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Starting or changing school

Autistic children and young people can find change difficult, including starting or moving to a new school. Read about strategies that can be used to support your child **in advance of** and **during** the period of change. You can also find guidance on **working with the school when your child starts**, getting your child's educational needs met **as they progress**, and the legal duties for **transition support across the UK**.

Preparing for change

Here are some strategies that you, the local or education authority and school could use to help your child to prepare for the change.

Plan visits and phased entry

Visit the school several times with your child before they start. Meet and take photos of any key people who will be involved in their transition. Make a book of photos and information they can refer to as this can help to relieve their **anxieties**. You might be able to arrange a phased entry into the new school.

Use visual supports

Visual supports can help your child to understand what will be happening and reinforce verbal communication. These will need to be used more than once, particularly if the change is going to take place over a prolonged period of time. When using visual supports it's important to:

- **use clear language** and give your child time to process what is said
- make sure that you show outcomes as well as the stages of a process, for example if you are using a visual support to explain a bus journey to school, make sure you use pictures of the whole process, including them arriving at school.

Mark the day of the change on a calendar and encourage your child to count down to that day.

Use Social stories™

Social stories™ – short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which includes specific information about what to expect in that situation and why – could help your child know what to expect in the new school.



Do preparation in the current setting

The current school could organise individual or group work on preparing for the transition. They could include activities in the curriculum that will help your child with transition, such as independent living skills.

Communicate with staff and share information

Share information with staff at the new school about your child's needs, likes, dislikes, capabilities, difficulties, and what causes them **anxiety**. Effective communication between you, your child, the authority, school and any support services, will make a positive difference.

Having a key worker or transition coordinator can help with this and with preparing a transition plan, or including targets and support strategies in an existing statement or education plan.

Manage your child's anxiety

If you are concerned that your child may become particularly anxious about the change, make sure you give them the opportunity to ask questions about their concerns and explain why the change will benefit them. You could provide them with a **worry toy**, book or box where they can write or draw any concerns they have.

Set aside some time to try and teach some relaxation techniques. Create an anxiety plan or a **social story** to explain what your child should do if they are anxious and remind them to use any relaxation techniques they have.

Find out more about supporting autistic people to **prepare for change**.

Supporting your child during the change

When the change is taking place:

- keep familiar things close to your child and make sure you communicate clearly with them
- give specific instructions, without using gestures or specific facial expressions. This will help them to process what is being said to them more effectively.

Using **visual supports** and a visual timetable can help your child to understand what's happening. Give them lots of praise for coping with the change and adapting to a new routine.

Many children starting school will have already attended an early education setting, such as nursery, and may have had their needs identified early. Information gathered by the early years setting should be passed onto the child's new school so that they can be prepared for their admission.

If your child or young person is starting secondary school or changing school, any information about their educational needs gathered by their child's primary or previous school should be passed on to the new school.

Keep in regular contact with staff working with your child to see how they are progressing. If you notice that the school is not dealing with specific behaviours appropriately, or using the means of communication that your child is familiar with, bring this to the attention of the relevant staff and arrange a meeting with them.



What the new school should do

When your child starts school, the school is likely to assess your child's levels of attainment, even though they may already have received information from a previous setting. If your child has identified additional support or special educational needs when they start school, staff should:

- use information provided by the previous setting to develop an appropriate curriculum
- assess, identify and focus on your child's skills and areas where support will be needed in class
- ensure that there is ongoing observation and assessment in order to plan the next steps
- involve you in developing and implementing a joint learning approach at home and in school.

You can also give staff information on how to deal with any specific **behaviours** or **obsessions**. If visual supports such as PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) Boards have previously been used, then it's important that these are made available to your child.

Some autistic children and young people find it difficult to transfer certain skills into different situations so putting these means of communication in place is important.

They can also have complex **sensory** issues and may become anxious due to different smells, noises and lights in the school environment. To help them cope with this you can ask school if they are able to take in reassuring and familiar smells. Some people are sensitive to bright lights or noise so sunglasses or earplugs may help them. Schools are responsible for making reasonable adjustments to help an autistic pupil feel more comfortable.

Read more about reasonable adjustments and disability discrimination in **Great Britain** and **Northern Ireland**.

Involving you as the parents

Parents should always be consulted and kept informed of the action taken to help their child and of the outcome of this action. The school must tell you when they first start giving extra or different help for your child because they have additional support or special educational needs. The extra or different help could be:

- a changed way of teaching

- some help from an extra adult, perhaps in a small group
- use of particular equipment like a computer or a desk with a sloping top.

Remember, you know your child better than anyone, so talk to the school in you have concerns about their education.

Transition support

Schools across the UK have a legal duty to take positive steps to make sure that pupils with disabilities can participate in all aspects of school life. During transition phases, you may find that you need to **advocate** for your child. However, your child or young person's school should never refuse strategies or supports that may help them.

In England and Wales

If your child or young person has an **education, health and care plan** or statement of special educational needs, your local authority has a legal duty to amend the plan or statement by 15 February in the year of transition to include the name of their next school.

In Scotland

Local authorities have a legal duty to support certain children with some of the changes in education to ensure that the transition goes smoothly.

- At least 12 months before your child starts or changes primary or secondary school (or six months for those starting pre-school), the authority must gather information from education, health and social work services that currently work with your child.
- At least six months before your child starts or changes secondary school (or three months for pre-school and primary school), the authority must provide information to prepare the services and staff in the setting your child is moving into.

You will receive a copy of this information and it can only be passed on with your permission. The authority must also ask you, and your child if appropriate, for your views.

If nothing has yet been done to support your child's transition, contact the school or education authority in the first instance. You may be able to make an application for **independent adjudication**.

In Northern Ireland

If your child or young person has a **statement of special educational needs**, guidance says that transfer between phases should be carefully considered at the annual review meeting during their last year at the school. The review can also be brought forward to allow time to consider an appropriate placement. Arrangements for the new placement should be finalised by the beginning of your child or young person's last term before transfer.



Further help from our charity

Our **Education Rights Service** can provide information, support and advice on educational provision and entitlements for children and young people on the autism spectrum. If you are not happy with the way that school are dealing with your child's transition, then please contact us.

Full spectrum awareness a toolkit to help secondary school students understand autism.

This is me! is our self-assessment toolkit that can help autistic children and young people in England to say what they would like included in their education, health and care plans. This can also help with the transition process.

Useful resources

Aneurin Bevan University Health Board - [Autism Sound Walk](#).

Black Sheep Press - [Talking About Secondary School iPad App](#).

Last reviewed: 22 August 2016

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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