

Transitions for Autistic Individuals

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What are transitions?

Day to day, we experience transitions both big and small. Transitions can occur between activities and between locations. For example, an individual can transition between activities during the school day, transition between year groups at school and transition between school and higher education. Transitions naturally occur when one activity ends, and an individual must move to another activity or location to start something new (1).

This help sheet will focus on transitions for autistic individuals between two locations, such as moving between home and school. Although, the advice is transferable to other, smaller and bigger, transitions.

What does a difficult transition look like?

A difficult transition for an autistic individual can present itself in numerous ways. Some individuals may get 'stuck' and be unable to move any further during a transition, whilst other individuals can present with behavioural distress such as kicking, hitting or spitting at people nearby.

Why can autistic individuals struggle with transitions?

Transitioning between places requires individuals to have a social imagination to understand what is expected of them, how they are going to transition and where they will be at the end of a transition (1). It can be very demanding on autistic individuals to process and understand the concept of transitions. The lack of understanding about the transition can be a scary experience and can increase an individual's anxiety levels. As a result, they can become emotionally dysregulated and have difficulty managing their emotions (2).

Autistic individuals can also become fixated on the activity or location in their immediate environment and find it difficult to 'switch off' from this and move on to another location (3). They have a difference in their Executive Functioning (EF) and this can make it difficult for them to be 'cognitively flexible' in switching between tasks and locations (4). They can also be resistant to change, preferring to follow a known routine. Therefore transitions can be particularly difficult for individuals when an unexpected change occurs in their daily routine e.g. starting school for the first time.

During transitions, individuals may be exposed to over or under stimulating environments that they may be sensitive too. On these occasions, it can be the sensory stimuli associated with the transition that the individual finds difficult rather than the process of transitioning (2).

Preparing autistic individuals for transitions

- Plan the transition; a successful transition is more likely to occur when the route between one setting and another is planned carefully by the supporting adults (5). For example, ensuring the route is clear of other individuals transitioning at the same time. This reduces the chance of the individual transitioning becoming anxious by the unpredictable presence of another person. If this is a transition that will be repeated, keep the route the same for consistency and make sure that those supporting the individual are all following the same route.
- Leaving enough time for the transition; if the individual needs to be at a particular place/location at a certain time, it is important for the supporting adults to pre-empt that the transition may not be as fast as it would be for individuals who do not struggle with changes. Leaving enough time for a 'slow' paced transition reduces the chance of the individual becoming anxious because of the 'pressure' they feel to transition and it allows them more time to process.
- Communication and visual tools; before starting a transition it is important to communicate the transition to the individual. This communication should highlight one activity or location ending and another starting. For some autistic individuals, communication is better understood and processed when information is visually presented. It is important to consider the individual's level of understanding/ processing when creating these tools, and their level of symbolic development. For example, some individuals may require 'objects of reference', such as a car key (physical object) to show them that they are going out in the car, whereas others may be able to follow symbols or photos of reference at a 'now and next' level or on a schedule strip. If you are unsure how much information to include and how the information should be presented, consult with the Speech and Language Therapist (SaLT) or refer to the individual's Communication Profile.

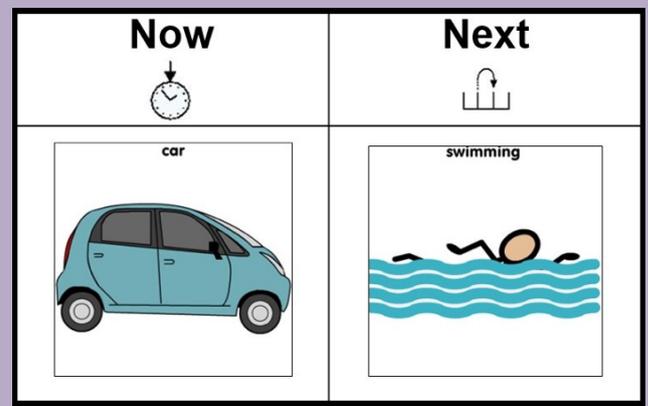


Image 1. An example 'now and next' visual that can support autistic individuals transitioning

Supporting autistic individuals during transitions

- Let the individual transition at their own pace; autistic individuals may be experiencing anxiety as a result of not socially understanding the process of the transition. Therefore it is important not to put pressure on individuals during transitions as this may increase their anxiety levels further, possibly overwhelming the individual with information and emotions to process.
- Reduce language; it is important to reduce language and keep language simple when individuals are transitioning. This limits the amount of information the individual must process and limits the chance of them being overwhelmed. If the individual responds to Makaton signs, use key signs along with single words to improve understanding, for example 'car' or 'school'.
- Praise and positive support; when individuals make progress during transitions and after completing their transitions, staff should genuinely praise them to encourage this positive behaviour.
- Consistency; routine and predictability are integral to create an environment that is supportive for autistic individuals. Not only do they respond well to structure and predictability, but as the individual becomes more familiar with the transition they learn to understand what to expect during it. It is also important that the visual tools used to communicate a transition between home and school are consistently used in future transitions. This increases the chance of the individual recognising and relating the visuals to the particular transition (6).

Support at Options Autism

The multi-disciplinary clinical team work together with the care and education team to support all individuals during their placement with us at Options Autism, which is part of Outcomes First Group.

If an individual has difficulty during transitions, the team would ensure supporting staff have all the tools necessary to support a successful transition; for example visual aids recommended by the Speech and Language Therapist and the individual's Communication Profile. It is also important that the environment is suited to the individual's transition needs. Occupational Therapists can explore the environment and help identify if there are any sensory or environmental changes that could be adapted to make the transition smoother. The transition strategies when relevant to an individual will be included in their Positive Behaviour Support Plan.

Further support

- National Autistic Society
- Autism Education Trust

References

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4. Comprehensive Book on Autism Spectrum Disorders - https://www.researchgate.net/publication/224920848_A_COMPREHENSIVE_BOOK_ON_AUTISM_SPECTRUM_DISORDERS
5. Autism Education Trust Transition Toolkit
6. The TEACCH approach to autism spectrum disorders from Mesibov, G., Shea, V., & Schopler, E. (2005). The TEACCH approach to autism spectrum disorders. New York, NY: Plenum Publishers

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The complete series of help sheets can be found on our website www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources

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