

**A guide for parents of autistic teenage girls: Transitioning from Secondary
School to Post-School Education**

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is commonly associated with challenges in social and communication skills, differences in executive functioning, and a strong reliance on routine (Essex & Melham, 2019). Autistic females often present with distinct characteristics that are frequently misunderstood or overlooked, including heightened self-criticism (Ko et al., 2021), a greater ability to mask difficulties (Ko et al., 2021), increased rates of anxiety (Wodka et al., 2021; Leow et al., 2024), and more socially acceptable special interests (Essex & Melham, 2019). These traits can make both daily (horizontal) and long-term (vertical) transitions more difficult (Nuske, Dissanayake, & Barbaro, 2019). Transitions often involve changes in family dynamics, peers, environments, and daily interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which can disrupt routine and a preference for sameness (Wehmeyer & Zager, 2016). The move from secondary school to post-school education (PSE) is especially stressful for autistic females due to greater demands on social interaction, independence, and communication (Nuske, Dissanayake, & Barbaro, 2019). This resource examines two key traits of autistic females that influence transition success and offers two strategies to support transitions into PSE by critically analysing current research. In this paper, I use identity-first language to support the view that autism is an intrinsic aspect of identity, not a separate condition (Taboas, Doepke, & Zimmerman, 2023).

Trait One: Masking & Anxiety

Research shows a significant gap between general autism knowledge and its presentation in females (Leow et al., 2024). Due to a male-focused research bias, many autistic females are misdiagnosed or go undiagnosed, as their traits differ from the

traditional “male” presentation (Suckle, 2021). Masking, the ability to hide or compensate for autistic traits, is a dominant theme among autistic females (Suckle, 2021). Autistic females often demonstrate greater awareness of social norms and mimic others to blend in (Ko et al., 2021). While this may assist with navigating social situations, it is mentally exhausting and linked to burnout, increased anxiety, and emotional meltdowns in safe environments like home (Leow et al., 2024). Neurodevelopmental differences may also drive perfectionism and self-imposed high standards, further contributing to anxiety (Essex & Melham, 2019). Given the link between masking and poorer mental health outcomes, in this paper these concepts warrant joint consideration (Wood-Downie et al., 2020).

When combined with the demands of transitioning into PSE, these traits contribute to challenges in understanding academic expectations (Essex & Melham, 2019), interpreting social demands (Suckle, 2021), and building self-confidence in the face of anxiety (Ko et al., 2021; Lindstrom et al., 2012). Essex and Melham (2019) found that limited understanding of autistic female presentation may explain higher anxiety levels during PSE transitions. To address this, supports should focus on non-academic challenges such as maintaining healthy relationships (Kim et al., 2021), managing mental health (Egerton, Ellis, & Carpenter, 2019), developing independence (Lindstrom et al., 2012), and navigating available supports (Kim et al., 2021). These approaches may reduce transition-related anxiety and stress. However, limitations of these resources, including small sample sizes, mixed-gender cohorts, and a lack of recent studies, mean recommendations should be applied with caution.

Trait Two: Challenges with puberty and relationships

Adolescence presents significant challenges for autistic females, driven not only by increased social and academic demands but also by hormonal changes during puberty (Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017). Menstrual difficulties often compound these challenges, frequently coinciding with the critical period of transition planning from secondary school (Ellis et al., 2025). Sensory hypersensitivities, emotional regulation difficulties, and challenging behaviors commonly intensify in autistic females during their periods, and although this area remains underresearched, menstruation is believed to exacerbate autism-related challenges (Seear, Collings, & McKay, 2023). Considering these factors during this pivotal period is essential for appreciating the added challenges and behaviors autistic females may experience throughout adolescence, and therefore when transitioning into PSE.

Autistic females frequently report diminished social skills relative to their male counterparts, a disparity associated with elevated self-criticism and anxiety-driven low self-confidence (Ko et al., 2021). Within PSE contexts, autistic individuals describe heightened difficulties in establishing and sustaining friendships compared to their experiences in secondary school (Nuske, Dissanayake, & Barbaro, 2019). Moreover, they encounter amplified challenges in navigating social interactions specific to academic settings, including group assignments, discussions, large class environments, comprehending instructions, and interpreting non-verbal cues from peers and educators (Bell et al., 2017). Socially, autistic females often face increased challenges during adolescence and early adulthood, as peer relationships become more complex and

centre on shared interests, values, mutual decision-making, and reciprocal behaviors (Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017). Supports in which educate autistic females about what is happening to their body and why they feel a certain way is vitally important leading up to, and during transitions, to aid them in managing their moods and behaviours during menstruation (Ellis et al., 2025). Supporting autistic females to understand neurotypical behaviour can help them make sense of peer interactions. Importantly, such education should not aim to change autistic behaviour, but to foster mutual understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity (Bell et al., 2017).

Strategy One: Individualised Transition Planning

The most effective transition supports are person-centered, meticulously tailored to the individual's unique needs, and characterised by ongoing, comprehensive collaboration among all stakeholders (Essex & Melham, 2019). Transition planning is a capacity-building process collaboratively developed to create a holistic profile of the autistic individual, encompassing their strengths, challenges, preferences, and interests, and to outline the necessary steps for a successful transition to PSE (Wehmeyer & Zager, 2016; reference). Such plans should incorporate explicit instructions, related services and supports, community engagement opportunities, skill development, and clearly defined, timely goals (Wehmeyer & Zager, 2016). Given the heterogeneity of ASD, it is imperative that transition plans are individualised to reflect the person's context and aspirations (Bell et al., 2017). Central to this process is the autistic female's active involvement and buy-in, without it, the plan's effectiveness is severely compromised (Essex & Melham, 2019). Additionally, having a designated coordinator or

single point of contact responsible for overseeing and managing the transition plan has been shown to enhance its success (Essex & Melham, 2019). Ideally, individualised transition planning should begin in early secondary school (ages 10–13) to maximize its impact (Bell et al., 2017). While parental engagement remains critical, its efficacy within an interdisciplinary framework is optimised when parents act as key stakeholders rather than the sole decision-makers or the ones “calling all the shots” (Essex & Melham, 2019). Once a transition plan is established, a comprehensive understanding of the autistic female’s unique needs and challenges emerges, enabling the identification and prioritisation of specific, targeted supports such as visual aids, peer mentoring (such as a buddy system), and structured practice sessions.

In Australia, while transition planning is not mandated, most schools acknowledge its importance (Queensland Department of Education, n.d.). However, available services are often underfunded and insufficiently tailored to meet the specific needs of autistic females (Essex & Melham, 2019). Fortunately, effective tools do exist to support the development of robust transition plans. The *Transition to Employment Toolkit* by Ambitious about Autism (2023) is one example of a comprehensive resource, designed to assist autistic young people in navigating transitions after secondary school and can be used to help guide a personalised transition plan.

Strategy Two: Building Non-Academic Skills

Research consistently shows that successful transition into PSE relies heavily on the development of non-academic skills. These include self-determination, awareness

of personal strengths and needs, effective communication with peers and staff, independent living abilities such as cooking and budgeting, mental health management, and interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues (Bell et al., 2017; Lindstrom et al., 2012; Wehmeyer & Zager, 2016). However, support for autistic students in school and PSE often prioritises academic outcomes, such as tutoring, resource access, class selection, and writing assistance, while neglecting these critical life skills (Bell et al., 2017). Autistic students themselves have consistently identified non-academic skills as essential for a smooth transition (Kim et al., 2021). Although existing research rarely focuses exclusively on autistic females, its findings still offer valuable guidance for supporting this subgroup.

For autistic females, targeted development of self-awareness, mental health management, self-determination, and confidence is particularly important (Essex & Melham, 2019). Tailored supports in these areas can reduce anxiety around PSE and foster a more positive, successful experience (Kim et al., 2021). Achieving this requires individualised transition planning that addresses the unique life skill challenges faced by the autistic female, supported by collaboration between students, families, schools, post-secondary staff, allied health professionals, and other relevant supports (Essex & Melham, 2019). With the exception of Essex and Melham (2019), current studies involve both males and females, highlighting the persistent lack of research specifically examining autistic females.

The Stepped Transition in Education Program for Students with ASD (STEPS) offers a promising model for bridging this gap. Its structured framework develops both academic and life skills, tailored to individual needs, and can be adapted to address the

distinct challenges faced by autistic females (White, 2017). Integrating programs like STEPS into individualised plans may optimise both transition outcomes and long-term academic achievement.

Conclusion

Autistic females face distinct challenges during the transition to PSE, shaped by factors such as masking, heightened anxiety, and the social and developmental demands of adolescence. Current transition supports are often under-resourced and insufficiently tailored to their needs. Evidence underscores the importance of early, individualised transition planning and the integration of non-academic life skills to foster independence, confidence, and mental wellbeing. Addressing these unique challenges through interdisciplinary collaboration and gender-informed approaches is essential to improving outcomes and ensuring autistic females can thrive in PSE.

Although much of the existing research on transition to post-secondary education is not specific to autistic females, it nevertheless offers valuable insights that can inform and enhance individualised supports for this subgroup. Given the unique challenges autistic girls face, there is a clear need for more focused research in this area to better tailor interventions and improve transition outcomes in the future.

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