

TRANSITIONING PREP STUDENTS WITH AUTISM TO PRIMARY SCHOOL



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A Practical Guide

Written by Jessie Baker (Psychologist and Director of Ability Psychology Services)

Families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often face the conundrum that is managing change with their child. Whilst many new environments can be avoided, there comes a time when children with ASD face situations that may be intrinsically challenging for them. The transition from Preparatory School (Prep) to Primary School is a good example of this.



The Prep to Primary experience for children with ASD

The transition from Prep to Primary School can be a daunting experience for any child. For children with ASD, this transition is compounded by the interplay of ASD characteristics with a new environment and a new suite of expectations. A notable characteristic of ASD is that the individual may experience sensitivity to sensory input, and a different sensory perception. Research refers to these experiences as hyporesponsiveness and hyperresponsiveness and recognises that an individual with ASD may experience this differently across senses (Tomcheck et al., 2018). Research also refers to the interplay of an individual's emotional state and context as to how they respond to a sensory experience and the impact this may have on them (Tomcheck et al. 2018).

Ashburn and Colleagues (2013) explored the sensory experiences of individuals with ASD, their coping mechanisms, and how this impacted their ability to engage in activities. The findings of this research highlighted the individual differences in the sensory experiences, transitions and preferences. As such, it was concluded that individual preference, predictability and control must be considered when planning transitions. This consideration for individual difference also feeds into an individual's cognitive profile. That is, the differences in an individual's cognitive ability across a number of domains. For example, two children with ASD may have very different levels of expressive and receptive language which can impact on their ability to transition to a new environment



and their needs to do this effectively. For instance, a child with lower levels of expressive language may experience more difficulty communicating their emotions around a change. This creates vulnerability where the child is unable to communicate their needs or their distress. Similarly, if a child had lower levels of receptive language they are likely to experience more difficulty understanding information that is verbally provided to them and consequently be less equipped for the upcoming transition or change (Hudry et al., 2010). What these considerations highlight is that whilst individuals with ASD share many diagnostic traits, the way these present and the way they are experienced by the individual vary person to person. These considerations will be discussed further later in this guide.

Research on transitions distinguishes two different types known as horizontal transitions,

and vertical transitions (Polloway et al., 2008). Vertical transitions are defined as "predictable, developmental, and experienced by all students" whereas horizontal transitions are described as "movements from one situation to another, occur on a daily or weekly basis, are individual and specific, and are not as predictable as vertical transitions" (Stoner et al., 2007). In the context of education, examples of a horizontal transition may include the transition from home to school, or class to lunch break. Whereas the transition from Prep to Primary School would be considered a vertical transition as it is predictable and experienced by all students. This is an important distinction to make when considering the literature on this topic.

It is understood that children with ASD are less likely to notice or understand transition cues as



well as their peers. For instance, a Teacher closing the story book may cue that story time is over, and another activity can be expected. When these cues are not interpreted by a child, it can make the transition much more difficult to manage. Children with ASD are likely to experience this in a more pronounced manner due to the interplay of the ASD profile with their environment. The Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition (2013) outlines the criteria for a diagnosis of ASD. For the purposes of the discussion at hand, the following traits of children with ASD are noted:

- Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction as manifested by deficits in social reciprocity, nonverbal communication and developing and maintaining relationships.
- Restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities as manifested by stereotyped or repetitive motor movements,

use of objects, or speech and insistence of sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, and ritualised patterns of verbal and nonverbal behaviour.

Of course, this is only a snapshot of the full criteria however it provides a platform to explore why transitions are often more difficult for children with ASD. For instance, the transition to Primary School will entail a number of variances to the child's Prep experience. New routines, new people, new relationships, new processes, new demands. A lot of change can be expected. When a child who relies on consistency and routine is placed into this environment, it can cause them significant anxiety and confusion (Connolly & Gersch, 2016). This can be compounded by deficits in social reciprocity



and their ability to build and maintain relationships. Where they may have sought comfort in a trusted person, place or routine, the child finds themselves surrounded by new faces. Amongst peers, a child with ASD may also become isolated and may even experience conflict or bullying as a result of their condition (Connolly & Gersch, 2016). Given this, it is unsurprising to conceive that in these circumstances a child may exhibit challenging behaviours, emotional dysregulation and possibly even regress (Ferguson et al., 2016). It is factors such as this that highlight the need for collaborative transition planning to ensure that children with ASD have the best opportunities available when moving from Prep to Primary School.

What to consider and how to plan

The following discussion is centred on the understanding that transition planning must integrate knowledge of the child and their preferences with evidence in literature. More specifically transition planning must incorporate

the following considerations:

- **Preparation of the Child:** Does the child have the necessary skills to function in this setting (toileting, eating) or otherwise relevant supports to facilitate this.
- **Collaboration:** The school, educators and parents must collaborate around the child's individual characteristics including their sensory experience, cognitive ability, and strengths and weaknesses. This will allow collaboration around how to effectively communicate with the child and their families, and to effectively prepare the child for their transition.
- **Child-Centred Planning:** Transition planning should consider a child's individual characteristics and preferences. Parents are likely to be able to provide vital information to inform this process, as discussed in the following.

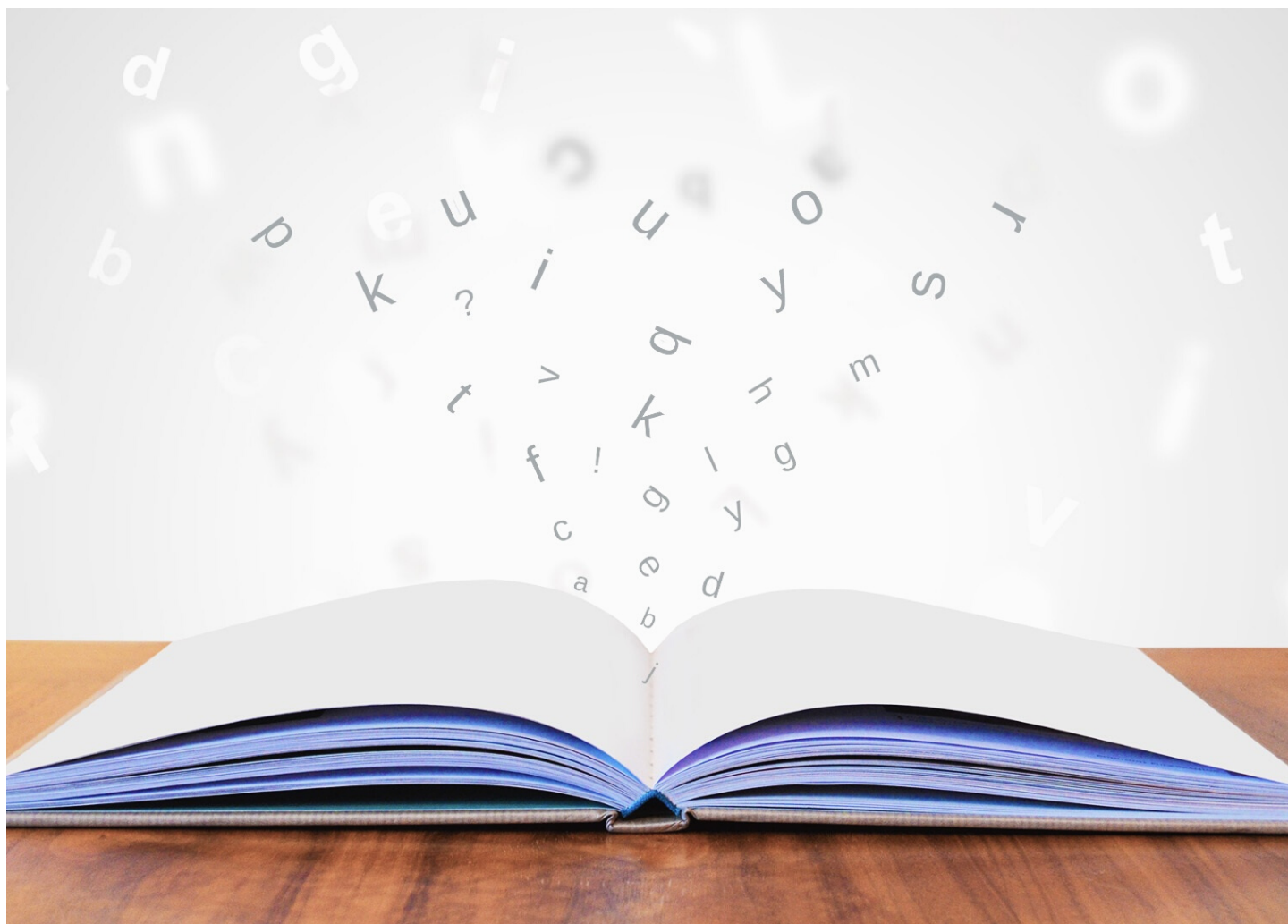


Stoner and Colleagues (2007) identify parental perspective as a vital tool for transition planning. In their research, Stoner and Colleagues (2007) identified major themes in respect to planning successful transitions. These were described as follows:

- Parents consistently identified child-centred transition strategies as the most effective.
- Communication between the school and family was considered a vital link for success.
- An understanding of the child as an individual was pivotal to transition planning.
- Parents can often preempt what may become a barrier to transitioning.
- Parents were able to identify which strategies were likely to be the most effective for their child.

What this research highlights is the value of parental perspective in planning a successful transition. Stoner and Colleagues (2007) suggest that this is amplified by collaboration with educators to ensure a child with ASD has the best opportunities to transition to Primary School effectively.

Research suggests a number of variables to take into consideration when transition planning where these consistently link into the concept of planning according to the individual's specific traits and preferences. Earlier in this guide sensory preference and cognitive profiling were discussed, and how a child with ASD can be at increased vulnerability to challenges when managing transitions. Whilst every child is susceptible to these challenges, children with ASD are likely to experience this in a more pronounced manner. Before planning



for a transition, one must first consider the individual's unique characteristics and what they may find difficult about the transition in light of this. One must also consider when to implement strategies to support the transition. For instance, what needs to be done prior, during and what measures are in place to check for efficacy. Tullis and Colleagues (2015) highlighted the importance of transition planning in their literature review, where 32 studies were compared and consistently concluded that intervention planning around transitions was associated with improved outcomes for individuals with ASD. This was corroborated by Lequia and Colleagues (2014) who reviewed 14 studies that explored horizontal transitions within education. Through the comparison and analyses of these transitions, Lequia and Colleagues (2014) concluded that Activity Scheduling had the strongest support of the intervention strategies used in respect to horizontal transitions. It was also noted that this

strategy is flexible and provides the capacity to align with a child's preferences. This strategy and alternatives are discussed in the following.

Strategies for managing the transition

Different transition strategies require varying levels of resources, collaboration and effort from the child with ASD. The following explores evidence based strategies that are suggested to assist with the transition from Prep to Primary School. This is based on a recent systematic review of 27 studies by Nuske and Colleagues (2019) that explored effective strategies for managing school transitions. The following is broken into four categories:

- Planning
- Visual Supports
- Social Supports
- Emotional Regulation



1) Planning

Nuske and Colleagues (2019) suggest the following planning strategies as outlined in the below. This table breaks down the intervention strategy, point of implementation and provides a rationale as to its purpose.

Table 1. Planning for Prep to Primary Transitions

Strategy	When	Rationale
Visit the new school →	Before →	"Visiting the new school setting with student and meeting the new teacher and other school staff (visit can be with the parent or pre-transition teacher). More than once if possible to establish a partnership and reduce anxiety and stress." (Nuske et al., 2019)
Include students →	Throughout →	"Child-centred planning including open, supportive discussions with student, check for understanding of transition and value input of the student help to address problems in a supportive environment where's student's voice is heard." (Nuske et al., 2019)



2) Visual Supports

Nuske and Colleagues (2019) further suggested the following planning strategies as outlined in the below. As above, this table breaks down the intervention strategy, point of implementation and provides a rationale as to its purpose.

Table 2. Visual Supports for Prep to Primary Transitions

Strategy	When	Rationale
School Map	Before	"Map of the new post-transition school // provides familiarity with the new environment." (Nuske et al., 2019)
Photos / Pictures	Before	"Photos of the new school building, new teachers or other areas, or pictures representing the school change (e.g. in the format of a social story or induction booklet) prepares student for the new environment." (Nuske et al., 2019)
Checklists	Before / At	"Checklists (e.g. packing school bag, homework) helps orientate and prepare the student before the transition to new setting." (Nuske et al., 2019)
Schedules/Calendar	At	"Picture schedule of day in the new school, calendar/diaries, or colour-coding of timetables provides predictability of routines for student." (Nuske et al., 2019)



3) Social Supports

Nuske and Colleagues (2019) suggested the following planning strategies in respect to social supports, as outlined in the below table.

Table 3. Social Supports for Prep to Primary Transitions

Strategy	When	Rationale
Peer Buddies →	At →	"Student buddy or social skills groups in the new school provides the student with support in navigating the new school and make new friends." (Nuske et al., 2019)
Safe Person/Space →	At →	"A peer/adult mentor that gets along with/can guide students, when needed (safe person) or physical area the student can go to (safe space) a person or place the student can go to for support at school." (Nuske et al., 2019)
Lunch Break Structure →	At →	"Structured playtime support such as timetabled activities to support students around making and keeping friends and to support cooperative group work." (Nuske et al., 2019)
Staff Relationships →	Throughout →	"Trusting relationships with adults and peers to ensure student feels support in their new learning environment." (Nuske et al., 2019)



4) Emotional Regulation

Finally, Nuske and Colleagues (2019) suggested the following planning strategies in respect to emotional regulation, as outlined in the below table.

Table 4. Emotional Regulation for Prep to Primary Transitions

Strategy	When	Rationale
Coping Strategies →	Throughout →	"Allowing student time/space to cope with stress with allocated time for preferred or relaxing activities (e.g. listening to music or playing a computer game) or alone time (when needed) to empower the student to calm themselves when stressed and to maintain class harmony." (Nuske et al., 2019)
Emotion Thermometer →	Throughout →	"Provides students with opportunity to monitor their emotional states with the help of their parent/teacher to allow students to become more familiar with their own emotional states." (Nuske et al., 2019)



These strategies are likely to be effective for the Prep to Primary School transition as they address some of the ASD characteristics associated with challenges managing transitions. Research by Makin and Colleagues (2017) examined factors associated with transitioning children with ASD between schools to identify strategies associated with a successful transition. In this study, 15 children were seen twice across 4 months, where their respective teachers and parents were also interviewed at these points. This research concluded, amongst other findings, that both planning and social supports were effective strategies for supporting a successful transition. Further research was conducted by Mandy and Colleagues (2016) explored the emotional and behavioural implications of school transitions on children with ASD. This study included 37

participants with ASD that required participation from their respective teachers. Similarly to Nuske and Colleagues (2019) conclusions, Mandy and Colleagues (2016) identified visual supports and emotional regulation strategies as helpful in reducing challenging behavioural and emotional responses.

These specific strategies are well suited to the Prep to Primary School transition as they help mitigate some of the challenges children with ASD face during this transition. Through Planning, a child has the ability to mitigate barriers associated with social skill deficits by building a partnership with their teacher and peers. This allows for collaboration between the child, parent and teacher and can assist with reducing stress and anxiety in a new environment.



Visual Supports help mitigate limitations associated with sensory profiles and cognitive ability as it provides another avenue for communication (such as visual aides) and provides context and familiarity which can assist with informing a child's sensory perception. Social Supports also assist with overcoming deficits in social skills and associated challenges. This may also assist the child with developing trust and reducing anxiety at school, and allows for the implementation of structure in routine in non-routine activities such as lunch breaks. This is suggested to support a successful transition as it aligns with insistence for sameness. Increases in routine and predictability in the new environment is likely to further support the child's transition. Finally, Emotional Regulation strategies assist the child and their supports with managing their difficult emotions and provide a

safe outlet for the child to explore their emotional state. This also helps minimise class disruption which may assist the child in developing relationships with peers and reduce challenging behaviours at school.

Whilst these strategies are likely to be beneficial for a number of students transitioning from Prep to Primary School, individual considerations and preferences must be accounted for when transition planning. However when time and resources are invested into successful transition planning, a child with ASD has the opportunity to not only transition but develop new relationships, skills and strengths through this process.