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**Transition from Primary to  
Secondary school advice for  
parents with children/young  
people with Special  
Educational Needs (SEN)  
/Additional Learning Needs  
(ALN)**

Children and young people with SEN/ALN can find change difficult, including starting or moving to a new school.

Change in the school environment can make the individual have major “wobbles” and make them anxious. Anxiety about lack of control of their environment can lead to the individual feeling panicky all of the time and this has a knock-on effect on their performance. They may lash out at others or withdraw into themselves in a form of self-protection.

Secondary schools are places of change. This causes additional strains on a child who is also trying to cope with their underlying difficulties and now has more problems layered on top. This can result in a breakdown in the child’s mechanisms for coping and this is why we sometimes see secondary school being a crisis time, after the child has seemingly been able to cope in primary school.

The move to secondary school exposes the child at key times in the school day such as coping alone at break and lunchtimes. Teachers may not be present all of the time to supervise in the same way as in the primary school playground and not all teachers in a large school will be aware of the child’s difficulties.

## **Preparing for change**

### **Managing your child's anxiety**

If you are concerned that your child may become particularly anxious about the change, make sure you give them the opportunity to ask questions about their concerns and explain why the change will benefit them. This can also help you to reassure and provide them with any resources that can help with their anxiety e.g. finding out if you can have access to a map of the school, or examples of timetables. You could provide them with a worry toy, book or box where they can write or draw any concerns they have.

Your child may also have complex sensory issues and may become anxious due to different smells, noises and lights in the school environment. To help them cope with this you can ask school if they are able to take in reassuring and familiar smells. Some people are sensitive to bright lights or noise so sunglasses or earplugs may help them. Schools are responsible for making reasonable adjustments to help an autistic pupil feel more comfortable.

### **Plan visits and phased entry**

Visit the school several times with your child before they start. Meet and take photos of any key people who will be involved in their transition. Make a book of photos and information they can refer to as this can help to relieve their anxieties. You might be able to arrange a phased entry into the new school.

## **Use visual supports**

**Visual supports** can help your child to understand what will be happening and reinforce verbal communication. These will need to be used more than once, particularly if the change is going to take place over a prolonged period of time. When using visual supports it's important to:

- **use clear language** and give your child time to process what is said
- make sure that you show outcomes as well as the stages of a process, for example if you are using a visual support to explain a bus journey to school, make sure you use pictures of the whole process, including them arriving at school.
- Mark the day of the change on a calendar and encourage your child to count down to that day.

**Social stories** short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which includes specific information about what to expect in that situation and why – could help your child know what to expect in the new school.

## **Communicate with staff and share information**

Sharing information with staff at the new school about your child's needs, likes, dislikes, capabilities, difficulties, and what causes them anxiety. Creating a 'passport' style guide could provide the new school the more current and up to date information. Effective communication between you, your child, the Local Authority, school and any support services, will make a positive difference.

If you have a key worker or transition coordinator, they can help with this and with preparing a transition plan, or including targets and support strategies in an existing statement or education plan.

Providing staff with information on how to deal with any specific behaviours or obsessions, if visual supports such as PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) Boards have previously been used, then it's important that these are made available to your child. Some children and young people find it difficult to transfer certain skills into different situations so putting these means of communication and all the appropriate interventions in place is important.

## **Supporting your child during the change**

When the change is taking place you could:

- keep familiar things close to your child and make sure you communicate clearly with them

- give specific instructions, without using gestures or specific facial expressions. This will help them to process what is being said to them more effectively.
- Using visual supports and a visual timetable can help your child to understand what's happening. Give them lots of praise for coping with the change and adapting to a new routine.
- Enquire whether any other pupils from your child's class or school are going to the same secondary school, having a group of known friends when they start school will help to increase confidence and reduce their anxiety.
- Look into any summer schemes or groups locally that may have others from the new school – recognising similar faces can also help with starting a the new school.
- Help your child to be more organised and taking responsibility
- Practice getting ready for school
- Introduce the use of a weekly timetable to get used to using one before starting secondary school.

## **The role of the primary school in the transition process**

If your child is starting secondary school or changing school, any information about their educational needs gathered by your child's primary or previous school should be passed on to the new school.

Keep in regular contact with staff working with your child to see how they are progressing. If you notice that the school is not dealing with specific behaviours appropriately, or isn't using the means of communication that your child is familiar with, bring this to the attention of the relevant staff and arrange a meeting with them. Contacting your child's teacher or Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) to ask any questions that you have can help with the transition process between schools e.g. extra visits to secondary schools, any things to work on during the summer holidays etc.

## **What the new school should do**

When your child starts school, the school is likely to assess your child's levels of attainment, even though they may already have received information from a previous school. If your child has identified additional support or special educational needs when they start school, staff should:

- use information provided by the previous school/setting to develop an appropriate curriculum
- assess, identify and focus on your child's skills and areas where support will be needed in class

- ensure that there is ongoing observation and assessment in order to plan the next steps
- Involve you in developing and implementing a joint learning approach at home and in school.

## **Involving you as the parents**

Parents should always be consulted and kept informed of the action taken to help their child and of the outcome of this action. The school must tell you when they first start giving extra or different help for your child because they have additional support or special educational needs. The extra or different help could be:

- a changed way of teaching
- some help from an extra adult, perhaps in a small group
- use of particular equipment like a computer or a desk with a sloping top.

Remember, you know your child better than anyone, so talk to the school if you have concerns about their education.

## **Things to think about:**

### **What is different about Secondary school?**

- Classes may be larger
- Bigger school environment
- No personal desks and the use of lockers to store belongings
- Subject specific teachers
- Independent travel to school
- Homework – greater volume and expectation
- The need for greater organisational skills and meeting deadlines.
- Career choices at a time when the child may not see he has any strengths
- Consider school uniform – adapt garments for ease of dressing
- Do as much preparation for the school day the night before –clothes, place the school bag by the door

### **Key transition difficulties**

- Negotiating the way around school – they may get lost and this may result in being late for class

- Meeting new children who may not understand difficulties
- Meeting new teachers who do not recognise their difficulties
- Learning about the rules of the school – explicit and implicit
- Learning new teachers' names and their expectations and styles of teaching
- Learning about the timetable and the appropriate books and tools required
- Carrying equipment around all day – no central place to return to – therefore increasing the chances of losing equipment or having incorrect equipment for the next class
- Coping with change determined by others not themselves
- Independently organising work and managing own timetable
- In PE and games coping with more complex activities such as changing in/out of PE kit
- At break times there is less supervision from teaching staff
- Coping with new topics they have not studied before

### **School based strategies**

Information should be transferred over so that all teachers and school know a profile of strengths and difficulties –this could be kept in a diary/passport guide/ profile.

- Visits to school should try to take place over 2 terms
- Draw up a map of school/ give opportunity to take photos to become familiar with school setting
- Take photos of the buildings, rooms and teachers to aid memory
- Parents to be given the opportunity to visit school
- Timetable given as soon as possible – keep several copies on view around the house
- Baseline assessment undertaken to check where learning level is
- Consideration of adaptations required for classroom/sport and new subjects
- Consideration of help required for organising work
- Consideration of help required in note-taking
- Consideration of where locker placed in school, and method to transport books and equipment
- Mentor/tutor introduced before new term
- Buddy system in place for first 2 terms
- Use of angle boards/position in class /amount of room required taken into consideration
- Adaptation of tools if required such as protractors, rulers, pens
- Extra time allowed for homework
- Work written down for individual on an ongoing basis if required

- 3 way communication card between school – different teachers, with home and with the individual