

Chapter 8: Transition Planning

Students with autism spectrum disorders often have difficulty with transitions. It is hard for them to take in all the information presented by a new situation, determine expectations and generate appropriate responses. As a result, even minor transitions are often difficult and result in increased anxiety and inappropriate or resistant behaviours. Transitions should be carefully and thoughtfully planned. This includes transitions between activities and settings throughout the day, from grade to grade, from school to school and beyond school.

All programs and environments involve transition and change. The goal is to help students cope with these changes and adapt to a variety of settings. Anxiety can often be decreased and inappropriate behaviours prevented or reduced if students are prepared for change and transition. The strategies for communication development and suggestions for instructional approaches in Chapter 5 can be used to help students understand and cope with change.

Transition into the School System

School staff and parents should plan well in advance for the child's entry into kindergarten. Various organizations recommend that February of the preceding school year is a good time to begin this process. Often these children have been in preschools, child care programs or child development programs. A range of support services may be in place before kindergarten.

Parents often seek reassurance that supports from preschool years will continue in kindergarten. Teachers may need to explain the differences between previous services and school-based support services. A school-based team meeting that includes school staff, parents and professionals can be arranged to share important information. This ensures that families' goals are communicated to the school, and helps school districts plan resources for the next school year. Parents must give permission for other service providers to share information with school staff.

Parents may wish to visit classrooms and talk to teachers ahead of time. For some children, several visits to the new setting may be appropriate, so that they can begin to become familiar with the new environment. For others, a gradual introduction to school in the fall may ease this challenging transition.

Transitions Between Activities and Settings

Use schedules

To minimize anxiety about change, give students ample warning before transitions. Use schedules to prepare students for changes in activities. It is important to involve students in referring to the schedule. Go through the schedule giving a description of what to expect. This can be done at the beginning of the day, as well as at transition times.

Schedules vary in complexity and length, and should be tailored to the abilities of individual students. They can be written, or have pictures/pictographs or objects depicting certain activities. Implement a method that indicates completion of an activity, such as turning over a picture card or crossing out an activity.

It is often helpful to use consistent language to refer to scheduled activities. For instance, using words such as “first” and “then” on a regular basis facilitates both smooth transitions and language comprehension.

Some students handle schedule disruptions and change much more effectively if they are warned well in advance. It may be helpful to make a calendar that highlights special events, such as field trips and sports days, so they can anticipate the change.

Provide signals

Schedules may not be sufficient to prepare students for change. Some teachers provide students with a consistent symbol or an object that will be used in the next activity to help them understand what is coming next. For example, when preparing to go to the lunchroom, students can be shown their lunch boxes. Using a watch, clock or timer may also help students understand when transitions will occur. Verbal warnings, e.g., “two more minutes” or “one more turn,” can help students to realize that an activity change is forthcoming. It is essential that the warning be used on a consistent basis and not be used out of context. For instance, if a student’s backpack is used to signal that it is time to go home, the student may display distress when given the backpack prior to an outing.

Use social stories

Social stories, especially when accompanied by photographs or pictures, are effective in preparing some students for change. A social story should provide specific information about what the transition involves, e.g., details about the activity, description of the new environment. Visual cues, used in combination with verbal instructions, can help students understand what is expected.

Provide choices

Whenever possible, give students opportunities to make decisions regarding which activities are to be completed and/or the order in which they will be attempted. In some situations, students do not have any say about whether or not they want to engage in an activity. However, it is often possible to build in choices to allow them some input in how the activity will be completed, e.g., “Where do you want to sit?” “Which pencil do you want to use?”.

Transitions Between Grade Levels

When preparing for the annual transition between grades in elementary school, it is necessary to prepare both students and receiving teachers. Preparation should begin in early spring of the preceding year. The same kinds of issues need to be addressed when students are moving to a new class in the school or to a new community.

Prepare classroom staff

Receiving teachers should be provided with information about student strengths and needs. This can be facilitated through team meetings involving teachers, parents and teacher assistants. Receiving teachers may also need general information about autism spectrum disorders and the educational implications. It may be beneficial for the receiving teachers and teacher assistants to visit students in their current classrooms in order to observe:

- how they behave
- the current routine and organizational structure
- successful adaptations and modifications to the environment and curriculum
- visual systems used to support students
- effective instructional strategies
- students’ levels of participation in the activities and social life of the class.

Ideally, a planning meeting should be conducted to exchange information as well as to discuss goals for subsequent IPPs, and instructional strategies and approaches that have proven effective.

Potential topics include:

- effective ways to motivate
- students' likes and dislikes
- sensory-related issues, e.g., stimuli students over- or under-react to
- effective behaviour management strategies or crisis intervention plans
- safety-related issues, e.g., running away, eating inedible objects
- pertinent health issues, e.g., how students communicate illness, allergies, description of seizures.

The planning meeting generally provides parents and teachers with an opportunity to discuss goals, instructional strategies, curricular modifications, methods for maintaining appropriate behaviour, and ways to encourage communication and peer interaction. It is preferable to conduct the meeting before the end of the current school year. Preparing a short videotape of students for receiving teachers is a creative way to provide information. Ask parents for permission to tape their children.

Prepare students

Prepare students for new classroom settings by showing them videotapes or photographs of new teachers and classrooms. It may be helpful to prepare scrapbooks that students can refer to over the summer. Whenever possible, visits to future classrooms should be scheduled. To reduce anxiety, a familiar person should accompany students.

Current staff can help make transitions to new classes positive by ensuring familiar objects accompany students to new classrooms. Current teachers and receiving teachers should work together to plan activities and privileges for students in the new setting. As with all future events, students with autism spectrum disorders need to know what to expect. Prepare a calendar that clarifies when visits to the new setting will occur and when students will be moving.

Transitions Between Schools

Suggestions for facilitating transitions between classrooms are also applicable to planning for transitions between schools. However, additional time and preparation may be required as students need to adjust to new buildings as well as new classrooms. If the transition is from elementary to junior high school, students may need to be prepared for:

- multiple teachers
- moving between different classes
- having different classmates for each subject
- using lockers to store belongings
- having homework assigned on a regular basis
- managing multiple notebooks or binders.

If possible, arrange for students to visit new schools on a number of occasions. If students are particularly resistant to change, it may be necessary to introduce new aspects slowly and go through a process of desensitization and rehearsal. For example, the initial visit may involve simply going to the school and entering in the front door. On another visit, the student might visit a classroom.

Provide students with videotapes of new schools and written information to help them prepare for the change. Identify key people students can talk to or go to for help. Enlist the help of peers who will help students make adjustments and accompany them to various locations.

Some students require additional support or adaptations to successfully make the transition into junior high. It may be beneficial to:

- assign adult mentors, e.g., key teachers, to address questions and concerns
- help students select age and socially appropriate wardrobes
- ensure that hygiene related issues have been addressed
- provide students with key locks or single number combination locks
- assign buddies to accompany students to extracurricular activities
- develop homework journals and schedules to ensure assignments are completed
- ensure students have ways to deal with teasing or bullying
- help students develop and maintain organized binder systems or workbook systems
- provide students with school maps to refer to during class changes.

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 See page 193 for information
 on regional educational
 consultation services.

Initiate referrals to regional educational consultation services well before students move to new schools. This ensures service delivery is minimally impacted.

Teach new skills

When the education program involves new settings, such as work placement, students with autism spectrum disorders should be taught the skills they will need in the new setting. These include:

- how to get to the new setting independently
- rules that are different from the current setting
- social skills required
- strategies for getting around
- ways to keep possessions organized
- strategies for dealing with anxiety
- where to go for help, if needed.

Transition from High School to Adult Life

It is recommended that transition planning from high school to adult life begin as early as possible. Initial planning for transition to adult life often begins after the first year of high school.

A collaborative process

Planning transitions is a collaborative process. It is important that parents, school personnel, and representatives from community agencies and support services begin long-term planning for students the first year of high school. Areas to consider include:

- employment options
- post-secondary training and education options
- income support opportunities
- residential options
- transportation needs
- medical needs
- community recreation and leisure options
- maintenance of family/friend relationships
- advocacy and guardianship.

To be effective, the planning process should be a collaborative effort involving students, families, schools, and community agencies and services. Identifying desired post-school outcomes is the driving force behind transition planning, so students and families are central to the planning process. The desired post-school outcomes drive the IPP goals and set the direction for day-to-day activities.

Transition plans should be included in students' IPPs. As with the other parts of the IPP process, transition goals and strategies should be developed at a meeting of the collaborative team. There are a variety of tools or processes for conducting such meetings.

One approach is to conduct a MAPS (McGill Action Planning System)⁶⁷ meeting. During the MAPS meeting, participants focus on answering seven key questions.

- What is the story of the person? (history)
- What is the dream for the future?
- What is the nightmare? (situations, outcomes to avoid)
- Who is the person? (process for gathering comprehensive information)
- What are his or her strengths, abilities, gifts and talents?
- What are her or his needs?
- What is the plan of action?

Regardless of the process or format used to conduct the transition planning meeting, the result should be a plan that addresses:

- desired outcomes for adult life
- specific current needs
- how those needs will be met
- the agencies and persons responsible
- timelines.

Subsequent planning should result in goals and objectives that identify what needs to be taught in order to meet the desired adult outcomes.⁶⁸

Contacts/Resources

For students who are not able to support themselves financially, it may be necessary to contact:

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)
Alberta Human Resources and Employment
Calgary: 403-297-8511
Edmonton: 780-482-9642

For students who are unable to care for themselves or make significant life decisions, it may be necessary to contact:

Office of the Public Guardian
Calgary: 403-297-3364
Edmonton: 780-427-0017

For students who are not able to manage their financial affairs, it may be necessary to contact:

Public Trustees Office
Calgary: 403-297-6541
Edmonton: 780-427-2744

Role of teachers

The role of teachers in helping students prepare for transitions out of the school system is to provide opportunities for students to develop skills for work and independent living.

The range of expectations depends on students' abilities and needs. Some students with autism spectrum disorders plan to go on to further education or training following high school. Consequently, there will be a greater emphasis on academic preparation, in addition to work experience and development of job-related skills, and skills for leisure and recreation. For others, the program may focus on work experience, community-based training and self-care. To facilitate transition planning, it is important to be familiar with regional systems and services for adults with developmental disabilities.

In general, school programs can prepare students for transition by:

- providing a variety of work experiences to help individuals determine preferences
- encouraging participation in extracurricular activities and social events
- encouraging volunteer work
- helping with developing résumés
- training in social skills for the job place
- providing on-the-job preparation, once preferences have been established
- training in the use of public transportation
- training in self-management
- teaching functional academics appropriate to the ability levels of students.