



# Education: moving from primary to secondary school

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## Introduction

This guide is for teachers and learning support staff to help pupils with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the transition from primary to secondary school. Parents and carers of young people with ASDs will also find it helpful.

## From primary to secondary school

The transition from primary to secondary school is a major change in a child's life. It could involve travelling to a new area as well as many other changes, such as:

- a much larger number of pupils
- being the youngest at the new school
- more teachers for different subjects
- a new building
- new timetables
- new and different routines, e.g. dinnertime arrangements.

Good preparation can help alleviate transfer difficulties. It is usual for the children to visit the secondary school once or twice before September to help smooth the transition and to help eliminate any concerns. Also, meeting the new teachers and learning support assistants can help lessen the stress.

If possible, a visit to the primary school by the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) or a secondary school learning support assistant can be very beneficial, as staff at the primary school can give a good picture of possible anxieties.

## Secondary school

Here are some guidelines covering the main areas of secondary school life.

### Travelling to school by bus

The pupil needs to be made aware of:

- where to wait for the bus
- using the bus pass or having the correct money
- the times of the bus
- allowing enough time to reach the bus stop
- who to go to with problems
- what to do if the bus doesn't arrive
- where to get off on the way home.

Pupils will also need help in coping with the social situations that often occur on the bus journey, such as noise, teasing etc. It would be helpful for the pupil to travel with someone they know for the first few days. A trial bus run before school starts would also be helpful.

### **The geography of the school**

A map should be provided, with as much detail as possible, using room numbers with descriptions. The pupil needs to learn various 'landmarks', which can be used to describe locations. For example, room A13 is the room for English lessons at the top of the stairs near the library.

It is worth spending time navigating the school and learning the important places: tutor room, library, toilets etc. Some schools have a 'buddy' system and the buddy could help with this.

### **Following a timetable**

This is one of the most complicated parts of school life to get used to, especially if the school uses a two-week timetable. In primary school the child is taught by one teacher and usually in the same classroom. However, at secondary school there are numerous teachers and learning locations.

To simplify the timetable these methods could be used:

- symbols to replace initials for subjects, eg instead of Gg for Geography, a picture of a globe could be used
- colour coding for subjects
- teachers' names written in full
- clock faces instead of times or period 1 etc
- room numbers with descriptions
- parents/carers should have a copy of the timetable prominently displayed at home.

### **Using lockers**

The pupil needs to:

- establish where the locker is (again using 'landmarks')
- find out if the school office has a spare key, and procedures if a pupil's key is mislaid
- attach the key to a belt ring or in a wallet with dinner money.

### **School diaries**

In the homework diary it is useful to attach a clearly defined map of the school and a timetable.

The 'TEACCH' programme recommends simple and clear instructions. For example, 'what to do if I lose my dinner money' instructions can help to eliminate stress. If the pupil becomes very upset when it rains at break time, a few simple instructions entered in the diary will help school staff to assist the pupil.

It is also helpful to use the diary to warn the pupil and their parents of upcoming dates or changes to the schedule. Any worries that can be discussed with the parent/carer will help the school.

When possible, the learning support assistant should be responsible for checking that homework information has been correctly entered. School staff should also make a note in the pupil's diary if a letter is given to the child to take home.

### **Added responsibility**

At secondary school, the pupil has complete responsibility for their pencil case, books, equipment, PE kit, cookery items etc. Using checklists can be very useful. Laminated cards, for example, detailing uniform could be used. Checklist/s could be written in the homework diary.

"For the whole secondary school, I invented my own visual schedules on small pieces of paper that I could carry around in my pocket and refer to continually."

Some pupils cannot manage to organise lockers/books/equipment at school, and end up without equipment and books in lessons, or just carrying around huge numbers of books. Where this is a problem, the books can be kept in a box at home and a parent/carer can help the pupil to sort out what is required for the next day's school each evening.

## Procedures for break and lunchtimes

The pupil needs to know:

- where to go/queuing procedures/where to sit
- procedures for taking a packed lunch
- what lunchtime clubs are available
- where they can go to for help.

It should be remembered that break times and lunchtimes (before or after eating) can be a problem because of the lack of structure, the noise and movement. Providing tasks at lunchtime is an option, but it is important that the jobs could not be interpreted as punishment, eg litter picking. Bullying can also be a problem and many pupils benefit from access to a quiet 'refuge'.

"It is important to differentiate between 'structured' and 'directive' environments as the two are often confused. Particularly when it comes to children with behavioural problems, references to a 'structured' environment often indicate one which is tightly controlled, with strictly enforced rules. The 'structure' needed by children with Asperger syndrome, in contrast, refers to order, not control."

## Social and communication problems

Tasks and instructions involving social understanding can be misunderstood by the pupil and consequently defied. For example, if you say "everyone line up", their response could be: "but I'm not everyone!" Saying the child's name before starting to talk to them is more likely to get their attention.

Children with ASDs could become a target for bullies and must be protected from them. Some children will not say that they are being bullied in this case sudden changes in behaviour either at home or in school can be a clue.

Points to remember:

- children with ASDs have a lot of difficulty with understanding others' body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. They also find it hard to recognise and understand others' emotions and express their own
- non-compliance can be due to not understanding or slower processing speed give them time
- negative behaviour can be due to poor interaction
- every child with an ASD presents a different set of behaviours even the same child from day to day
- break down tasks into small chunks
- instructions must be simple and clear
- give visual supports wherever possible
- the pupil will have difficulty in making choices so it is best to limit choices to two or three
- allowing a pupil five minutes 'chill-out' time can help in difficult moments
- the pupil will benefit from a 'refuge', a safe, quiet place somewhere in the school with supportive individuals who will listen.

Children with ASDs often have major problems with socialising and making friends. A 'buddy' system or circle of friends can help.

It is important for the school to actively set up a dialogue with parents, who know their child better than anyone. An awareness of difficulties can help teaching staff to understand autism. Hopefully with a little understanding, the transition to secondary school will be a positive experience.

## References and recommended reading

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Last updated: September 2008

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