CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
DIAGNOSTIC CENTER, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Transition Help for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) usually share characteristics that make transitions to new classes or schools potential nightmares, not only for the student, but also parents and school staff. These include:

- Desire to maintain sameness in the environment, follow known routines
- Reduced flexibility
- Difficulty understanding verbal instructions
- Literally interpreting rules and instructions
- Difficulty learning from casual observation, picking up on social cues

WHY PLAN?

Carefully planned transitions that address the above characteristics can reduce student anxiety and the behavioral challenges, including school refusal, which may result.

The following methods for easing transitions have evolved in working with children who have ASD. These include strategies for:

- Preparing the receiving school staff
- Preparing the new environment to be as familiar as possible
- Preparing the student for what will happen and how s/he is to respond

PREPARING THE RECEIVING STAFF

Weeks prior to a transition to a new class or school, the sending teacher and case manager meets with their receiving counterparts at the new school. If the student has an individual aide, ideally s/he will be involved. The sending staff will be seeking information on the environment into which the student will transition so they can help prepare the student. They will share information about the student with the receiving staff, including information about effective supports for the student and his or her:

- Learning characteristics
- Achievement level
- Behavior
- Sensory processing differences
- Social skills

The participating staff will want to clarify the roles and tasks for each person, especially that of the case managers. Timelines should be set and persons identified for tasks such as contacting the parent and arranging a school visit, setting up an appointment for the receiving teacher(s) to visit the sending class, contacting other staff members who will be involved in the transition, and so on. When these assignments are clear and in writing, it reduces the risk that steps will be forgotten.

If the student is transitioning into a general education classroom, it will be important to discuss ways of preparing other students if there are behavioral oddities. Ways of eliciting acceptance and support among students can also be discussed.

Anticipate anxiety on the part of the student and the potential for related challenging behavior. Jointly working on a plan for addressing these, should they occur, will allow the receiving staff to benefit from the experiences of the former teacher.

The role of the case manager is a crucial one. It encompasses:

- Program planning
- Making sure that each of the student's teachers is aware of the student's disability and its impact on learning and behavior (including social awareness)
- Ensuring needed accommodations are made

Because of their difficulties in reading social cues and understanding the nuances of social language, students with ASD often become involved in conflicts with peers and have a high potential for being harassed, especially during their secondary school years. The case manager would:

- Ensure that there is a person on campus responsible for trouble shooting any peer conflicts
- Help create a positive school environment, possibly through disability awareness programs for staff and students
- Arrange for consistent supportive adult supervision and monitoring
- Actively monitor the student's academic and social progress

PREPARING THE NEW ENVIRONMENT

A visit to the student's current classroom by the receiving teacher and case manager will allow them to observe the student in class and to get ideas for elements familiar to the student that can be transferred to the new classroom. These might include:

- Posting the same rules
- Approximating the seating arrangement
- Adopting familiar routines (wording or signals for in-class transitions, scheduling of subjects, plan for dealing with completed and incomplete work, etc.)
- Copying visual cues, such as schedules and ways of showing changes to the schedule

The extent of adaptations needed, will vary among students. Some individuals tend to be more flexible than others, but most are reassured by visual cues that help them understand the class expectations.

PREPARING THE STUDENT AND PARENT

Parents and staff may begin preparing the student for the transition through the use of short social stories. Social stories are short, simple stories composed of sentences written from the student's viewpoint that describe the situation and state in a positive manner what behavior is expected. They may also describe the reaction of others to the situation or the expected behavior. The Social Stories technique was developed to help students with ASD understand what is happening or is going to happen, and what is expected of them. In writing stories to prepare the student for transitions, it is prudent to include the idea that sometimes plans change, as unforeseen events can disrupt the best of plans.

If the transition will involve several students from the same class, these students may visit the new classroom as a group. Arranging follow-up individual visits to the new class with the student's parents will help establish positive relationships between the receiving staff, the student, and parents. If this takes place shortly before school begins, the receiving teacher may already have some of the visible signs of familiarity in place, which can be pointed out to the student. If the student brings work samples, the teacher may look at them with him and comment positively on his or her efforts. Photos of the teacher with the student and of the new classroom may help the parents continue preparing and reassuring the student.

The teacher may give the student and parents a tour of the classroom and the school environment, including restrooms, cafeteria, the office, and the playing fields. If the schedule is in place, the teacher may walk the student through the sequence of places on the campus. S/he may offer the student help if he does not understand what to do. In case the parents have concerns they wish to share, the teacher may plan for some supervision of the student so they can talk without arousing the student's anxiety.