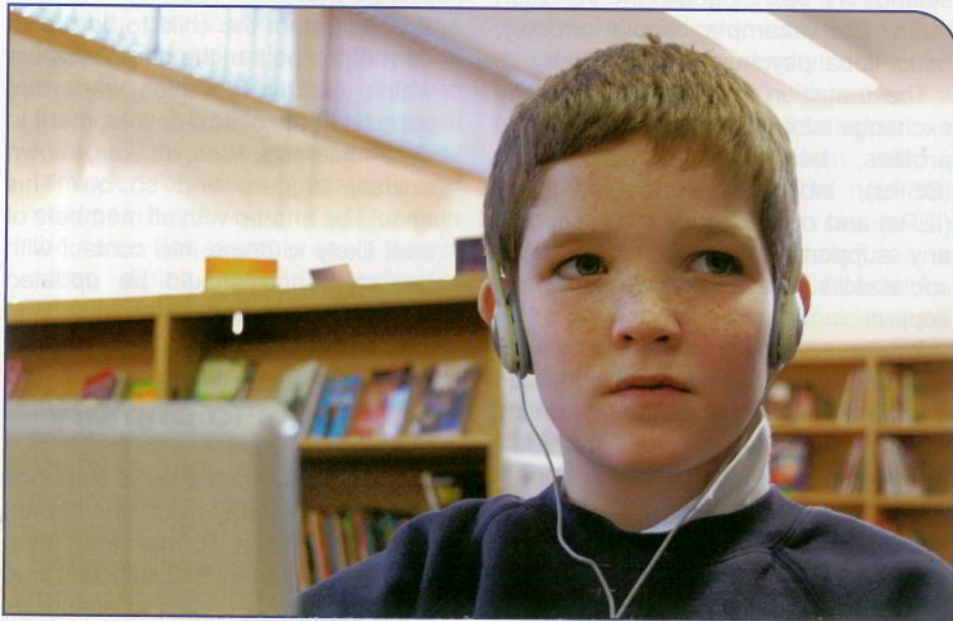


# Facing change

What are the best ways to ease transition for pupils with autism? Alice Stobart has some recommendations



The Autism Education Trust (AET) believes that planning, individualised support and information sharing can result in smoother transitions for children and young people with autism.

The word 'transition' has become a watchword among professionals supporting children with additional needs and is particularly relevant in the education sector. It means 'change' or 'movement' and knowledge of its impact on children and young people

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on the autism spectrum is essential if an effective package of support is to be delivered. Yet life is a constant stream of change and movement – transition is not just about major changes that occur in phases throughout life. There are many transitions during a child's typical day – for example, from one task to another; from one room to another; from home to school or college; from inside to outside or from class time to breaktime. As life moves from babyhood to childhood to adolescence to adulthood, many transitions occur

along the way – from home to nursery, to school, to secondary school, to college and to life beyond.

So how do we differentiate between transitions requiring a little support and those which may need a more planned approach? The devil, as they say, is in the detail and before such distinctions can be made, we must first understand the nature of autism and the way in which it affects the individual with whom we are working.

Autism is a lifelong disability. It affects around 1% of the population without discrimination. Its causes are unknown and there is no 'cure'. Any type of change is difficult for many people on the autism spectrum. This is because of impairment in flexibility of thought, and anxiety linked to the unknown, common in many people with autism. People on the autism spectrum have difficulties in predicting what might happen in a new setting so prefer to stick with what is familiar. Difficulties in social understanding mean that a person with autism is likely to take longer to understand the expectations and social rules of a new environment or social situation. And due to difficulty in 'reading' and interpreting social cues,

a person with autism may not know how to respond or how to behave in many common social environments. The need for routine and familiarity leads to anxiety when interruptions occur, meaning that any type of transition can be challenging.

## Considerations for success

When planning a package of transition support for any stage in a child's learning pathway, it is essential to understand the individual. Autism affects people in many different ways and to varying degrees – what may have worked for Oscar last term may not be suitable for Olivia this term.

- > All staff supporting an individual should have an understanding of autism, and training should be put in place to ensure this.
- > It is essential that information is shared between one setting and the next during a transition phase. A pupil profile can help this process – it is a document which outlines key facts about an individual and highlights points to consider and can follow the pupil throughout their learning pathway.
- > Staff supporting an individual need to understand how that person communicates. Considerations may be the need for explicit, often visual, instructions; the need for tasks to be broken down into manageable steps; and the need for more processing time than the rest of the peer group.
- > Staff supporting an individual need to be aware of, and consistently implement, special measures to support the child. These may include movement breaks, time out cards and specific strategies such as a different lunch routine or a visual schedule. There should be synergy between the person's needs and the support given to meet them, and the support package should be regularly reviewed and updated.





can be made up of a variety of individuals, most often including parents/carers, staff/professionals from the previous setting and staff and professionals from the new setting. Often 'outside' professionals who are not from either setting but who will support the young person across settings will be included in the transition team (for example, social worker, educational psychologist, therapists).

The transition team should regularly exchange information through individual profiles, behaviour support plans (BSPs), individual education plans (IEPs) and other documents explaining any support strategies, for example social skills groups and communication support.

The transition team should also work together to prepare an individualised transition pack for the young person, with information and materials (presented in an appropriate format making it easy for them to access) to help them understand the transition process and familiarise them with any changes. Visits to the new setting, photos, maps, a workbook, staff information, prompt cards and Social Stories could all be included in the individual's transition pack to help prepare the young person for the move.

### Moving into an early years setting

All children require a certain amount of planned preparation for their first experience of formal education, whether this is at a nursery, pre-school, playgroup or a specialist nursery setting. However, if a child has an early diagnosis of autism he or she is likely to require a more structured approach to transition.

There are several things to be considered as priorities:

- > Nursery and support staff to have prior knowledge of autism and ideally to have attended specific training such as the National Autism Society help! or EarlyBird programmes with the parents/carers of the child.
- > Home visits to be carried out by nursery staff to see the child in a familiar environment and to speak to the parents about specific requirements.
- > Visits to the early years setting for the

child and parents/carers to attend sample sessions such as snack time, circle time and sharing time.

- > Photobook to be prepared by nursery staff for the child with images and labels of staff, activities and key areas of the setting, such as lunch table, doll corner, sandpit and playground.
- > Pen portrait of the child to be drawn up with the help of the parents/carers which clearly identifies important aspects of the child's development to date – interests, likes, dislikes, known anxiety triggers and so on. This should be shared with all members of staff likely to come into contact with the child and should be updated regularly by parents/carers and nursery staff.

### Early years to primary school

This may be the first time a child has faced a transition from the home environment to a formal education setting. It is important that sufficient time and support are set aside to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. Including parents/carers in this process is essential and as much should be done as possible to include the child in the decisions made about his/her first experience of school.

**A familiar adult should accompany the child to sample various sessions**

The following should be considered as part of the transition process:

- > Transition visits to the new school – a familiar adult should accompany the child to sample various sessions, including assembly, structured lessons, lunch and playtime.
- > A transition pack – this should be developed for the child, including photos and an 'all about my new school' booklet.
- > Plenty of opportunities for the child to meet the new teacher(s), teaching assistant/learning support staff.
- > Transition planning with parents and early years staff – this should include a pupil pen portrait, BSP, sharing of documents/information and two-way transition visits (ie

- > It is important that staff have realistic and appropriate expectations of the young person on the autism spectrum. The profile of the person may initially make it difficult to gauge their capabilities or they may have extreme ability in some areas, while experiencing real difficulties in others.
- > The best ways to gather information about a young person include: observation and discussions with the individual; discussions with the parents and carers and other professionals who have worked with them personally; past reports and supporting documents.

Beyond these general considerations, more detailed planning steps can be taken to ease transitions for pupils on the autism spectrum. Depending on the individual and the type of transition you are planning for, a 'transition team' may be necessary to ensure effective information sharing and timely intervention. This is particularly important when a child is changing schools or settings.

### Transition teams

The role of a transition team is to ensure that information about an individual is shared and that plans are implemented to facilitate as smooth a transition period as possible. The team should consider what support must be provided to reduce anxieties where possible and should agree which transitions are most relevant and important for an individual. The team



- > primary staff to visit the child in the early years setting and vice versa).
- > An initial focus on 'learning to learn' behaviours (IEP targets should reflect this), for example listening to the teacher, adult-directed tasks, sitting for longer periods and so on.
- > The annual class-to-class transition (following initial transition to school) should be facilitated with the following considerations: information transfer; visits for the child to the new classroom; personal introductions to any new staff; visual reminders of new expectations and changes but also what will remain the same (for example same peers, same dining room); transfer of attachment and allegiance; transfer of classroom; support on the first day; allowance for purposeful return (for example, delivering a note to the previous teacher).
- > The NAS help! and EarlyBird Plus programmes (recommended for parents). Staff should access Inclusion Development Programme resources for children on the autism spectrum.

### Primary to secondary school

This change in environment and learning ethos is a challenge for all young people. However, those on the autism spectrum may find the shift from primary to secondary setting particularly disruptive. They should be allowed sufficient time and support to get to know the new environment, staff and, importantly, the new expectations which will be placed on them in secondary settings. Furthermore, the secondary setting will require transition support for more regular changes throughout the school day – movement between classrooms, differences in daily/weekly timetables, expectations of homework and so on.

Some of the following may be applied to these more regular transitions if additional support is required but it is essential for all school staff to understand the ways in which autism affect an individual child and be prepared to offer appropriate help, advice and support.

- > Provide a map of the new school building(s); colour code subjects and

classrooms; highlight important areas such as the dining hall, lockers, form room.

- > Make the timetable easy to use for the individual – introduce a colour-code system if this would help.
- > Create daily checklists so that the correct items are taken to/from school according to daily activities.
- > Create a user-friendly diary for organising homework – again, use a colour-code system if this helps.
- > Set up a 'buddy system' with a designated peer/group to help the individual move between classes.
- > Assign a member of staff as a mentor to help in times of crisis (for the pupil to call upon should he/she become anxious over, for example, losing dinner money). The same person could be the home-school liaison.
- > Plan for a consistent approach between all lessons. A staff communication system (in diary form) may be useful to pass on information. Remember to consider a BSP or pupil profile.
- > Make provision for a 'chill out' space for an individual to withdraw to when necessary.
- > Consider procedures for break and lunchtimes which can often be the most stressful time of the day. Options include a circle of friends or a lunch club as a way to structure these times. However, be vigilant about bullying – pupils on the autism spectrum can be easy targets.

### Beyond secondary school

Moving beyond statutory education services requires further planning and support for most young people on the autism spectrum. The Autism Education Trust's *Transition toolkit* provides further guidance on this and includes an insightful case study from Joshua Muggleton, a young man with Asperger syndrome currently studying psychology at St Andrews University.

### Access the right information and support

Whatever the transition phase, deciding on the best approach for an



individual at as early a stage as possible is essential to safeguard the child's future in education services. This should be done in collaboration with all those involved in the child's education, including parents/carers and wider health and social care professionals if relevant. You can find help and support from a range of organisations, and several valuable resources are published online.

The full AET *Transition toolkit* can be downloaded from the AET website at [www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/)

In addition to this I would recommend the following for help and support:

- > The Inclusion Development Programme (IDP) (supporting pupils on the autism spectrum) – <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/165037/>
- > Mencap Transition Guide – [www.mencap.org.uk/transitionguide/](http://www.mencap.org.uk/transitionguide/)
- > Transition Information Network – [www.transitioninfonetwork.org.uk/](http://www.transitioninfonetwork.org.uk/)
- > National Autistic Society help! and EarlyBird programmes – [www.autism.org.uk/](http://www.autism.org.uk/)

Alice Stobart works on a consultancy basis for the Autism Education Trust and is Senior Consultant for the National Autistic Society Education Support Service. She is author of several publications including the AET's *Transition toolkit*.

### Further information

If you would like to receive regular updates from the Autism Education Trust via an e-newsletter please email [info@autismeducationtrust.org.uk](mailto:info@autismeducationtrust.org.uk) with the subject 'Subscribe'. To find out more about AET resources call 020 7903 3650 or visit [www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/)