



Teenagers with ASD: Managing change at school

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Most students with an ASD find school challenging at some time or other. This can be the case no matter what the type of school; specialist or mainstream, primary or secondary. The continuing challenges of ASD (difficulties with communication and social skills, emotional and behavioural difficulties) combined with the added demands of secondary school indicate that they will require ongoing support in this educational setting. At secondary school it is usually students with high functioning autism (HFA) and those with Asperger's Disorder (AD) who do not have an intellectual disability (ID), or those diagnosed with Autism and only a mild intellectual disability (ID) who are continuing in mainstream education. The student with ASD has been given this diagnosis because he or she, since birth, has had difficulty with communication skills, social relationships, and particular focussed preoccupations and repetitive aspects to their play and behaviour, all of which can impede learning and managing in an educational setting. On top of these difficulties, many adolescents with ASD are struggling with emotional and mental health issues that interfere with their enjoyment of daily life and affect their performance at school.

Difficulties may arise for students with an ASD because of:

- the interaction required with teachers and students throughout the day
- the student's learning and thinking style
- difficulties in managing stressful situations
- poor organizational skills
- poor peer social interaction
- insistence on sameness and special interests or obsessions
- difficulties in both understanding and using language
- other issues (health, mental health problems)

If we look at this list in relation to coping with and managing daily changes and transitions at secondary school it is obvious that the student's ability will be impacted upon not only by symptoms of ASD but also by these other aspects of ASD that affect a person's capacity to manage the day to day demands of everyday life out in the community, at home and at school. In order for the student with an ASD to cope there needs to be a plan that includes how he/she will be supported during the school day.

- For quick reference a small pocket size timetable or information on tablet or mobile may be possible.

It is usually necessary to make plans for helping each student with an ASD with daily structure and routine, including:

- managing the daily timetable
- moving classrooms
- managing books, folders and equipment
- using specialised rooms e.g. music room, gym
- working with unfamiliar or substitute teachers

Below are some suggestions for managing and responding to transition support needs. It is probably best to appoint a staff member to take responsibility for transition support and managing things on a day to day basis. This person should also ensure that there is a consistent approach from all staff members and also that everyone has the same expectations of the student. If the plan includes strategies for each of these points above then the student and staff members will probably manage quite well. Having strategies can help the confidence of students and staff because there is a plan and neither are left trying to make do on the spot if something is not going well.

Managing the daily timetable

- The student with ASD must understand each day's routine/timetable and know what to expect in order to be able to concentrate on the task at hand. Ensure that the student and support staff have a personal timetable, detailing when and where lessons are to take place and who will be there to help.
- Whenever possible, provide clear visual information.
- Always give the student advance warning of changes in routine.

Moving between classes and classrooms

- If the student is sensitive to noise and crowds, it may be helpful if they are permitted to arrive or leave a few minutes early or late and so avoid the rush of getting to and leaving the classroom with everyone else. Specify the time allowance and ensure that each teacher knows about this arrangement.
- A small map of the school buildings and classrooms can be helpful. Mark the quickest way to get from A to B.
- When giving an instruction as the student arrives or leaves the class, be explicit and specific because he/she may not focus on what the staff member considers to be the obvious message.

Getting organized - managing books, folders and equipment

- Offer assistance. Be flexible. Give the student options as to where he/she can store personal belongings. This could be a locker in an area adjacent to the main student locker rooms (they are usually noisy and crowded). A filing cabinet in the learning support area might also be helpful.
- Offer assistance in managing the organisation of materials. A filing cabinet could hold the student's books and folders in hanging files - one for each subject and colour coded if that is helpful to the student. This can help the student to become more independent and confident about having what they need when they need it.

Using different/specialised rooms – e.g. music room, gym.

- At secondary school the students are frequently moving between classrooms. This may be stressful for students with ASD. A clear timetable of subjects and where to go is necessary.
- A photograph of subject rooms, or a photograph of the classroom door that clearly shows the room identifier will help.
- Special classes such as music or sports are usually held in the same place. A small map on tablet or mobile phone or written directions on a pocket sized card should help if the special subject room is not near the other classrooms.
- If there is to be a change in classroom, prepare the student by telling them exactly where the class will be held and write it down. Also provide written information about how long the change of location will be for.
- Notify parents of impending changes.

Working with unfamiliar or substitute teachers

- Student: It is not always possible to give a student warning about a change in teacher. When there is time, discuss the situation beforehand. A photograph of the new/substitute teacher with their name will help.
- Teacher: Ensure that the unfamiliar teacher has seen the student snapshot summary that gives essential information about the student.
- Parents: When possible, alert parents to changes in staff so that they can tell their daughter or son about the anticipated changes before arriving at school.

Managing stress and anxiety.

Students with ASD, particularly those with Asperger's Disorder, may be inattentive, easily distracted, and anxious. Understanding and adapting to the social demands of school and the stress of having to be organised and punctual may increase stress and anxiety. This is also relevant to considering what impact managing daily school transitions may have on the student with ASD. Worrying about where to be, when, what equipment or books are needed, who will be in the classroom can all lead to the student with ASD becoming more stressed and inattentive.

Provide a safe space the student can go to when feeling overloaded and stressed. This may be a quiet area in a resource room, computer room or library. All staff should know where the safe place is and direct the student to it or give the student the option of going there if he/she is becoming distressed.

Be flexible with regard to lessons and homework. Students with autism deal with many transitional challenges during the day that may be managed well some days and not so well on other days. If the student is over anxious, it may help if they are permitted to leave the classroom and work in their safe place instead.

The staff member who is responsible for helping the student with transition support should meet with the student at the beginning and end of the day to have a chat. Discuss how things went during the day and what is going to happen the following day. This may assist the student to manage school issues at school and not take to take problems and worries home with them.

Managing anxiety through relaxation exercises can be very helpful. One new example of a meditation/relaxation exercise programme is the *My Smiling Mind* online programme for ages 7-11yrs, 12-15yrs, 16-22yrs, adult. There is also an app available. Smiling Mind is modern

meditation for young people. It is a unique web and App-based program, designed to help bring balance to young lives. It is a not-for-profit initiative based on a process that provides a sense of clarity, calm and contentment.

<http://smilingmind.com.au/my-smiling-mind/>

Given the range of social, communication and behavioural impairments, together with the additional stress of managing with daily transitions at school, a collaborative team of parents, teachers and other professionals working together is crucial. Regularly share information at SSG meetings about:

- how the ASD currently affects the young person
- information on the effectiveness of current strategies and programming ideas at home and school
- academic performance and progress
- peer relationships
- adjustment and well-being

References and relevant further reading

Wray J, Williams K. The prevalence of autism in Australia. Report commissioned by the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders, 2007.

Autism Speaks is working with the National Center for Learning Disabilities, PACER's National Bullying Centre and Ability Path in partnership with the new documentary film *BULLY* to raise awareness about how bullying affects children with special needs. For more information see: [Autism Speaks: Combating Bullying](http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/bullying)

There are a number of factsheets about ASD at the DEECD Autism Friendly Learning website Resources page. These cover topics relating to young children as well as adolescents with ASD

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/program>

[s/needs/Pages/autismfactsheets.aspx](http://www.vcuautismcenter.org/resources/AutismTechnology/FastFacts/videoModeling.cfm)

Autism Technology Fast Facts: Video Modeling using iPod Touch, iPad or other Tablets

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Technology: e.g. personal tablet devices have become common place in many peoples' lives at home, work or school. This website has been developed in response to the many parents, teachers and individuals who have approached the Autism Association of Western Australia asking for ideas about how to effectively use technology, specifically an iPad or tablet device. The Adolescent and Young Adults section focuses on apps that may be particularly relevant to adolescents or young adults and focuses on scheduling, planning and independent living. <http://autismapps.org.au/>