

Transitions

Transitions are an inevitable part of everyday life, and they can make an effortless process a difficult one, e.g., getting ready to go to the park or finishing a game and tidying up before dinner. Bigger transitions are also an unavoidable part of someone's life, such as moving house, school holidays, moving up to secondary school, or starting a new job.

Autistic individuals may react to a change like tidying up a game before dinner with elevated levels of distress or become extremely anxious at the prospect of the school term ending and moving onto a new school.

Even though these transitions are unavoidable, there are things that can be done to reduce the distress caused, especially if we are able to plan and prepare for the potential challenges that may be faced.

Examples of transitions:

Big transitions

- Starting school
- Moving from primary to secondary school
- Moving from secondary school to post 19 services
- Moving from education to employment
- A new sibling being born
- Moving house

Medium transitions

- Moving to a new class
- Getting a new teacher
- School ending for the half term holidays

Small transitions

- Finishing a favourite activity
- Moving from one lesson to the next
- Getting ready to go to the park
- Tidying up before dinner

Strategies to support

It may seem like a huge undertaking to try and work on transitions. They may have been impacting your child's life for a long time, from small transitions up to big transitions. The impact on your family's quality of life could be significant, the places you go or the things you do may be limited to avoid the chance of a transition triggering significant behaviours that challenge.

There are lots of strategies that can be tried to reduce the behaviours that challenge and increase the variety of places that can be visited/ activities that can be done. The first thing to do is consider the following general principles.

1.

Plan ahead – be proactive, not reactive

By focusing on skills teaching and preparing the individual for an upcoming event, the more successful the transition will be. If we support proactively, there is less chance of behaviours that challenge occurring, and the individual learns new skills to apply the next time a transition comes up.

2.

Individualise – no strategy is 'one size fits all'

Everyone is unique, and every autistic person is unique. What works well for one person may not work for another. Sometimes it does not help to know too far in advance about a substantial change coming, as this can lead to more anxiety. For another person, however, they need longer to process the change and prepare themselves.

3.

Adapt the environment – set the individual up to be successful

We are not looking to change an individual, but to change the environment so they can be successful. If everything in the environment is set up well to meet the needs of the individual, behaviours that challenge will not be an issue.

Example strategies

- **Person-centred plans:** These are a great tool to ensure that the individual remains at the centre of all planning that affects them. If the individual needs to have lots of visit days completed before they feel comfortable starting at a new after school club for example, then this would be written into the plan and should be implemented if that transition were coming up. Visit our website for person-centred planning templates.
- **Visual stories:** A visual story is a useful tool to support social communication and interaction for autistic children. The stories are a visual representation of social situations explained simply and broken down into small steps. A visual story about the arrival of a new sibling in the family could help an autistic individual to prepare for the change and understand what is going to happen.

An example of a visual story

Saying goodbye

It feels nice when we get to know people and see them regularly. It is great when you're with someone who knows you already.



Sometimes, we have to move places. People may need to change to a different school...



school

a different job...



or even a different house.







A visual story is a useful tool to support social communication and interaction for autistic children.

- **Visual schedules/now and next boards:** Knowing what the schedule of the day is can lower the anxiety for an individual that is trying to navigate their day at school. For more immediate transitions, for example between two activities, a now and next board can make that clear e.g., now work, next playground.


Visual resources: Now, next, then board




Now




Next





Then





- **Use timers or countdown strips:** These help to provide a visual representation of how long your child has left on an activity, or how long until the next activity will begin. Give your child warnings of when the activity is nearing an end.





How much longer?

1


2

3

4

5

Finished



- **Validate their feelings:** If your child is finding a small transition difficult as they are moving away from an activity they enjoy such as coming home from the playground; validate their feelings e.g., 'I know you are having fun and want to stay', then offer a choice e.g., 'do you want to go down the slide one more time or two more times?'