



Where Autism
Professionals Connect

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Pre-school to primary transitions for children with autism

In March of this year I was fortunate enough to be awarded the National Autistic Society/Axcis Award for Outstanding Achievement by an Education Professional. This award was for doing what I know many other teachers do each and every day – supporting children who may be struggling in school and inevitably supporting their families in coming to terms with their unique child.

As a mainstream Primary School Reception Teacher part of my role is ensuring a smooth transition for the child. All the strategies and approaches I use have been tried and tested by many before me, and I hope you find them useful too.

Effective transition

So, where to start? Well, as a Reception Teacher I would say ‘start at the beginning’, or more accurately half way through Early Years foundation Stage.

As an Early Years teacher the need to be flexible, proactive and creative is crucial and begins well before the new intake of Reception children.

Parents

Be prepared to meet with parents before the school applications deadline. Meeting with parents during open mornings in the autumn term helps them make an informed choice about whether the school can best meet the needs of their child.

Getting to know our families through meetings and pre-school visits gives us time to arrange extra transition opportunities. We can begin planning for children’s individual needs well before they begin school. For parents whose child’s pre-school setting have already identified an educational need, this is hugely important:

- It gives us the opportunity to plan ahead in terms of applying for 'Top Up' funding (if applicable).
- We can prepare for the transition and allocate our staff team for the following September to best support the needs of the intake.

Pre-schools

Establish good links with the local pre-school setting. Invite staff to an informal meeting to exchange information, and proactively offer advice and support. This may be more time consuming for the teachers and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo), but a successful and smooth transition benefits all those involved.

The child

Transition into school can be daunting for any child so good transition practices should start early, particularly if a pre-school setting have identified a child with an additional need:

- Be prepared to offer extra settling in time and start the school visits in term six.
- For some children we have offered short and frequent visits to the classroom after school. Getting to know their new teachers and classroom in a quiet and calm atmosphere pays dividends for all.
- Be prepared to repeat this again in early September, maybe on one of the usual inset days. Six weeks is a very long time when you're four, and all the school familiarity built up in term six may well have dissipated.
- Make a Social Story transition book in term six with photos of school life so that the children can refer to these during the summer holiday.

Children without an identified additional need

All of the above is great, of course, if you know the nature of the child's need. But, what if a child appears in your classroom with a need that has not been addressed before?

Some children will arrive in school without any concerns having been expressed by their pre-school setting. This happens more often than we would like, and there is a need for good working partnerships between schools and pre-school settings where staff can give advice if a child is causing concern.

Addressing any concerns to parents is always difficult and practitioners may sometimes delay doing this if the child is young. For my part I would much rather that those conversations are started before the child comes to school.

Some would argue that it is wrong to 'label' a child and that they may well grow out of it. Whilst I sympathise with that view I would argue that if a child has an additional need that will affect

their transition to school and subsequent happiness, let's not 'wait and see'. I'm more than happy to be proved wrong on a hunch, but leaving that hunch alone can sometimes mean that children go through a stressful time without receiving the support that could make all the difference.

Parents

My experience from working with many families has taught me that communication is key. Talk to the family. Don't be afraid to express concerns but do it gently.

- Arrange a meeting with the parents or carers as soon as you have concerns. Lots of children have settling in issues, but if a child has an additional need that requires support this will be evident pretty early on.
- Be honest about the difficulties the child is having in school, and try to build a picture of what the child is like at home. The parents may well have concerns too, and opening up this dialogue allows them to express these.
- Support the family. Be prepared to give time and energy to the family. For some parents the fact that someone else recognises that their child is struggling is a weight off their shoulders. Other parents may be very concerned and fearful for their child. Be prepared to listen and reassure.

Be proactive

Don't wait for a diagnosis before doing something. You shouldn't be using diagnostic terms but you can borrow some successful approaches. Do your own research and start preparing resources that will help. Every child benefits from resources and approaches that lessen anxiety so don't be afraid to use them. They certainly won't do any harm.

Better partnerships, better transitions

The nomination for my award came at the end of an exhausting yet hugely rewarding year. Being appreciated by families who had gone through so much with their children was very humbling, and I feel privileged to have been part of their lives.

Winning the award was a truly amazing and life changing experience, but I really wanted to 'do something' with this huge honour. In recent months I have met with the local authority to explore how we can improve links and communications between pre-school settings and primary schools.

The aim is to make transition to school a positive experience for all children, but particularly those exhibiting autistic behaviours. By providing opportunities for pre-school and Reception practitioners to share concerns, advice and expertise, I believe we can really impact on the lives of children and families in our locality.