

Change is an inevitable part of life. It can be challenging, but it can also give us opportunities for personal growth and development. Some autistic people find change and transition difficult.

This information sheet introduces reasons why, and how we can support autistic people during change and transition.

There are different types of change and transition:

- Major changes, for example moving from home to nursery, nursery to primary school, primary school to secondary school, leaving school and preparing for adulthood.
- Smaller changes, for example changing class at the end of each year, moving from Cubs to Scouts or moving up a grade in a swimming class.
- Daily transitions, for example 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 autistic individual's well-being, ability to learn skills, make progress and build relationships.

Why do some autistic people struggle with change and transition?

Being able to cope with change depends 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 autistic people may not have the communication skills and social understanding to understand why change is happening. Some autistic people may experience 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 behaviour.

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

What can we do to help?

- Understand how autism affects each person individually.
- Provide as much predictability and consistency as possible, and plan for change.
- Make sure the language you use is clear. Keep things short and simple. Give instructions in small steps and in the correct action sequence. Use positive language.
- Teach skills and coping strategies to minimise anxiety.
- Be aware of the person's sensory issues.
- Some autistic people may need a well-structured day, clear physical boundaries for activities and visual supports if appropriate.
- Use social stories, buddy systems, peer mentoring and circles of friends to help understand social rules.
- Allow the person to use comfort objects to move from one situation to another if this helps them to reduce their anxiety.
- Use rewards for getting through difficult changes and transitions.
- Encourage the use of 'time out', exercise, breathing and relaxation exercises to help with the physical and emotional stress of coping with change.