

Transitioning to high school

Transitioning to intermediate or high school can be a big change for any child, particularly an autistic child. Below are some of the big changes that you and your child can expect when moving to the next stage in their education, and some strategies for coping with them.

High school is big, and it can be difficult to find your way around.

Organise a tour of the school for you and your child, if possible more than once. Make sure they know where the bathrooms are, where their locker is, and where to go if they need help getting around (the school office, or a dean or deputy principal's office is often good – ask the school staff where the best place to go is).

It may help to make sure your child has a map of the school, or for children who have difficulty reading maps, to write out a list of directions to help them get around for their first few days.

Bigger schools often mean bigger, louder bells and alarms. If your child is particularly sensitive to noise, it can help to prepare them for this – ask the school if you can bring your child in during a school day so that they can hear the alarm, and if necessary check whether your child will be allowed to wear headphones or earplugs when bells or alarms go off. Your child may also be able to get advance notice for fire and emergency drills, so that the loud fire alarm does not come as a surprise.

Expectations around organisation and self-motivation are suddenly much higher.

Find organisational strategies that work for your child – physical to-do lists; lists on the child's phone; wall charts at home; and task apps like Habitica or Goblin Tools can all be helpful for some children, but won't work for everyone. It may take some time to find the right strategy or combination of strategies for your child.

Support your child. It is frustrating when your child constantly loses possessions that cost money, forgets to do homework, or leaves things until the last minute and then stresses out about them. Remember that they're not doing any of this on purpose, and it's just as frustrating for them. They're likely to already feel ashamed that they can't organise themselves, and what they need from you is support and understanding.

Let your child find a schedule that works for them. High school comes with a lot of homework, studying, and assignments, but it can also be a chance for your child to figure out how they work best, which will be vital if they go on to tertiary education. Try out different schedules – some children work best getting all their homework done as soon as they get in the door; others need downtime or to spend some time on a special interest to reboot their brain before they can tackle any more schoolwork.

Most schools expect parents to have a much lower level of involvement in their child's school life.

This can be a big adjustment for both you and your child. Talk to your child before school starts about the changes in their routine (you will no longer walk them to their classroom; they will be walking to school alone; they will need to come and find you outside the school gate at the end of the day; etc.).

There will be more competition for leadership roles, and for being 'the best' at particular things.

Some autistic children have a particular skill or interest that sets them apart in primary or intermediate school – it might be being the best at chess, knowing the most about chemistry, or having a particular extracurricular activity that no one else does. If this sounds like your child, they may struggle with meeting older adolescents in high school who are better at their particular skill or interest, or who have been around longer and don't take them seriously.

Autistic children sometimes thrive in leadership roles, particularly in extracurricular activities, and may have difficulty adjusting to a new environment where they are no longer in charge.

Be patient – having something your child sees as their special thing intruded on by older, more skilled teenagers is tough on them!

If they are really struggling, try to find opportunities for them to be the leader or the best at something in another area. Can they teach their skill to younger children? Can they join a club outside of school where they will be around children their age?

Students have multiple teachers who often only see them a few times a week, instead of one or two teachers who know them really well.

Talk to your child about the change, and if you think it will be necessary, help them make a list of adults they can go to with any problems. (This can include you, other family members or friends, school guidance counsellors or other staff, teacher aides, or any other trusted adults in your child's life.)

Having an older buddy who attends the same school can be helpful for some children – this will often be the child of a family friend; some schools also have a system where a class of incoming Year 7 or Year 9 students will be assigned one or two Year 13 buddies to help them adjust.

Your child will need to adjust to different procedures for minor emergencies (e.g. what happens when they're sick, if they're late for school, if you're late picking them up, etc.).

Run through with your child in advance what to do if they're sick, if they're running late, or if they can't find you after school (or if they miss the bus home, can't find their carpool buddy, etc.). If your child finds visual reminders helpful, making a cartoon or visual checklist can work.

It can help to make sure your child carries instructions in their school bag for what to do if they're running late or if something unexpected has happened at home time. Some autistic children can become very distressed when plans change or things unexpectedly go wrong, and it can be difficult to remember what they're supposed to do in the moment.

Exams

If you think your child will struggle with exams, talk to the school about what accommodations are available. Some common accommodations include extra time to complete exams; reader/writers who can read out the exam questions and write down your child's answers; rest breaks during exams; or a separate space in which to complete the exam.

If your child often gets anxious, it can help to think about and practice calming strategies long before exam time. (Focussing on deep breaths before going into an exam; counting to ten or twenty whenever you start to feel overwhelmed; or having a fidget toy or comfort item with you can all be useful strategies – while fidget toys and comfort items will usually not be allowed in exam rooms, it can help just to know that it's outside waiting for you.)