

ADAPTED FROM THE AUTISM SOCIETY'S LIVING WITH AUTISM PUBLICATIONS, *MOVING FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN* AND *PLANNING FOR SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS ACROSS GRADE LEVELS*, BOTH CONTRIBUTED BY THE INDIANA RESOURCE CENTER FOR AUTISM.

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School Transitions in the Elementary Grades

Practical suggestions for families

Generally speaking, in the elementary grades, the two most important transitions for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) occur when the student enters school for the first time (following the pre-kindergarten experience) and when the student moves on into a new grade level or to a new school placement entirely.

In the special education field, the term "transition" is often used in a limited sense, referring strictly to an older teen's important life phase of moving out of school and into adult life. However, transitions are common to everyone across the lifespan, and for individuals with autism spectrum conditions, these transitions require specific considerations and planning by family and school staff.

Planning for Starting School and New Relationships

Leaving preschool to enter a more formal educational system represents a major transition for every parent and child. The environment will be new, challenges will be different and new relationships will be formed. While parents of children on the autism spectrum initially may approach this time with trepidation, it actually represents an opportunity for learning and developing new friendships

and relationships. Following are some suggestions for parents to ensure a more successful and less stressful transition:

- Talk to the preschool teacher about how you can best prepare your child for the new curricular/environmental demands of kindergarten.
- Look for your State Department of Education on the Autism Society's State Pages (www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=stateresources) to check the standards for kindergarten.
- Check out the National Center for Learning Disabilities-sponsored Web site (www.getreadyto-read.org) for a checklist about home support for early literacy development.

feature / Elementary Education

Find out who will provide support for your child's school, the type of support offered and how to contact the person so he or she can assist the classroom teacher.



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- Inform the local director of special education in writing that you are enrolling a child with special needs for elementary school programming. List the child's special needs in bulleted format; you can provide more detail when preparing a file folder for the teacher.
 - Notice given to the special education director may result in the scheduling of one or more assessments. You will be given a booklet about your rights under the federal law regarding special education services, but you may want read up on such topics as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The Autism Society Web site and special centers have materials that provide basic information.
 - An IEP meeting will be scheduled to discuss your child's needs, goals and classroom assignments. Parents are members of their child's educational team, which considers options and how to best accommodate specific needs. Educate yourself and be prepared to be involved as a team member. If desired, bring someone more experienced with you as an advocate.
 - During the IEP meeting, ask if the special education program has an autism consultant(s). Find out who will provide support for your child's school, the type of support offered and how to contact the person so he or she can assist the classroom teacher. Ask when ASD training will be provided to the appropriate staff. Contact the Autism Society for additional information or suggestions, and visit its Web site for helpful materials.
- Tour the new school and make a formal appointment with the principal so he or she can meet you, get a better understanding of your child's needs and begin building a positive relationship with your family.
 - Provide opportunities for your child to become accustomed to the new playground before the transition, if the playground is open during non-school hours.
 - Prepare a 2- to 5-page portfolio that contains easy-to-read information about your child. List strengths, challenges, likes, dislikes, supports needed and specific strategies. If you know which kindergarten teacher your child will have prior to the end of the preschool year, you may want to give the teacher the file as well as any books and videos about autism. Give a copy to the autism consultant, as well. In the fall, offer folders to any person who would benefit from the information (e.g., music teacher, aide, occupational therapist, principal). Include your phone number and e-mail address.
 - Check with your public library and bookseller Web sites for children's books and videos about starting a new school year, particularly kindergarten.
 - As the big day approaches, contact the teacher. Offer to help develop a picture schedule for the week. If the teacher has not previously had students with ASD, emphasize that having a schedule will make things easier for everyone. Follow up to see if the teacher has any questions. Ask for a convenient time for your child

and the teacher to meet before school starts.

- Establish a means and frequency of communication with the teacher. Let the teacher know what information is helpful for home. Information should flow both ways—if your child was up all night, the next school day is likely to be affected. Good communication helps others gain a better understanding and respond appropriately.
- Ask how you can best support the teacher. Volunteer to provide training on ASD to staff or other students, lend books, help on field trips, produce the classroom newsletter, cut out materials and so forth. More specific to your child, offer tips on how to handle specific situations.
- It may take time for the school staff to realize that you want the school experience to be positive and productive for everyone. Make sure your actions reflect a concern for all involved, and that you use your expertise about your child to help in any given situation.
- Most importantly, keep a positive attitude about this new step for your child. Everyone wants a successful transition.

Transitioning to a New Grade or School

Transition is a natural part of all educational programs. Students with and without disabilities must adjust to changes in teachers, classmates, schedules, buildings and routines. The transition from one grade to the next or to a new school can be especially challenging for a student on the autism spectrum. However, these students can make this shift more easily with careful planning and preparation.

When thinking about transition, it is helpful to start the process with a list of questions to act as a springboard for discussion. Some parents use similar questions when preparing for an IEP meeting. Other families hold family meetings with siblings and the individual with autism so that they can all share in the planning. Below is an example of such a list:

- What does your child like to do?
- What can your child do?
- What does your child need to explore?
- What does your child need to learn to reach his or her goals?
- What transportation will your child use to get to school and for extracurricular activities?

Many people think of school in terms of curriculum, but having friends and a sense of belonging in a community also is important. To address these areas, following are a few additional questions to consider:

- Are supports needed to encourage friendship?
- Do people in the school community know your son or daughter?
- Are supports needed to structure time for recreation? Exercise?
- Does your child have any special interests that others might share, which could lead to participating in extracurricular activities?
- Can you explore avenues for socializing with peers, such as religious affiliation or volunteer work?

Part of transition planning should be preparing students to play an active role in all decisions that impact their life. The best place to begin this preparation is to have the student with ASD involved in all aspects of educational planning,

including the transition process, from the very beginning. Given the great variance of student ability, there is a wide range of options. Some students may just be able to state or read part of their plan for the future to the IEP team, while others may go on to explain their disability, describe the need for accommodations, share their strengths and challenges, and talk about plans for the future.

Following are some suggestions that can help ease the impact of transitioning to a new grade or school for a student on the autism spectrum:

- Preparation for transition should begin early in the spring. Whether a student is moving to a new classroom or a new building, it is helpful to identify the homeroom teacher, or general or special educator who will have primary responsibility for the student.
- Once the receiving teacher is identified, this person should be involved in the annual education plan process so that he or she can learn about the student's level of functioning, strengths and weaknesses, and likes and dislikes, and provide input into projected goals.
- Written transition plans may facilitate the student's successful movement. A meeting should be conducted to allow key participants to exchange relevant information. Responsibilities and timelines for those involved should be clearly stated.
- Either during the annual education plan conference or at the transition planning meeting, information should be exchanged about effective instructional strategies, needed modifications and adaptations,



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positive behavior support strategies and methods of communication. The receiving teacher should learn about strategies that have worked in the past.

- The receiving teacher may find it helpful to observe the student in his or her current classroom or school setting to gain insight into the student's learning style and needed supports.
- Instructional assistants who will be involved in the student's daily education should be identified, educated and informed about their role in the student's education.
- Many teachers may not have previous experience with students on the autism spectrum. Therefore, they will need basic information about ASD and how it impacts the student. Student-specific information about learning styles, communication systems, medical issues and behavior supports is also critical.
- Cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, the school secretary and the school nurse should also be provided with information, as should the student's classmates.
- Before entering a new school, any anxieties the student may have about the new setting should be alleviated.

Preparation for the move can be facilitated by providing the student with a map of the school, a copy of his or her fall schedule, the student handbook and rules, and a list of clubs and extracurricular activities.

- A videotape can be made about the new school, providing written information about specific situations so that the student can learn and rehearse for the change at his or her own pace.
- Visitations should be conducted to allow the student and his or her family to meet relevant school staff, locate the student's locker and become familiar with the school culture.
- Key people or a mentor should be identified that the student can contact if he or she is having a difficult time adjusting to or understanding a certain situation. Finding a location where the student can go to relax and regroup also is helpful.
- Parents should receive information about bus schedules, parent-teacher organizations and available resources (e.g., counselors, social workers, nurses).
- Prior to the new school year, methods and a schedule should be established

for communicating between home and school. Suggestions for maintaining communication include journals, daily progress notes, mid-term grades, scheduled appointments or phone calls, informal meetings, report cards and parent-teacher conferences.

- Once in the new school, peers should be identified who are willing to help the student with the transition to the new school. By gaining the support of a friend without a disability, the student with autism may have greater access to social opportunities during and after school.

By systematically addressing the transition process, students with ASD can be prepared to participate in their new school or grade.

The Autism Society's Web site (www.autism-society.org) has a short publication, "Growing Up Together," available for elementary-aged children to gain a better understanding of a classmate or friend with autism. From the home page, click on Free Downloads to access the publication.

