



OH NO! NOT BIG SCHOOL!



Information and Ideas for Everyone Involved in Transition Planning for
Youngsters With Autism Spectrum Disorders Moving to Secondary School

Autism Cymru 

Wales' National Charity for Autism
Elusen Genedlaethol Cymru ar gyfer Awstiaeth

Maggie Bowen and Lynn Plimley

Foreword

At the consultation events for the Welsh Assembly Government's Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Strategic Action Plan, parents and professionals expressed concern over the move from the security of a primary school environment to a larger more formal secondary school for youngsters with an ASD. Funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, this booklet is intended to help make this process less stressful for young people with an ASD and their families. We are very grateful to Dean Beadle for sharing his experiences with us and offering his support and advice in the writing of this booklet.

We would also like to thank members of the Autism Cymru Secondary School forum, their pupils and their families and Jennie Thomas for her contribution.

Introduction

Given the difficulties many ASD pupils face in coping with change, it is important to place a strong emphasis on carefully planned transition across phases. The move from one provision to another therefore needs to be handled sensitively. Some local authorities now have designated officers with a responsibility for monitoring transition either across phases or within a phase.

The transition from primary to secondary education tends to have an educational focus

rather than a multi-agency focus. Procedures outlined in the Code of Practice (WAG,2002) are used. Whether individuals with ASDs have a statement of special educational need or not, the local authority should give parents/carers and individuals with ASDs the opportunity to discuss appropriate schools to which they could apply. When individuals have a statement, the provision required in secondary school should be discussed at the Year 5 Annual Review.

There should be adequate record keeping and profiling methods so that information can accompany the individuals with ASD as they move to their new school. In this respect, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) must be up-to-date and annual reviews well documented. All pupils should have an individual file that details their strengths and areas for development. In some authorities, an officer with expertise in ASD might be available to support the school during the transition phase and develop partnerships with other schools who have the relevant expertise and experience. It is also important for schools to have a member of staff to link with the child to help them at times of transition, particularly in secondary schools where they have to relate to many different members of staff.

Preparation

The sooner the familiarisation exercises start with the new environment and population, the better. Parents who have chosen mainstream primary schools for their youngsters with ASDs, can often feel unsettled when they are looking at secondary provision. Some might be concerned that the secondary environment is too large and too busy for their child and may even consider a special school placement. In some instances, local authorities may have developed ASD resource bases attached to a designated mainstream school. If this is the case then transition planning between primary and secondary phases should be easier.

The child with ASD might have attended a primary school located within his/her community and parents and staff will have got to know each other. A secondary school on the other hand may be at a distance from home and only accessible on school transport. The lack of personal contact and the efficient ethos of secondary schools, with a high emphasis on conformity, may mean that mainstream in Year 7 is a very difficult option for children with an ASD and their families to come to terms with. However, with careful planning many obstacles can be overcome. For example, more inclusive secondary schools are taking greater responsibility when it comes to easing the transition of pupils with disabilities by early and effective exercises to support their future learners. Secondary Special Educational

Needs Co-ordinators (SENCoS) are advised to keep in contact with their primary counterparts in order to identify pupils in need of support as early as Year 4 or 5. This may make all the difference to transition across phases being a success.

In some areas, 'support contracts' may be issued and attached to a certain number of hours for a named child within a particular setting; sadly this may end once the child moves to a new setting. Often a new member of support staff will be appointed with a different contract. Although this is understandable, it can be another change that the child has to learn to accept and therefore needs careful consideration in transition planning.

Strategies that help

Plimley and Bowen (2006a, p.2) suggest the following when planning for transition:

- Procedures outlined in The SEN Code of Practice (WAG, 2002) should be noted
- The views, feelings and anxieties of the child with ASDs should be considered at all times
- Secondary and primary SENCoS have regular dialogue throughout the school year
- Secondary SENCo attends Annual Reviews of children with a Statement of Special Need in Year 5 and Year 6

OH NO! NOT BIG SCHOOLS!

- Child with an ASD visits the secondary school as often as possible in the Summer Term, prior to the Open Day when all potential Year 7 students attend
- Nominated member of Secondary staff gives pastoral support to the child early on
- There should be adequate record keeping and profiling methods so that all relevant information can accompany individuals with ASDs as they move on.
- Parents of child with ASDs are invited into Secondary school to talk about their child's differences
- Staff make up an Action Plan around the support needs of the child
- Sensory and environmental adjustments are pre-empted and accommodated
- The Secondary environment is labeled and made more visually clear
- The Secondary environment is made into a CDROM "virtual map" as a guide for ALL new pupils (Cook and Stowe, 2003) well in advance of their start date
- All Secondary staff have awareness raising session using cases studies of pupils with ASDs that they know
- The Secondary environment has a break time "safe haven" room available for all vulnerable pupils.
- The Secondary SENCo has a portable

file of accessible information on all conditions present in the pupil population of the school

- The Secondary SENCo has quick checklists for each teacher containing guidance on how to teach pupils with different conditions
- There is a peer 'buddy system' in place
- There is a "Circle of Friends" (Whitaker, Barratt, Joy, Potter and Thomas, 1998) mechanism within school
- All channels for communication are kept open

Dean Beadle is a popular speaker at conferences and is a young man with an ASD. He offers the following advice based on his own personal experiences:

1. **Visits to the school before they actually arrive there.** This would familiarise them with the school so that it is less of a shock when they arrive.
2. **Getting to know their timetable in advance** so that they can come to terms with where they are supposed to be and when before they arrive.
3. **Meeting new Learning Support Assistant (LSA) before they go to the school,** so that they feel they almost have an "ally" in the classroom. This would also remove the immediate shock of meeting the new LSA on the

first day. Going to secondary school is full of new things and instability, so knowing their LSA ahead provides a piece of much needed familiarity and stability.

4. Having their primary school LSA move with them to secondary school. This would help them to feel comfortable as they have support from a person that they are comfortable with. If this isn't possible then **the primary school LSA should meet with the new secondary LSA** so that the knowledge of the child (what strategies work etc) can be transferred effectively. Perhaps, having the primary LSA meeting with the secondary LSA in front of the child so that the child can visually see that his LSA is changing; that the baton is being passed on.

5. Carrying out training for classmates/staff about autism may help. Depending on the child, the child themselves may want to play a part in this as well. Speaking to the class before the child arrives, in some cases, can make the class quite excited about the child's arrival and more willing to be the child's "buddy" etc. Although this wouldn't work with some, more introverted children, so the child would have to be in control of this.

What do secondary school staff have to say?

We asked teachers attending Autism Cymru's Secondary School Forum to tell us about some the strategies they have found important. They came up with the following suggestions:

- Let pupils take their own photographs and make their own videos of their visit.
- Give separate questionnaire to pupil and parents to get an overall view of the child
- Make a DVD of the school or design a colour coded map and timetables
- Use a communication/information passport- one sheet of A4 showing pupil's abilities, difficulties, interests and strategies required for de-stressing.
- Using a key ring with laminated tabs attached to a pencil case. The tabs on the fob can be colour coded to highlight different information e.g. strengths (green), targets (orange) and things that may cause stress (red). Some tabs could also be used to alert pupils to rules and routines.
- Make different visits at different times (including break and lunch times) and involve parents as much as possible. Give both a detailed Transition Plan with dates and times of visits and meetings at the beginning of Year 6 and make sure a familiar adult is with the pupil at these times

- Have a whole school training day on ASD at the beginning of the school year.
- If the secondary school has an established parents' club that meets after school- invite Year 6 pupils and their parents to the meeting. Pupils and parents can then discuss any concerns together.
- Invite parents to make a video presentation- personal footage to help staff understand the issues
- Make a school brochure highlighting the things that will be different.
- Ask pupils to make a list of three things they are looking forward to and three things they are worried about. Talk through these with pupil and parents and use the information at the wider Transition Planning Meeting
- Make sure new taxi drivers and escorts know about the pupil's needs and introduce them to each other before the start of Year 7 if possible.
- Letting son/daughter visit secondary school several times to get acquainted with the new environment and staff.
- Staying for lunch can be very useful when children have a limited diet. They can see what is on offer and whether they like it.
- Transition visits for parents/carers and a named contact in the secondary school can put parents/carers at ease
- A full assessment of transition needs- **both** socially and educationally.
- Awareness raising of ASD issues across the whole staff.

In Summary

Individuals with ASD rarely like change. The move from primary to secondary school therefore needs planning well in advance and should involve staff from the primary and the secondary school, the pupil and their family. The list of strategies suggested in this booklet is by no means exhaustive and may work well for some but not others. It is important to look to individual needs and provide a tailor made package to make the move as stress free as possible

Parents' Views

Forum members asked some parents what they had found helpful. They said:

- Information about the school- what would be happening during transition, photographs of the school and the details of key staff to contact.

And Finally...

Let us conclude with comments from two young men with an ASD. Each quotation has its own message.

OH NO! NOT BIG SCHOOL!

'I felt it was difficult starting secondary on my own since I only made one visit before moving from primary school. When I started in Year 7, it felt like hell because I always got bullied. The teachers did not know about my problems and the CDU did not exist then. Now I am getting a lot of help and I am finding my life easier'.

In answer to the question 'What helped you most?'

'The teachers were really friendly and kind. I liked my best friend to be with me because I did not like being on my own'.

References

Bowen, M. and Plimley, L. (2008) *The Autism Inclusion Toolkit*, London: Sage Publications

Cook, L.L and Stowe, S. (2003) Talk given on Nottingham Inclusion Support Service at Distance (ASD) weekend, School of Education, University of Birmingham.

Plimley, L. and Bowen, M. (2006) *Autistic Spectrum Disorders in the Secondary School*, London: Sage Publications

Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) (2002) *Special Needs Code of Practice for Wales*, Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government

Whitaker, P. et al (1998) 'Children with autism and peer group support using 'Circle of Friends'', *British Journal of Special Education*, 25, 60-4.

For further information on Transition Planning email Maggie Bowen at maggie@autismcymru.org or telephone enquiries on +44 (0)1978 853841 or +44(0)7766 805822