



Where Autism  
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## The Transition Project

There are three major transitions in a child's educational career:

- transition into school
- transition to secondary school
- transition to adulthood (when school ends)

For children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a time which can be difficult for all requires greater clarity and planning to avoid a fragile start.

Successful transitions for children with an ASD rely upon the complex interactions between personal (the child) and environmental (school and community) factors coming together to meet need, for each particular child, in a way that is useful *for them* and meaningful *to them*. Support needs to be flexible, so instead of adopting a 'one size fits all' approach, we should choose from a 'tool-kit' of strategies according to the child's individual autism profile. Support is so often needed yet unavailable as highlighted by Dr Gillian Baird in her recent lecture at the Royal Society of Medicine.

### What do transitions require?

Transitions require an ability to think about the future, to hold in mind a new concept whilst not having all the facts necessary to make this visual picture complete. It's about doing something new and different, requiring a process of review and adaptation over time until stability and predictability is reached. For all children transitioning to secondary school the change is as significant as stepping from a small island into a vast unknown continent, comprising:

- a new peer group where social worries are often greater than concerns about school work.
- a larger school
- moving classrooms throughout the day
- a longer and more independent journey to school

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- new methods of functioning in learning, where independence is accompanied by new levels of responsibility.
- greater academic demand.

(Coffey 2013).

### **Why is this hard for children who have an ASD?**

The diagnostic cluster of features that are central to an ASD are in stark contrast to the skills that would assist any child to adapt to their new secondary school environment. We need to reflect upon:

- *Anxiety* – Children may have anxiety about the unknown, change, different rules and processes and more, in addition to excessive social anxiety caused by social difficulties.
- *Social competence* – Children may struggle to adapt to new social dynamics and relationships, may misinterpret social cues, thus making friendships and social integration harder to achieve.
- *Adaptive functions* – Children will require support to adapt previously learnt everyday school behaviours to their new environment by creating new routines and developing skills. For example, looking after their possessions, how and where they eat lunch, self-care and self-management skills, who they communicate with and how.
- 40% of children with ASD may also have a co-morbid condition, such as ADHD, mental health or behavioural difficulties. These bring a greater challenge for the level self-management and emotional regulation that secondary school requires.

(Mandy, Murin, Baykaner, Staunton, Hellriegel, Anderson and Skuse 2015).

### **Grange Park Transition Project**

Following a review of children thatwhom Grange Park Outreach Service have supported over the last few years, it was apparent that ‘transition’ was a theme. Following a review of recent literature and current published support tools, ‘The Transition Project’ was created. Commencing in January 2016 the research project is running for the whole calendar year, spanning both Academic years (leaving primary and starting secondary school). It currently supports 28 children in mainstream schools in Year 6 who have a diagnosis of autism. The children are spread across 18 primary schools and are transitioning to 19 different secondary schools, comprising academies, specialist resource provisions, comprehensive, grammar and independent schools. The aim has been to provide support to the children in a timely manner throughout the year, preparing the children for their transition to secondary school through the provision of two newly created booklets devised to incorporate recent research and traditional transition tools:

- The “My Autism” booklet
- The “My school Plan” booklet

## “My Autism”

Aim:

To develop self-awareness through a greater understanding of their own Personal Autism Profile through discussion in the following areas:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



# My Autism

 **Behaviours and Meltdowns**

 **My Worries**

 **Interaction**

 **Making friends**

 **Interacting**

 **Thinking about others**

**Sensory**

 **Taste:**

 **Touch:**

 **See:**

 **Smell:**

 **Sound:**

Add photo here

 **My Interests**

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## “My School Plan”

Aim:

To develop the children’s knowledge through a process of learning, understanding and fact finding about the new school and to create a cohesive team around the child through the sharing of information with secondary school teams. To prepare for the transition we use an individualised approach to ensure each child’s anxieties were addressed, for example:

- Completing traditional transition activities around taking photos, discussing timetables, visiting on a number of occasions, rehearsing finding places, allocating at least one safe place for times of stress/meltdown which is recorded in their “My

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School Plan” book which the children keep to use as they need in order to reduce anxiety and support their memory.

- Setting achievable targets in primary school - organising and managing their own items at school, regularly moving classrooms when studying different subjects, wearing blazers and ties to practice tactile tolerances and using individual strategies to maintain focus i.e. a vibrating watch to overcome inattention.
- A social event so that parents and children transitioning to the same school can meet in an informal way before the new term starts.
- Sharing information about the children’s personal characteristics with SENCOs and form tutors so that plans can be made to overcome situations before they become a problem.

Alongside the booklets, support is also provided by a specialist speech and language therapist (ASD and Behaviour) and clinical psychologist who meet with the children regularly. In addition to completing the booklets, we have played games such as “what’s in your school bag?” and other short activities to build relationships and introduce the concept of secondary school in advance.

Each child will be visited at home over the course of the summer holidays to ensure everything is ‘ready to go’ and anxiety levels and strategies can be discussed. Visits continue into the new school year, this time at secondary school, offering outreach assistance to solve issues as and when they arise and promote a smooth transition process. Our support can continue until the end of Term 2 when the project ends, however schools can continue to access help through our outreach service if needed.

Each of the children and their families have consented to the completion of a range of assessments including:

- communication skills
- social ability
- anxiety
- sensory processing difficulties
- adaptive behaviour
- parental confidence
- family stressors.

Initial findings support the view that those children with impulsive (ADHD) behaviours, and those who are extremely non-compliant are at risk of their transition not being successful. We expect to find that high levels of anxiety and low parental confidence also have an impact. Full findings of the research project will be available in early 2017.