

Transitioning to school

The transition from home or early childhood education to primary school is a big life change, for you and your child, and it can be stressful for everyone involved. Below are some tips for preparing your child to start school, and for preparing the school to work with your child.

Preparing your child for school

- Talk to your child about what will happen at school. Take them through the routines of a school day – how they will get ready in the morning, what will happen at school, when they will be able to eat, go to the toilet, and take breaks, what will happen when they come home, etc.
- Take your child on a tour of the school so that they are familiar with the playground, their classroom, the toilets, where to get a drink, where to keep their things, and other environments before their first day. Allow lots of time for this, and let your child explore the new environments as much as they want to.
- If possible, set up a meeting between your child and their teacher, so that your child is familiar with the teacher before school starts. If your child attends a preschool or other early childhood centre, it may be possible to organise for their new primary school teacher to visit the centre and observe your child (although many teachers' workloads may make this impossible).

- The more things you can let your child practice before starting school, the better. Some possible examples:
 - While you are on a school tour, practice using the toilet at school. (This can be particularly helpful if your child has difficulty using the toilet in any way, or has struggled with toileting in the past; the new environment adds an extra layer of difficulty.)
 - Practice eating morning tea and lunch out of a lunchbox at home.
 - If your morning routine will change to accommodate school, practice the new routine before school starts.
 - Talk to your child's teacher about classroom rules and routines – you may want to practice things like putting your hand up to ask a question, or lining up (with toys standing in for classmates) before coming inside.

Preparing the school for your child

- Meet with your child's teacher, and anyone else at the school who will be working closely with your child. If your child has particularly high or complex needs, it may be helpful to meet with the school principal as well.
- It can help to make a list before you meet your child's teacher; write down everything you think the teacher will need to know about your child's personality, strengths, and challenges.
- Some things to think about including:
 - What is your child particularly good at? What are they really interested in?
 - Is there anything your child really struggles with that their teacher will need to know about? This could be academic, social, life skills like remembering to go to the toilet, or anything else that your child may need extra help with.
 - Is your child likely to need or want help making friends and talking to their peers?
 - Is there anything that really upsets your child that would be helpful for a teacher to know about (sudden plan changes, loud noises, strong smells, etc.)?
 - Is there anything that helps your child when they are distressed or overwhelmed? This could be a quiet space, a favourite toy or fidget, or a particular activity.
 - Does your child use any form of alternative communication (like a tablet, picture cards, or signing)?

- Maintain a relationship with your child’s teacher. Most schools will have parent-teacher meetings at least once a year, but you may want to organise more frequent check-ins. You can bring a support person to these check-ins if you’re not comfortable pushing back when things aren’t working for your child, or if you think you will have difficulty getting your point across.
- You may want to have an individualised education plan (IEP) in place for your child. You can find more information about IEPs, how to set them up, and what to include here: <https://carematters.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/IEP-booklet-P2P-new.pdf>
- The Ministry of Education provides extra support for some children. You can find out more about what they provide and whether your child might be eligible for support here: <https://parents.education.govt.nz/learning-support/primary-school-learning-support/>

Looking after yourself

As with everything that can be stressful for your child, transitioning to school can be stressful and overwhelming for you too. A few things to try:

- Schedule times in your day to prioritise looking after yourself. This could mean doing an activity you enjoy; having a cup of tea and deliberately not doing anything else at the same time; going for a quick walk; taking a few minutes to sit quietly outside; or anything else that helps you get a bit of energy back.
- Ask for help if you need it. Get your partner or another family member to handle the school admin or practice a new morning routine with your child; ask a friend if you can vent to them about the school transition process; or if you need extra help, contact one of Autism New Zealand’s Outreach Coordinators (you can find a list sorted by region here: <https://autismnz.org.nz/support-from-us/>).
- It can sometimes help to make a list of people in your life who can help out with different things – that way, when you’re overwhelmed, you don’t have to think about who to ask for help.

Remember that school transition never goes perfectly for anybody. Bumps in the road (even huge ones) don't mean that you're a bad parent, or that you're failing your child. By coping with setbacks and looking after yourself, you are teaching your child to do the same.

If school isn't working

For some autistic children, mainstream school will not be the best option. It takes time to adjust to a big change like transitioning to school, but if you've given it time and it still isn't working, or if your child is consistently finding school intolerable, there are some other options you can look into. (Like any problems with transitioning to school, it's important to remember that this isn't your fault, and doesn't reflect negatively on you as a parent – the best thing you can do for your child is find an option that works for them and for you.)

If your child has particularly complex needs, there are a few specialist schools in New Zealand – you can find more information on those here: <https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/specialist-schools-for-students-with-high-needs/>

Depending on your area's zoning and enrolment rules, you may be able to try out different schools. If your child's current school isn't working, but you think another school might be better, you can find other schools near you and check their zoning and enrolment policies here: <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/find-school>

For some autistic children, homeschooling can be the best option. If you think homeschooling might be a viable option for you, you can find more information about it here: <https://parents.education.govt.nz/primary-school/schooling-in-nz/home-education/>