



Transitioning Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into the Classroom

Anxiety and Transition for Students with ASD

Anxiety is a normal part of a child's development, but children and teenagers with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can experience anxiety more intensely and more often than other children. When children and teenagers with ASD get worried or anxious, the way they show their concern can look like common characteristics of ASD: stimming, obsessive and ritualistic behavior, and resistance to changes in routine. Transitions are often difficult for people on the autism spectrum. People with ASD usually rely on routines to navigate social situations, so a sudden schedule or lifestyle change can be very disruptive and discomforting.

Ways to Reduce Anxiety about Transition

The neuropsychological process is known as the "executive function," is heavily involved in making transitions. This function helps the brain to shift and reallocate attention and other brain resources when required. In autism, there are often gaps in this system. Because of these gaps, the brain may struggle with stopping one task and transferring attention to another. Preparatory activities can reduce the stress of transitions, resulting in more confidence and comfort during these difficult phases.

- **Use various forms of communication.** Video modeling, social stories, and checklists will help communicate what one is planning for a child, and what the expectations will be. Social stories that walk a child through the plan, from beginning to end, will offer predictability and a sense of control that may reduce anxiety.
- **Create a sensory diet plan.** Routine sensory diet activities are essential to support regulation throughout the day. It is helpful to schedule "quiet time." Proactively allow for downtime before the operation of the day gets to be too much.
- **Create a safe sensory space.** Create a safe space to calm down or regroup. Sensory deprivation or quiet areas change the amount of sensory exposure input the child can tolerate. This technique can be beneficial in situations where sensory overload contributes to anxiety.
- **Use visual supports.** Time can be an abstract concept for some students, so referring to time to help with a transition often visually represents it. Some tools that you can use are a simple egg timer, clock, phone application, or any other type of visual timer.
- **Use reduced language.** When children are having difficulty with making transitions try not to use language to move them along. Using too much language can often be a trigger for students on the spectrum. More communication can lead to verbal overload, which will only increase anxiety and lengthen the transition.

Sensory Challenges and Transition

Children with ASD can be oversensitive or under-sensitive to noise, light, clothing, or temperature. Their senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste – take too much or too little information from their environment. For students with autism, sensory processing dysfunction can manifest in many ways.

- Language delays or deficits
- Fine and gross motor delays
- Strong sensory interests
- Sensory aversions
- An inability to interact with people and objects and to stay within an interaction
- Repetitive sensory stereotypies (stimming)

Some research-based strategies to help combat sensory overload include: Capitalize on the student's strengths and specific interests; Explicitly teach and model social expectations; Provide a predictable environment and daily schedule; Design the classroom space in an organized manner, keeping clutter to a minimum.

Things to Consider

- Students with autism learn best using visual tools; it utilizes the individual's optical strengths and provides a receptive communication system to increase understanding.
- To help students with autism to transition back into a school environment, one might need to make accommodations or provide supports. Many students with autism wear sound-canceling headphones or sunglasses to reduce sensory challenges. "Lunch Bunch" groups, Best Buddies, and other peer-to-peer social programs can help reduce social anxiety.
- Children and young adults with autism will likely have difficulty accurately expressing how they feel about the many unexpected changes. There are communication difficulties for individuals with autism due to expressive communication delays, limited verbal or nonverbal skills, difficulty perspective-taking, and social communication deficits. Students experiencing fear, frustration, and worry may demonstrate challenging behaviors because they do not have the communication skills to express themselves.
- When moving to different school, prepare a plan for the child to visit the school building when school is not in session for the student to become familiar with the building, classroom(s), and new teacher(s). Obtain permission to take pictures of the new environment and teachers to create a visual schedule for the student in preparing for the transition.

Resources

[Autism Society of America Social Stories](#)
[Supporting Students with Autism in Uncertain Times](#)
[Autism Society of America Covid-19 toolkit](#)

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