



Successful transitions throughout the school day

A guide for parents and carers
of Autistic primary school students

What are micro-transitions?

Often when we think of school-based transitions, we tend to think of the big milestones like starting primary school, moving up to high school, or finishing the school term. While these big changes are important to plan for, there are a vast number of smaller transitions, known as micro-transitions, that students face every day when attending school. These can include things like:

- Transitioning between home and school at the start and end of the day
- Transitioning between break times and classroom times
- Changing from one activity to another within the classroom
- Moving from their regular classroom to another room (e.g. art, P.E., school assembly)

While these daily transitions may not appear too strenuous on the surface, they can add up throughout the school days, weeks and months, which can significantly impact your child's executive functioning and wellbeing.

What makes transitions tricky for Autistic children?

There are several factors that can make transitions challenging and exhausting for Autistic children, including:

- **Preference for predictability** – Autistic people often prefer structure and predictability and find comfort in familiar routines. Unfamiliar or unexpected changes can be unsettling and lead to stress and anxiety.
- **Time blindness** – the concept of time can often be challenging for Autistic children, especially when they get hyper-focused on a task. This can mean they lose track of time and not be aware that a transition is coming up. It can then feel like the transition has occurred with no warning which can be distressing.
- **Shifting focus** – Autistic people can get very absorbed in a task and get a strong sense of achievement upon completion. This can make it difficult to stop a task and change focus to another one before finishing the first task.
- **Sensory sensitivities** – moving into a new environment (e.g. outside for recess/lunch) or sudden changes to sensory inputs (e.g. a noisy classroom activity) can cause stress if they occur without warning.



How can I help my child manage micro-transitions?

When supporting your child with transitions, no matter how big or small, it is important to anticipate and plan for the support they may need. These supports need to be based on your child's unique strengths and challenges. There is no one size fits all approach to supporting transitions, as each child will have unique stressors. Also, their capacity to deal with transitions may vary from day to day; what might feel easy one day could feel impossible the next.

Below we explore a few strategies you can try to help lighten the load of daily transitions. These strategies can help by:

- providing predictability and structure
- making processing easier
- managing expectations
- maintaining consistency.

Write a list

Discuss with your child's teacher what micro-transitions your child finds difficult during the day. They may be similar or different from some of the transition your child struggles with at home. By making a list it will help you:

- Understand how many micro-transitions your child has during the day
- Explore ways to support your child with micro-transitions
- Share successful strategies used at home

The list will help you prioritise the tricky and easy micro-transitions that your child has during the day.



Visual supports

Visual supports are a great way to present a schedule of activities, transitions and changes to Autistic children.

Visual supports can assist Autistic children (and all children) by:

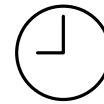
- Providing clear instructions and reducing confusion
- Providing back up if there is a communication breakdown
- Remaining the same and creating predictability
- Decreasing processing time.

The amount of information your child needs for transitions may vary. There may be certain transitions during the school day where your child requires more detail than what is typically given. For example, if they find packing up at the end of the day challenging, you could create some step-by-step visual instructions to follow that explain exactly what to pack in their school bag at the end of the day.

The Victorian Department of Education has a [resource for teachers about visual supports](#) and how to implement them in the classroom.

Discuss with your child's teacher what transitions can be supported visually for the whole class (e.g. a daily schedule at the front of class), and which one's might require more focused support for your child.

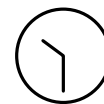
For example



9:00



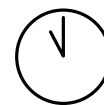
Arrive at school



10:30



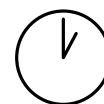
Snack



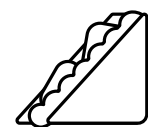
11:00



Sport



1:00



Lunch

Time and task difficulty

For some Autistic students at school, some daily tasks may take them longer than their peers. When looking at the list of micro-transitions, it's a good idea to look at what tasks take a long time for your child. Is there are way to adapt the task to make it easier? For example, your child may take a long time to get ready to play in the playground. This might be due to the whole class transitioning at the same time, creating a busy and potentially overwhelming environment. By identifying the barrier, a suitable strategy can be implemented to support your child, such as having them collect their food from their bag before the other students.

Another component is the concept of time itself. Some Autistic children are time motivated and find timers very helpful for completing and transitioning between tasks. Other children become anxious with timers. Timers can be particularly useful for

open ended activities, where there isn't a clear end to a task or activity. For example, independent reading time in the classroom. There is no right or wrong answer but working out what time support works for your child can help make transitions easier.

An alternative to timers that you may wish to try is checklists. Some children prefer to work through a check list and feel a sense of accomplishment when finished. This approach can help relieve the sense of pressure that some children experience with timers.

Motivation

Sometimes the reason an Autistic child may struggle with a transition is due to a lack of motivation or interest in the upcoming activity. Children may need support with motivation for tasks they are less interested in or tend to forget about. Below are some strategies you can try to help motivate your child:

- Gamify the activity, such using a song or game to assist.
- Incorporating your child's interest, such as football or pet themed items, may motivate them engage with the task.
- Having a break after completing a chore or less favoured task.
- Breaking the activity into smaller more achievable steps. Create a checklist if they are motivated by a sense of achievement so that they can cross items off as they go.
- Do not overload your child with too many demanding tasks. Mix up their schedules with preferred and fun activities too.
- Reward the completion of tricky or less preferred activities with a preferred activity.



Buddy system

Autistic children may find transitions easier if they have a buddy who can do it with them. Body doubling is a support strategy where someone works alongside someone else to help them stay focused and motivated. Body doubling can help Autistic children overcome executive function challenges like task initiation.

If your child has a friend in their class, their friend could help them navigate transitions they find tricky. For example, their friend could meet them at the school gate and walk them to class, or could help them collect their lunch at break time. Talk to your child's teacher and a parent or carer of your child's friend to see if they can help you set up a buddy system.

Conclusion

Autistic children navigate multiple transitions during their school day. This can be a lot of information to remember, and process. It's important for parents/carers and teachers to understand the anxiety that Autistic children experience with micro-transitions and the ways to support them during their day. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting transitions, so talk to your child and their teacher to figure out which transitions are the most challenging and where supports are needed the most.



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