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Preparing a person with autism for change

People on the autism spectrum can find any kind of change or [transition](#) difficult. Sometimes, changes that are apparently small and insignificant may cause more difficulties than a significant change, such as the death of a relative. It can often take time to adjust so you may notice a few problems to begin with. However, if you prepare the person well for the change and keep things as structured as possible, it will be easier for them to adapt.

This page will explore situations where change has taken place and the strategies that can be used to help manage the situation.

Autistic people thrive on being in a familiar environment with routine and structure. As soon as you know what the change involves, start to prepare them. This may mean that, as parent or carer, you have to be proactive in finding out what is involved in a specific change. For example, if you know they find certain changes at school difficult, such as changes to PE lessons, you may need to talk to the school. If possible, find out when exactly changes are going to take place, what is involved and if a different PE kit will be needed.

If someone on the autism spectrum is going to a new service such as a day centre or a [school](#), or on a [holiday](#), perhaps flying abroad, it's important that you prepare and brief staff about the things that the person finds difficult or may become anxious about.

Give staff information on how to deal with any specific behaviours or obsessions. If you have previously used visual supports to communicate for example, PECS

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(Picture Exchange Communication System) boards then it's also important that these are ready for the person to come in and use. Some autistic people find it difficult to transfer certain skills into different situations so putting these means of communication in place is important in case they experience any difficulties.

Further information:

- For school staff: [Autism spectrum disorders: a resource pack for school staff](#)
- For airline staff: [CAA Guidance for airports on providing assistance to people with hidden disabilities](#)
- For employers: [Managing an autistic employee](#)
- For care services: [Care and support services for adults: information for local authorities](#)

You can also use [social stories™](#) and [comic strip conversations](#) to prepare a child for a change. You can adapt them to suit an individuals understanding.

Strategies for managing change

Use visual supports

Using [visual supports](#) can help to explain what will be happening to someone on the autism spectrum. They help with understanding and re-inforce what you are saying. You will need to explain what's going to happen more than once particularly if the change is going to take place over a long time. It's important to use clear language and give the person time to process what you say.

Use visual supports to show the person the outcome of certain activities. For example, if you are going on holiday, just showing them a picture of an aeroplane may make them reluctant and nervous to go on a plane as they may not see the relevance of doing this. Show pictures of the whole process instead, including the destination you are heading for, this will help him understand the whole situation better. By reversing the series of pictures to show the return journey, you can talk about the return home.

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Also mark on a calendar when the change will be happening and encourage the person to count down the days until the change takes place. On the day of the change, a visual timetable can be useful to explain exactly what will be happening. You can use a visual timetable throughout the holiday as well.

Structure transition times

When the change is taking place, keep familiar things close to the person and make sure you communicate clearly with them so you don't add to any stress or confusion. When giving specific instructions, don't use gestures or specific facial expressions as this will enable them to process what you are saying more effectively. Also give them time to process what you say to them. Give them lots of praise and support for coping with the change.

If the change is because of a move to a new school or care service, keep in regular contact with the people working with the person to see how they are progressing. If you notice that the service is not dealing with specific behaviours appropriately or using the means of communication that the person is familiar with, bring this to the attention of the relevant staff and arrange to have a meeting with them, if necessary.

Use visual representations to show the person how long they need to wait before an activity begins, such as an electronic timer, sand timer, or stickers on a clock face. These can also be useful if the person finds it difficult to adjust from a particular activity which they really enjoy. An activity could be put into a 'finished tray' or the symbol for the activity put into a 'finished box' to signal that the activity is over.

Manage anxiety

If you are concerned that the person on the autism spectrum may become particularly anxious about the change, make sure you give them the opportunity to ask questions to help with their concerns about the change. You could provide them with a worry book or box where they can write or draw any concerns they have. Explain the benefits of the change, for example if you are moving to a bigger house or going on holiday.

Set aside a time to work on relaxation techniques to manage **anxiety** before the change. Create an anxiety plan or use a social story™ to explain what the person should do if they are anxious. If you can see that the person is becoming anxious before or during the change, remind them to use any relaxation techniques you have worked on.

The following books offer information on how to support children who have autism and experience anxiety:

*Dunn Buron, K. (2008). *When my worries get too big: a relaxation book for children with autism spectrum disorders*. London: National Autistic Society

*Dunn Buron, K. and Curtis, M. (2008). *The incredible 5-point scale: assisting children with ASDs in understanding social interactions and controlling their emotional responses*. London: National Autistic Society

Some autistic people have complex **sensory** issues and will become anxious because of different smells, noises and lights in different environments. To help them cope with this in a new environment, let them bring reassuring smells, such as relaxing lavender, to the new place. Some people are sensitive to bright lights or noise so sunglasses or earplugs may help them.

Visit the new place

If someone on the autism spectrum is due to move somewhere new, for example to a new school or house, visit the new place several times beforehand so that they can get used to the unfamiliar environment. Take photos of any key people who are going to be involved in their support, the rooms they'll be using including their bedroom and the kind of activities they can expect to do. Making a book of photos and information that they can refer to before the change will help to relieve their anxieties.

Common changes - further reading

Going on holiday

Auld, M. *Going on holiday (My family and me)*. London: Franklin Watts

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Lewis, M. *Going on a holiday*. Glasgow: Collins Education

Moving house

Cartwright, S. and Civardi, A. *Moving house*. London: Usborne Publishing

Hunter, R. *Moving house*. London: Evans Publishing Group

Divorce and separation

Brown, M. and Krasny Brown, L. *Dinosaurs divorce: a guide for changing families*. London: Little, Brown Book Group

Lansky, V. *It's not your fault, Koko Bear: a read-together book for parents and young children during divorce*. Quality Books Limited

Changing school

Civardi, A. *Going to school!*. London: Usborne Publishing

Alexander, J. *Going up!: the no-worries guide to secondary school*. London: A & C Black Publishers.

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If you require further information, please contact:

Autism Helpline

Tel:	0808 800 4104 (open 10am-4pm, Monday-Thursday, 9am-3pm on Fridays)
Text:	07903 200 200 (to request information packs only)
Minicom service:	0845 070 4003
Email enquiry service:	visit www.autism.org.uk/enquiry and complete the online form

The Autism Helpline provides impartial, confidential information, advice and support for autistic people and their families.

Useful links ▼

Social media ▼

Quick contact ▼

Sign up for email updates ^

To get email updates from us, update your details and preferences, take part in our communities, and use other services, please sign in or register.

The National Autistic Society

Until everyone understands

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