

Planning for Successful Transitions ACROSS GRADE LEVELS

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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 can be especially challenging for a student on the autism spectrum (ASD). However, these students can make this shift more easily with careful planning and preparation.



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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.



THINKING ABOUT TRANSITION

When thinking about transition, sometimes 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 like to 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 the student 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 all aspects of educational planning, including the transition process from the very beginning. As mentioned in Student-Led IEPs (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001), 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, others may go on to explain their disability, describe the need for accommodations, share their strengths and challenges (present levels of performance), and talk about plans for the future. The eventual goal is a student-led IEP meeting (under the watchful eyes of the IEP team). Dealing with the paradigm shift from being advocated for through the IEP to having to advocate for oneself after high school requires much long-term work. Starting the process of teaching self-advocacy ideally could begin before transition planning for school is mandated into the Individual Education Plan (IEP). Providing students with a well-developed sense of self-advocacy through the process should be an integral part of education. Doing so is vital for gaining a greater understanding of how to obtain the required accommodations upon entering the community, in higher education, employment, and relationships during adolescence and adulthood years.

The transition process also should involve taking action. After identifying areas of interest and setting goals, steps should be taken to meet those goals. For example, an older student with ASD who has particularly sharp computer skills is dismissed from school early a few days a week to work with an aide at a data processing office. This position was acquired through the vocation rehabilitation office, which continues to provide support. Before beginning this job, the student was taught appropriate office social skills (including unwritten rules) and important office procedures, such as using a time clock. Another student, who prefers to be outdoors, received school credits for joining peers to work on a community clean-up project.

These examples emphasize the need to develop a plan tailored to each student's skills and preferences. Many professionals and families believe that three or four different vocational experiences can be helpful in assessing a student's desires and capabilities while he or she is still in school. The bottom line for all students is to ultimately prepare them to make good choices leading to the greatest degree of independence possible and the kind of life they want after high school. Keep in mind the greater goal of experience and knowledge gained through appropriate transition planning across grade levels.

FACILITATING A SMOOTH TRANSITION

Following are some suggestions that can help ease the impact of the transition process 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 to 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, likes and dislikes, and can be actively involved 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, positive behavior support strategies and methods of communication. The receiving teacher should learn about the strategies that have worked in the past, so that precious time is not lost at the beginning of the new school year.
- The receiving teacher may find it helpful to observe the student in his or her current classroom or school setting. This will provide important 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 included in the training. Classmates of the new student also may need information. This should be

provided in a respectful manner and without stigmatizing the student.

- Before entering a new school, any anxieties the student may have about the new setting should be alleviated. Preparation for this move can be facilitated by providing the student with a map of the school, a copy of his or her fall schedule, a copy of the student handbook and rules, and a list of clubs and extracurricular activities.
- A videotape can be developed 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, as is providing the student with a visual menu of coping strategies.
- 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 ongoing 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 and acclimation 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.

The ultimate goal is to promote a successful experience for both the student and the rest of the school community. By systematically addressing the transition process, students with ASD can be prepared to participate in their new school or grade.

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The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities has a transition summary series that helps families and students with disabilities focus on taking definite steps toward a successful transition. To read the entire article, go to the NICHCY Web site at www.nichcy.org/.



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