



# MANAGING TRANSITIONS BIG AND SMALL

Jacqui Shepherd, PhD.

Many autistic children and youth find transitions to be difficult because they dislike changes to their routines or their environment. By understanding the process of transition in everyday situations and managing associated anxiety, parents can be better equipped and feel more confident in supporting their children in the bigger life transitions that they will face.

## **Transitions are Challenging**

Early research on autism highlights the desire on the part of autistic children to keep their worlds constant and unchanging. Leo Kanner referred to it as the “anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness.”<sup>1</sup> Any change to the status quo can be unsettling and cause anxiety, particularly if there is no preparation or warning. This applies not just to small everyday transitions, such as leaving the house or getting changed for bed, but also to the bigger life events, such as starting school or moving to a different house. The need for predictability and routine can be very powerful. Some autistic children live happily and vividly in the moment and may find it hard to imagine the future.

Sensory sensitivities can mean that leaving a space of perceived safety, warmth and calm, such as the home, to go outside or to a different and less familiar or more challenging environment can be overwhelming. Children who are sensitive to busy and noisy spaces will find leaving the quiet of home to go to a supermarket a very unappealing prospect. Similarly, when children are asked to stop doing an activity that they are enjoying, such as having fun at a soft play center, it could trigger anxiety or even a “meltdown.” This is especially true if the request is made with little or no warning.

Having intense interests or the ability to hyperfocus can be strengths for autistic children. It allows them to concentrate for long periods of time and to pay attention to small details. However, it can make it hard for some children to leave one activity to begin another, especially if they are in deep concentration.

For other children on the spectrum, the combination of autism, additional learning difficulties, limited communication or difficulty with social interaction can further complicate the experience of transitions. The use of social stories, checklists, picture schedules, timers and other visual supports can be invaluable in supporting the transition process.

## Everyday Transitions

Understanding how to support autistic children in their small, everyday transitions can be helpful when it comes to addressing the bigger transitions. For example, using visual sequences for the daily routines of getting up, showering, getting dressed, eating breakfast and going to school not only signals the order of activities but also offers reassurance about the micro-transitions themselves. When such strategies are being used on a daily basis, they become familiar tools that can help us to support the bigger transitions.

The strategies below offer a range of tools that can help parents manage transitions with their autistic children, although not every strategy will apply to every situation.

## Strategies to Support Transitions

<b>Pre-preparation</b>	Be sure to finish one thing before starting another. Keep in mind that some activities can be completely absorbing, so any request to change activities will feel intrusive. Allow time for children to gradually withdraw from an activity through the use of countdown cards, timers or verbal instructions.
<b>Reconnaissance</b>	Gathering all the information you can about a new situation can help you and your child to prepare for the transition. You could gather story books about starting school, autism-friendly guides to airports, pictures of a school or holiday destination, schedules showing the start and finish times of activities, and more. These help you to be informed and enable you to prepare your child effectively.
<b>Preparation</b>	The goal is to individualize the experience for your child. Preparation will vary according to your child's needs, abilities and difficulties. It may involve preparing visual schedules, writing social stories or preparing verbal cues. You may want to rehearse the transition in advance. It can get difficult if things change, but preparation supports the process.
<b>Planning</b>	As the parent, you need to have everything that you will need on hand so that the transition is smooth for you. What are your needs at this point? What will help to reassure you and give you confidence that the transition will go well? For example, make sure tickets, passports and hand luggage are all ready. If it is about starting school, have you got everything prepared for the first day? For smaller transitions, such as leaving the house, you may wish to ensure coats, bags and shoes are lined up near the door to facilitate a calm transition.
<b>Choice and Control</b>	In situations that are changing, we all like to feel that we have some control. Wherever possible, involve children in planning the transition and look for opportunities in which they can have some choice or control. For example, can they decide what they have in their packed lunch on the first day of school? Can they decide what toys to take on holiday? Can they decide who to sit next to or what clothes to wear? What game do they want to play?

<p><b>Managing Anxiety</b></p>	<p>Give some thought to how you are going to manage the almost inevitable anxiety at the time of transition. The anxiety may take the form of screaming in a new play setting, turning around and trying to run away on a new outing, or panicking in a busy and crowded place. What methods work best for your child? Is it reassurance through softly spoken, familiar words or phrases, or finding a quiet space? Is it through a familiar toy, or is it a particular comfort food? Be ready to use your calming strategies when needed.</p>
<p><b>Allow Time</b></p>	<p>Transitions can take time. Give yourself and your child time to get used to new situations, and try not to give up too quickly. For example, the first few weeks at a new school can be difficult. Remind yourself that it will take some time for your child to settle in. This will help you be patient and put less pressure on your child. Going to a new play setting or doing an activity for the first time could also be problematic. You could use a "20 minute rule," or a time limit of your choosing, to allow your child to become accustomed to a new place. Accept the fact that those first 20 minutes will be hard. Be prepared to leave if things don't improve after the allocated time, but don't abandon hope if the first time does not go as planned. The second time may be easier as parts of the experience will now be more familiar.</p>
<p><b>Debrief and Celebrate Progress</b></p>	<p>Remember to praise and reassure children throughout the process. Recognize what they did well, and acknowledge the progress they are making.</p> <p>Take time to reflect on what strategies worked and what went well in that situation. Are there strategies or supports that you could use again? What did you and your child enjoy, and how can you build on that? Involve your child, where possible, and ask what made the new experience enjoyable.</p>

By following some of the strategies outlined above, you can help your child deal with transitions both big and small.

**References**

Kanner, L. (1943). Autistic disturbances of affective contact. *Nervous Child* 2, 217-250.



Jacqui Shepherd, PhD, is an Honorary Senior Lecturer in Inclusive Education at the University of Sussex where she also co-directs the Autism Community Research Network Sussex (ACORNS). She teaches and researches disability, autism and inclusive education, including recent research on the experiences of families with children with disabilities during the pandemic. She is also Global Technical Lead: Inclusive Learning and Teaching for Sightsavers working on disability inclusive education projects in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Her doctorate focused on experiences of transition for young people with autism.

For information only. Views, recommendations, findings and opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Autism Advocate Parenting Magazine Inc. or anyone otherwise involved in the magazine. The magazine and others are not responsible for any errors, inaccuracies or omissions in this content. The magazine provides no guarantees, warranties, conditions or representations, and will not be liable with respect to this content. Please read our full terms [here](#).