

Understanding and Managing Change and Transition



Very few people like change – we tolerate it because it is an inevitable part of life, so we learn to cope with it and eventually appreciate the challenges and opportunities for our personal growth and development that it brings. However, for individuals with ASD each and every change and transition is very difficult.

This may mean the major moves at different life stages. For example, home to nursery, nursery to primary school, primary to secondary, leaving school and preparing for adulthood. It may mean the interim changes that happen within those stages like changing class at the end of each year, moving from Cubs to Scouts or up a grade in a swimming class.

It can also mean the daily transitions of 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 individual's well-being, ability to learn skills, make progress, build relationships and be happy.

Why are change and transition so difficult for people with ASD?

Behaving appropriately in a given situation and being able to cope with change is dependent on understanding what is going on in the first place, understanding the underlying social rules and having the coping strategies to overcome anxiety when things change unexpectedly. People with ASD may lack the communication skills and social understanding to comprehend fully what is going on around them. Other people seem unpredictable in their words and actions when the person with ASD doesn't understand why they do and say these things and then gets very stressed by even minor changes in routine, displaying rigid thinking and behaviour in an attempt to regain control of the situation, maintain sameness and create some predictability that will restore a sense of well-being.

A lack of understanding of cause and effect makes predicting consequences of specific behaviour difficult and a lack of social empathy causes problems in imagining the effect of your own words and actions on other people. In addition, poor problem solving ability, caused by inflexibility of thinking, renders an individual with ASD unable to imagine a different plan if the original plan has to change and s/he cannot cope with the resulting change.

What can we do to help?

Understanding autism and how it affects each individual, appreciating the need for predictability, consistency and planning for change, modifying our own language and the environment for greater clarity and direct teaching of appropriate skills and of coping strategies to minimise anxiety will all help. This includes keeping what we say short and simple, giving instructions in small steps and in the correct action sequence and using positive language so s/he knows what you want him/her to do. Being aware of sensory sensitivities and aiming for low arousal, with clear physical boundaries for activities, structuring the day as much as possible and providing visual supports will also help.

Making use of social stories, buddy systems, peer mentoring and circles of friends, to provide support in understanding and keeping social rules in a range of situations and to develop an appreciation of

