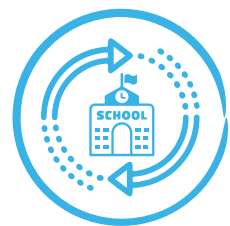




What is: The Potential Impact of Autism on School Transitions?

A guide for parents, helping them to understand how autism may impact on their child or young person making transitions in school, as a first step to understanding how to support.



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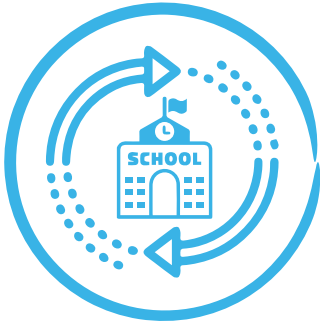


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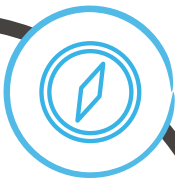
In the **What is? Series**, we answer some of your most frequently asked questions about autism.

In this guide:



What is: The Potential Impact of Autism on School Transitions?

This guide is part one of three resources for parents about supporting their child or young person with school transitions. The second resource looks at how to provide effective support and the third provides a toolkit of resources, to make supporting their child even easier.



What is: The Potential Impact of Autism on School Transitions?



How to: Support Your Child or Young Person With School Transitions.



Supporting School Transitions
Toolkit of Resources.



Parent Resources

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Section 1:

What Is Transition?

If you have children or young people of school age, then you have probably heard the term 'transition' before. If not, and just as a recap, 'transition' refers to **change**.

Bigger Changes:

Some of these changes can be bigger changes. They may involve a change from one educational phase to another. For example, a young person moving from year 9 in Secondary School into year 10 and the start of their GCSE courses. Sometimes, these changes are even bigger and include a change from one physical building to another, such as when your child leaves primary school and moves to secondary school, or when your young person moves from Secondary School to college or employment.



Smaller Changes:

Other changes may be smaller, within the same classroom or school building. These changes may appear to be less significant, but they happen many times throughout each day. Examples might include your child or young person moving from a lesson in a classroom to break time outside on the yard. Another more every day change would be your young person moving from one subject to another, such as transitioning from an English lesson to a Maths lesson, or transitioning from class work to eating lunch in the canteen or dinner hall.



It is important to note, however, that changes that may seem smaller to us as adults may feel very significant to a child or young person. However, there are a number of ways that you can support them, working together with staff in their school.

In this guide, our **What is: The Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions**, we explore the sorts of changes your child or young person may find more challenging and the possible reasons why. Understanding is the first step to giving your child or young person the support they need to be happy and settled in school.



Parent Resources



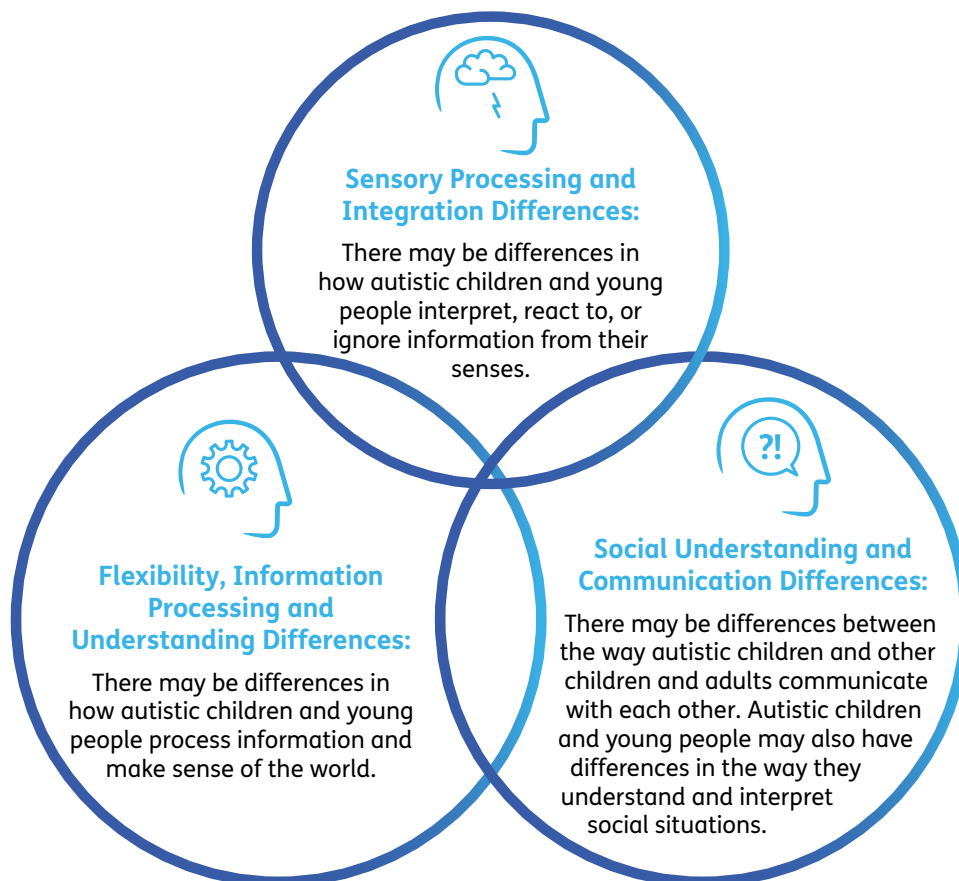
Section 2:

What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?

As you will know, no two autistic children or young people are alike. Your child or young person is an individual, with their own likes and dislikes, and being autistic, they will have their own strengths and support needs within what we call the Three Areas of Difference in autism. These areas of difference can make transitions - both larger and smaller - more of a challenge for your child or young person.

It is helpful to know more about the Three Areas of Difference to understand the things that your child or young person may need more support with. Understanding will help you put support in place early, so that going to school is a more positive experience for your young person, both educationally and socially.

The Three Areas of Difference in Autism:



Your child or young person will have both strengths and support needs, within the Three Areas of Difference.

Understanding their strengths and support needs will help you to understand more about how they may respond to transitions in school.



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Section 2:

What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?



What is the Potential Impact of Flexibility and Information Processing Differences on Transitions?

Differences in Flexibility:

Flexibility is about being able to adapt to new places, people and experiences. Adapting – especially when lots of new things are happening – is a challenge for most people – adults included.

However, autistic children and young people, who have support needs due to this area of difference, will have a much stronger need for routine, predictability and structure.

If your child or young person has a difference in this area, then they are likely to find transitions challenging.

This is because - as we already know - the term ‘transitions’ literally describes changes, which are the opposite to routine, predictability and structure.

In both Primary School and Secondary School, routines, expectations, processes, subjects, topics, activities, staffing and the students your child or young person is with may all change. When they move from one school to the other, even the actual building will change.



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Let's look at an example...

Many autistic young people find the transition to **Secondary School** to be particularly challenging because of differences in the area of flexibility:

- Different staff (including the potential for having more supply teachers).
- Different children from different schools.
- A different way of getting there - potentially by bus.
- A different, larger setting.
- A different timetable.
- Different classrooms.
- Different subjects.
- Different uniform.
- Different expectations for the amount of work to be done: more classwork, more homework, increasing assessment pressures.
- Different expectations that learners will take more responsibility for their own learning, resources and equipment.



It is important that parents, carers and staff in school, understand that an autistic child or young person will find these changes challenging, so that the appropriate support is put in place. Simple adjustments to prepare children and young people for these changes can make all the difference.

Simple adjustments
to prepare children
and young people for
changes can make all
the difference.



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Differences in Information Processing:

Information processing is to do with the way we take in information, understand it and apply it. Autistic children and young people may have differences in this area and it is important for parents, carers and staff to understand and be accepting of this.

There is lots of information to take in and understand just being in school even when things are fairly settled. However, when there is change, coping with any new or different information around that change, can be challenging.

Understanding this and adjusting how we respond and interact with our autistic children and young people can help to reduce this anxiety.



Shifting Focus:

As a result of differences in the area of information processing, your child or young person may have challenges shifting their focus from one topic to another or from one activity to another. This may be because autistic children and young people often have what is described as a more monotropic focus.

Monotropism describes how it is believed that autistic people have a preference for focusing on one thing at a time, rather than many different things at once. This means they may appear to have particular interests and they may often have real strengths in understanding these areas of interest. It is likely they will have real strengths in being able to focus on one task for longer and go into more depth.



Whilst monotropism can be a real strength in certain situations, it can also make change – where lots of things may be happening at once – trickier.



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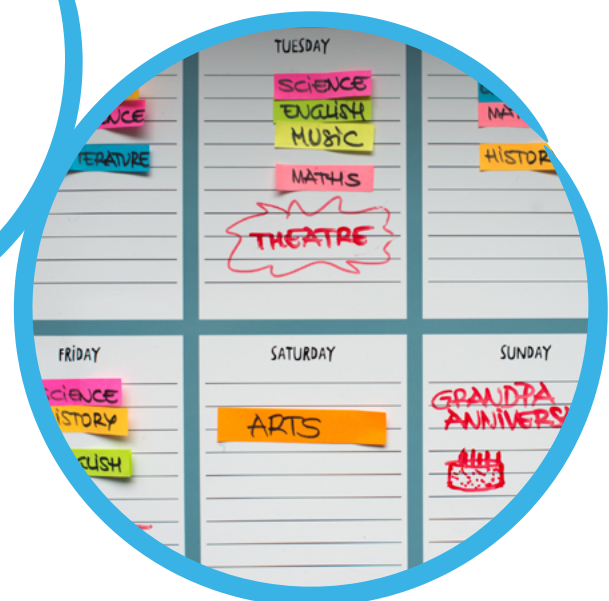
What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?

Making Generalisations:

Being able to focus in detail on one thing may mean your child or young person has strengths concentrating on a particular activity or subject in school, especially if it is one they are interested in. However, because of this, it may be more difficult for them to move easily from subject to subject in Secondary School or from doing a puzzle at the desk and then switching to singing in the hall in Primary School. Staff should understand this and can make some simple adjustments to support them in moving from one area of focus to another and parents and carers can also support with this at home.

This focus on detail may also mean that your child or young person finds it challenging to make generalisations. This may impact if they have to 'relearn' expectations or rules from subject to subject, classroom to classroom or when moving from working with one member of staff to another. Your child or young person is likely to find this even more challenging when they move from a smaller Primary school to a larger Secondary school, if staff are not consistent in their application of 'rules' in relation to uniform, behaviour or expectations around work. Staff should aim therefore to be as consistent as possible in adhering to agreed processes in school and it is helpful if parents and carers reinforce messages at home. This is why it is so important to work together with your child or young person's school – it is much easier for them to understand what is expected when everyone is saying the same things.

School staff should be able to make some simple adjustments to support an autistic child or young person to move from one area of focus to another.



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What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?

Following Instructions:

Due to differences in information processing, your child or young person may find it challenging to follow instructions related to transitions, especially if these instructions are only given once and only given verbally without any written or visual reinforcement. Whilst they may be able to follow instructions, they may take longer to process the information given and therefore they may take longer to follow the instruction. This may mean they transition from place to place or from activity to activity more slowly. It is important that you work with your child or young person's setting to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made where necessary so that your child can transition more successfully. Such reasonable adjustments may include giving longer processing time, providing instructions visually as well as verbally and prompting. The same strategies can also be applied when giving instructions at home.



Processing Information and Learning:

Autistic children and young people of any age may find it challenging to process the information and knowledge they encounter over the course of even a single day in school. Throughout the day, they encounter more and more information and this may lead to information overload. They may find it more challenging as they have to transition through school and the scope of the knowledge gets wider and the volume of work increases. They may also find it tricky to make the links between lessons, units or topics and pieces of information - especially over time. This may make remembering the information required in examinations difficult, especially for subjects where young people have to construct longer responses, in subjects such as English. As such, settings and parents can work with children and young people, helping them to develop strategies to make these connections more readily.



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Planning, Prioritising and Organising:

Differences in information processing may also mean that your child or young person finds it more difficult to plan and organise tasks or work. They may find this difference has more of an impact as they move through year groups and phases as there is likely to be more of an expectation for them to be more independent and complete more detailed work.

They may also find homework challenging as they are expected to complete it more independently, especially with the transition to Secondary School and in key stages 4 and 5 in particular. Differences in this area may mean that your child or young person may feel like they don't know where to start or how to prioritise multiple pieces of homework.

They may also find assessments tricky for a similar reason - having to plan and organise their answers, in timed conditions, may be extremely challenging and cause a lot of anxiety. It is important therefore that young people are enabled by staff who are aware of their support needs and put appropriate ways of working in place and organise exam concessions as required.

Staff in school and parents at home can help children and young people put in place strategies that will support them enormously with planning, organising and prioritising.

Decisions and Choices:

The older your young person gets, the more choices they will have to make. The transition from key stage 3 to 4 may be challenging as your child is expected to choose options that will dictate their exam subjects. They may also have to decide on a work experience placement and undertake this independently. Young people in year 9 with an EHCP are also officially required to think about the transition to adulthood and whether they will continue in full time education or apply for an apprenticeship or supported internship for instance. This decision becomes more pressing as your young person gets closer to 'moving on.' It is therefore crucial that settings provide support with the decision-making process, providing students who need it with extra support around careers education, vocational and life skills, applying for jobs and interview preparation. Supporting this process as a parent or carer will also help your child or young person feel less anxious and more able to take their next steps.



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What is the Potential Impact of Differences in Social Understanding and Communication?

Understanding Communication:

Transitions may involve your child or young person understanding and using new vocabulary. For example, phrases like 'line up,' 'coat pegs,' 'reception,' 'head of year' and 'tutor' will at first be unfamiliar to all children and young people but, on top of other changes, may prove an additional challenge for an autistic child or young person.

Communication may also be trickier for your child or young person if it requires a lot of inference (having to work out meaning if it isn't very clear). Autistic children and young people also tend to find interpreting facial expressions, gesture and tone of voice more challenging. It is important for staff in schools – and parents and carers at home – to understand this and ensure that they communicate as clearly as possible, avoiding sarcasm or humour that may be confusing or difficult for your young person to understand.

Understanding Social Rules and Expectations:

Autistic children and young people may have differences in understanding social rules in different settings and situations. Change of setting is inevitable during the bigger transition of moving from one school to another or to college or employment. There will be changes in social rules between these different settings as rules and expectations change as children and young people get older, and your child or young person may therefore have support needs around this. This may be the case even within the same setting as children and young people move from one phase to another, such as from Early Years into Primary School, or from Key Stage 1 into Key Stage 2. It is therefore important that when your child or young person moves to a new school or phase that settings take steps to prepare them in understanding new rules and expectations, through focused work, visits and providing clear instructions. It is also important for you as their parent or carer to support any visits or transition 'work' that either setting puts in place.



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Even smaller transitions within a single setting may require your child or young person to understand changes in social rules or expectations. For example, there may be different rules in the classroom, library, play ground or dinner hall. Even within a single classroom, teachers may expect children or young people to stick to different social rules. For instance, in Primary, there may be different expectations of behaviour during Literacy or Numeracy compared to afternoon project-based work. There may be different rules on the carpet to sitting at the desk. There may also be different rules during individual work, compared with paired or group work. There will also be different rules during class work compared with during assessed tasks as children move through the phases of schooling. Rules should be explained clearly and reinforced visually both at school and at home.

In Secondary School, sixth form or college, there may also be different rules within different subjects - sometimes due to safety reasons. In a Science lab, there may be rules about wearing goggles during experiments or that gas taps must not be touched. Your child or young person may find these changes and differences to be very confusing and difficult to understand and implement. This is likely to cause them increased anxiety, especially if they are punished for 'not following' the rules. Staff may need to provide extra supervision or put other supports in place where necessary. Instructions regarding safety should be clear and visual as well as verbal and may need reinforcing at home as well as in school.



Forming Relationships:

Differences in communication may mean it is challenging for autistic children and young people to form relationships in new settings, with new teachers and with different peer groups. Your child or young person may therefore need support in forming these relationships when they move from one setting to another. Support may also be required if they change class in Secondary school, as often happens in schools that put students in 'sets.' If staff are expecting children or young people to work in pairs or groups, they and their peers may require some support or scaffolding to collaborate effectively due to possible communication differences.



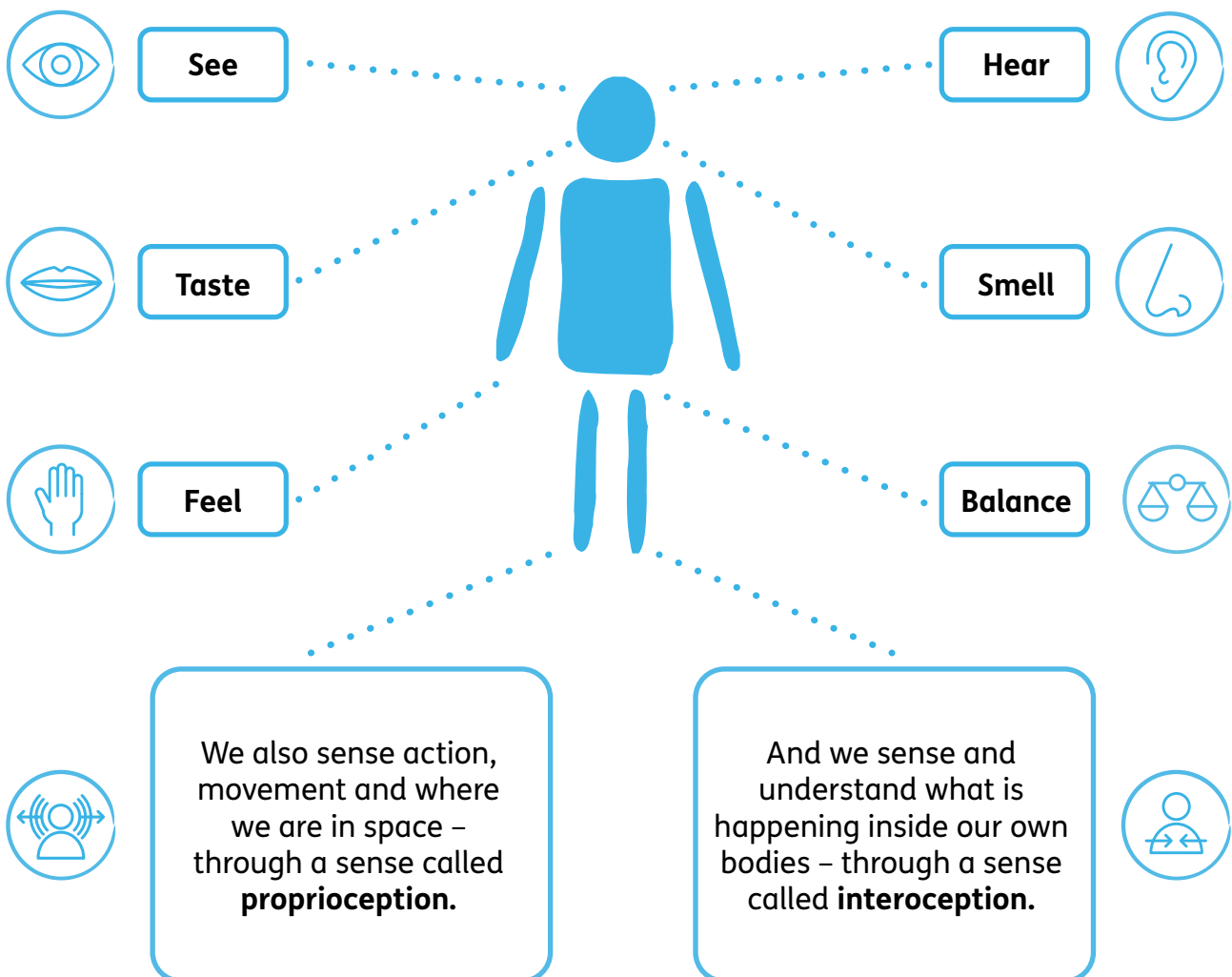
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What Is the Potential Impact of Sensory Differences on Transitions?

Sensory differences describe the differences that autistic children and young people may have in the way that they take in and respond to information coming in through their senses.



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What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?



Seeing Sensory Differences:

Unfamiliar classrooms and environments may be challenging for an autistic child or young person if they are too bright or too dark. Autistic children and young people may need to cover their eyes which can be problematic if transitions involve unfamiliar teaching staff, who may think are putting their hands over their eyes to avoid the lesson. This is why it is important that there is good communication between home and school—some settings allow children and young people to wear caps, sunglasses or fit blinds to reduce the impact of light.

Your autistic child or young person may also be distracted by movement during transitions. For example, if the class or members of the class are instructed to move from one area of the classroom to another or they have to move down a busy corridor to get from one subject to another. Staff should remain aware of this and seek to limit distractions of this type wherever possible. Lots of settings consider seating very carefully, sitting autistic children and young people where visual distractions may have less of an impact.



Sound Sensory Differences:

Following Instructions:

Due to sound sensory differences, your child or young person may not be able to easily process verbal instructions that indicate the end of one activity and the start of another. There may be an expectation for instructions to be followed quickly, but your child or young person is likely to need more time to process what has been said and staff should be sensitive to this and support them by reinforcing information and instructions visually.



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What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?

Noisy Areas:

Transitions to busier, noisier areas may also be more problematic - noisy corridors, drama or sports activities, the playground, dinner hall or school bus – transitions into (or out of) all of these situations could cause anxiety for a child or young person with sound sensitivities. Settings should look to limit noise and make expectations around noise levels clear and parents should be aware of this at home and when out and about.

Unfamiliar staff will need to understand that a child or young person having their hands over their ears is not an attempt to avoid the lesson. There needs to be understanding across the whole staff about why some learners may find sound distracting or even distressing. Reasonable adjustments can be made such as setting noise expectations and allowing your child or young person to wear ear defenders or ear plugs should they wish to, which is something they can also do at home.



Touch Sensitivities:

Uniform:

If your child or young person is sensitive to the feel of certain materials, then a transition that requires a specific uniform may be problematic. There may be possible issues with uniform if reasonable adjustments are not made, as your child may be distracted by the feel of their clothing. This is where good communication between home and school is important and there should be a discussion about how your child or young person can be best supported.

Safety:

Some autistic children and young people may have an altered sense of pain. It is important that staff in schools are aware of this so that the appropriate safety precautions can be put in place. This may be important during sporting activities, Science lessons or cookery. As parents, it is important to be aware of this at home too.

Messy Activities:

Autistic children and young people often have a dislike of messy activities. This may make transitions to these types of activities and subjects more challenging. Settings should look to adapt these activities where your child has sensory sensitivities in this area.



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What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?

Relationships:

Sometimes autistic children and young people have differences in understanding personal space. They may get too close to another child or may want to stroke their hair or clothes because they are seeking sensory input through touch. This may be more of an issue when they are entering new peer groups where there is less awareness of their support needs. For example, this may be accepted more in a Primary classroom where children have been in a class together from being very young, but less accepted in a class of unfamiliar young people in Secondary School or college. This is where a setting can look to increase peer awareness so that all children and young people are more accepting of each other's differences.



Taste / Smell Differences:

Lunch:

Sensitivities to taste and smell may prove especially problematic during the lunch time transition, especially if a child or young person is expected to eat a school lunch or a snack provided by school. Your child or young person may also react to the smells from lunch being prepared, if they are in a classroom or space near to the lunch hall. The setting may need to make reasonable adjustments to support your child or young person around this area of difference, such as providing them with a different space to eat in. It is worth knowing this as parents and carers too – when your child rejects the pasta you have spent time making because it is 'slimy' they are not necessarily being deliberately difficult – it may be due to differences in their taste responses.

Toilets and Hygiene:

If your child or young person has difficulties with the smell of the toilets, they may try to avoid those areas. This could lead to toileting accidents, especially during transitions to new environments or with unfamiliar staff if there are no supports in place. It is important that the setting is aware of the need to make reasonable adjustments to support your child or young person with this so keeping them informed is essential.



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There could also potentially be problematic relationships if a transition 'requires' a learner to sit near a peer whose smell is distracting to them. Teaching staff should be aware of this possibility and take steps to consider seating in a way that is sensitive to all of the children and young people in the class.



Proprioception: Balance and Moving Differences:

Differences in this area may result in challenges moving between classrooms, different places in school or within classrooms. This is because differences in this area may make it more likely that your child or young person could bump into things or other people more easily. Staff supervising corridors and having rules around movement in school is likely to help with this.

This difference could also mean that autistic children and young people need more support during activities requiring balance or dexterity. For example, during sports, during craft activities, during play or during lessons requiring a lot of writing such as English or Literacy.

During transitions involving new or different staff, it is important that new teachers are aware of why your child or young person may slouch in their chair due to differences in this area. It may be that your child or young person requires some occupational therapy input to support with this.



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Interoception: Differences Interpreting Inner Feelings:

Interoception differences refer to an autistic child or young person's challenges in recognising and understanding inner feelings and bodily sensations.

As a result, some children and young people may miss lunch due to not recognising they are hungry and need to eat. This could result in conflict with unfamiliar staff later if the learner does eventually feel hungry and cannot understand why they can't just eat when they want to.

Toileting accidents can also occur for this reason, especially during transitions to new places, environments or with unfamiliar staff if there are no supports in place. This is because autistic children and young people may not recognise the need to use the toilet or may leave it too late to go. There are plenty of supports that can be put in place to help with this such as toilet cards and regular prompting.

As always, effective communication between home and their educational setting is vital to ensure your child or young person's needs are met. Staff should make reasonable adjustments and this must be done consistently.



Parent Resources



Section 3:

Top Take Aways:



Top Six Takeaways:

There is a lot to think about when it comes to understanding the possible impacts of autism on school transitions, so below are our *Top 6 Takeaways*:

1

Transition means change.

2

From an educational point of view, transitions can be big (macro) or small (micro).

3

What an adult sees as micro may be seen as macro by a child or young person.

4

Transitions can cause all of us anxiety – when things are different or unknown it can be unsettling.

5

Autistic children and young people are likely to find transitions even more challenging because they often have communication differences, preferences for routine and support needs around understanding social rules and expectations.

6

There are lots of reasonable adjustments settings can put in place to support your child or young person and good communication between home and the setting is key.



Parent Resources



Section 4:

Take the Next Steps:



Next, check out our guide on **How to: Support Your Child with School Transitions.**



Then, check out our **Tools for Transitions**, resources that will help you to support your child or young person more effectively.



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