

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 are expected to adjust to changes in teachers, classmates, schedules, buildings, and routines. The transition from one grade to the next can be especially challenging for the student with an autism spectrum disorder. However, these students can more easily make this shift if careful planning and preparation occurs. Below are suggestions for facilitating a smooth transition:

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 home room teacher, or general or special educator who will have primary responsibility for the student.

Once the receiving teacher is identified, involve this person in the annual case conference process so that they may gain information about the student's current level of functioning and can 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 individuals involved in the transition should be clearly stated.

Either during the annual case 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/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 with autism spectrum disorders. Therefore, they will need basic information about autism spectrum disorders and about how autism impacts the student with whom they will be working.

Student-specific information about learning styles, communication systems, medical issues and behavior supports is also critical. Remember to include cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, the school secretary, and the school nurse 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 with autism spectrum disorders.

Before entering a new school, work to alleviate any anxieties the student with autism spectrum disorders may have about the new setting. Preparation for this move can be facilitated by providing the student with a map of the school, a copy of his/her schedule for the fall, a copy of the student handbook and rules, and a list of clubs/extracurricular activities. Develop a videotape about the new school and provide written information about specific situations so that the student can learn and rehearse for the change at his/her own pace.

Visitations should be conducted to allow the student and his/her family to meet relevant school staff, to locate the student's locker, and to become familiar with the school culture. Identify key people or a mentor the student can contact if she/he is having a difficult time adjusting or understanding a certain situation. It may also be helpful to find a location where the student can go to relax and to regroup. Provide 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, it will be helpful to establish methods and a schedule 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, or parent-teacher conferences.

Once in the new school, ask for peers 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 an autism spectrum disorder 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 autism spectrum disorders can be prepared to participate in their new school experience.

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