

Very few people like change – we tolerate it because it is an inevitable part of life, so we learn to cope with it and eventually appreciate the challenges and opportunities for our personal growth and development that it brings. However, for individuals with autism each and every change and transition can be very difficult.

Changes can be major, for example moves at different life stages (for example moving from home to nursery, nursery to primary school, primary school to secondary school, leaving school and preparing for adulthood). Changes can also be smaller interim changes that happen within those stages such as changing class at the end of each year, moving from Cubs to Scouts or up a grade in a swimming class.

Change can also be the daily transitions of moving from one activity to another, from place to place or person to person. These ongoing transitions may not always be acknowledged as a major difficulty by other people, but the way such changes and transitions are managed can make a big difference to an individual's well-being, ability to learn skills, make progress, build relationships and be happy.

Why are change and transition so difficult for people with autism?

Behaving appropriately in a given situation and being able to cope with change is dependent on understanding why something is happening, what the underlying social rules are and having the coping strategies to overcome anxiety when things change unexpectedly. Some people with autism may not have the communication skills and social understanding to understand why change is happening. Other people may seem unpredictable in their words and actions when the person with autism doesn't understand why they do and say these things. This may lead to increased stress and anxiety when even minor changes in routine occur. In an attempt to regain control of the situation and create some predictability, they may display rigid thinking and behavior to restore a sense of well-being.

Some people with autism may not understand cause and effect which can make predicting consequences difficult. In addition, some people with autism may have trouble problem solving due to inflexible thinking. This can make it difficult for some people with autism to imagine a different plan if the original plan has to change, leading to increased stress and anxiety.

What can we do to help?

It is important to understand autism and how it affects each person. Some people with autism may need predictability, consistency and planning for change. Some may need us to modify our own language and the environment for greater clarity. Some may need direct teaching of appropriate skills and of coping strategies to minimise anxiety. Strategies can include keeping what we say short and simple, giving instructions in small steps and in the correct action sequence and using positive language so they know what you want them to do. It is also important to be aware of sensory sensitivities and aim for low arousal. It may also be useful to have clear physical boundaries for activities, structuring the day as much as possible and providing visual supports if necessary.

Making use of social stories, buddy systems, peer mentoring and circles of friends can be useful to provide support in understanding and keeping social rules in a range of situations. Coping strategies that may help include:

- Comfort objects carried from one situation to another that can reduce anxiety
- 'Traffic lights' cue cards that allow time and scope to pause, reflect, then act
- Favourite toys and activities to focus on as a reward for getting through a difficult change or transition
- Taking 'time out', exercise, breathing and relaxation exercises to combat the physical and emotional stress of coping with change

Transition Planning

When it comes to major transitions in the life of an individual with autism, it is essential to remember the importance of preparation and planning well in advance. PREDICTABILITY is the key to success. For young people with a Statement of SEN the transition planning process should begin automatically in the year of their 14th birthday (Year 9) with a transition review, leading to a detailed transition plan. The transition plan should address core areas such as housing, leisure, relationships, further education, employment, transport, benefits, health and personal care. Specific needs related to autism should also be taken into account. The plan should be drawn up with the input of all relevant professionals and family members, taking account of the young person's views, and should not be a static document but should evolve as individual needs change. For those without a Statement but who will require support after they leave school it is important that the local Connexions Service ensures that schools are aware of the options available to these individuals and offer appropriate support. The Learning and Skills Council takes responsibility for the funding and planning of further education and training post 16.

Individuals may be assessed by their local Social Services Department either under the Children Act 1989 (under 18) or the Community Care Act 1990 (18+) to identify level of need and draw up a care plan to determine what services and support they can offer. This assessment should take place no later than three months before the young person leaves school.

The role of families in transition planning is crucial but they often need support to find a way through the maze of getting their son/daughter's needs met in the transition from children's services to adult services. Unfortunately, young people with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome may not meet the eligibility criteria for learning disability services and may require the assistance of an autism specific service.

These resources may be useful:

www.after16.org.uk
www.connexions.gov.uk
www.lsc.gov.uk (Learning and Skills Council)
www.housingoptions.org.uk
www.natspec.org.uk (directory of specialist colleges)
www.direct.gov.uk (comprehensive website of services for people with disabilities)

Bibliography:

'Transition Toolkit', edited by Karen Broderick and Tina Mason-Williams, BILD Publications (2005)