



What is: The Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions, in the Early Years (From Birth to Five)?

A guide for parents, helping them to understand more about how autism can impact on their child's transitions, as a first step to providing effective support.



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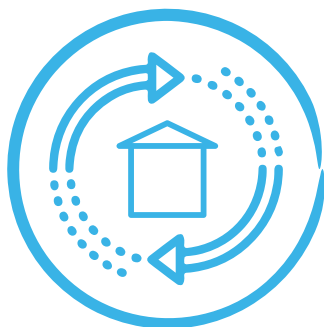


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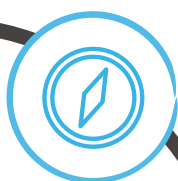
In the **What is? Series**, we answer some of your most frequently asked questions about autism.

In this guide:



What is: The Impact of Autism on Transitions, in the Early Years (From Birth to Five)?

This guide is **part one of three** resources for parents on **supporting their child with *Transitions in the Early Years***. The **second** resource looks at **how to** provide effective support and the **third** provides a **toolkit of resources**, to make supporting your child even easier.



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How to: Support your Child with Transitions, in the Early Years (From Birth to Five).



Supporting Transition in the Early Years **Toolkit of Resources**.



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Section 1:

What is Transition?

Transitions can be difficult for many young children as they involve change and things being different. These changes can be big or small, one thing changing (micro) or multiple changes at the same time or over a short period of time (macro).

Bigger Changes:

Some changes can be bigger. It might be moving house or welcoming a new sibling into the family. They may involve a change from nursery to pre-school, pre-school to Reception or from a childminder to starting school. Sometimes these changes are bigger as they include a change of building or a change of key adults.



Smaller Changes:

Other changes may be smaller, within the same room or building. These changes can appear to be less significant but can happen many times throughout the course of a day. For example, in one morning, a child could encounter: moving from home to pre-school, removing their coat, moving from outside to inside, going to the toilet, tidying up the toys to sitting on the carpet and then getting ready for snack or lunch.



It is important to note, however, that changes that may seem smaller to us as adults, may feel very significant to a child. These changes may feel even more significant to your autistic child, but there are a number of ways that you can support them, working together with staff in their setting.

In this guide, our **What is: The Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?** we explore the sorts of changes where your child may require additional support and the possible reasons why. Understanding is the first step to supporting your child and reducing their anxiety and your own around transitions, to enable them to be comfortable in their environment.



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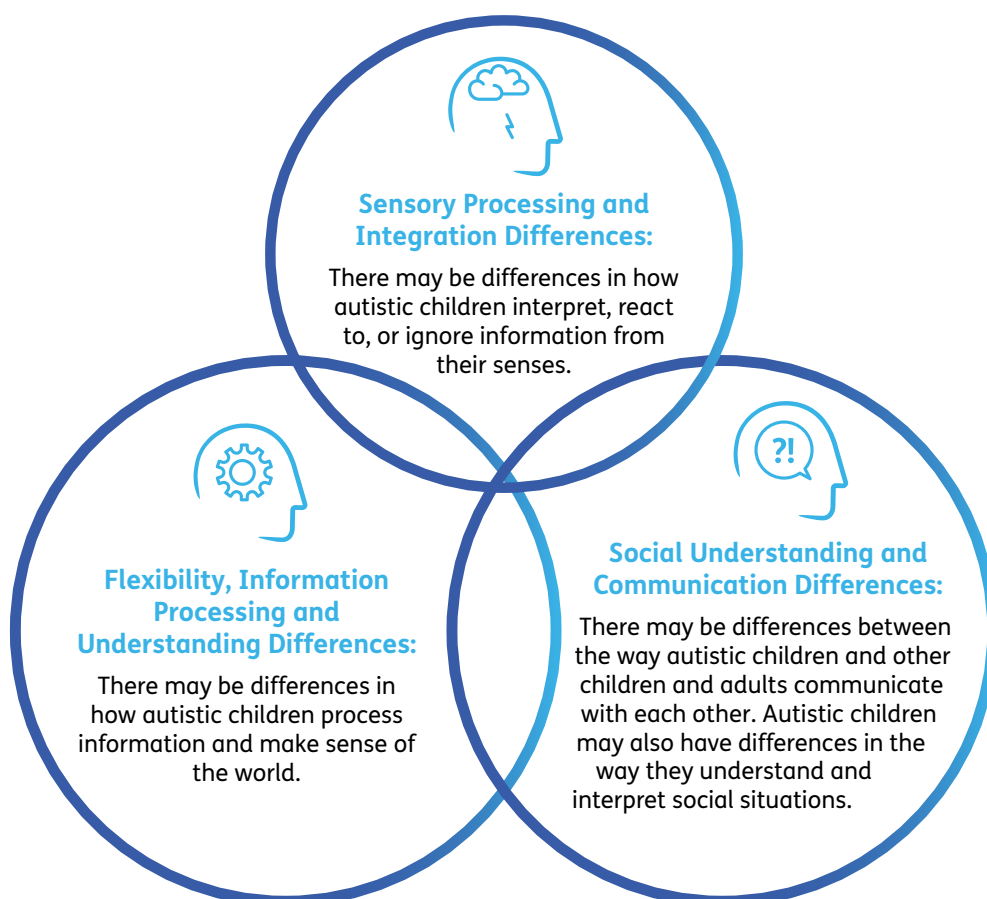
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What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?

Every autistic child is unique. Your child is an individual, with their own likes and dislikes and, being autistic, they will have their own strengths and support needs within what we call the Three Areas of Difference in autism. These areas of difference can make transitions - both larger and smaller - more of a challenge for your child.

It is helpful to know more about the Three Areas of Difference to understand what support your child may need. Understanding will help you put this support in place early, so that transition to a new setting is a more positive experience for them, both educationally and socially.

The Three Areas of Difference in Autism:



Your child will have both strengths and support needs within the Three Areas of Difference.

Understanding your child's strengths and support needs, will help you to understand more about how they may respond to transitions.



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What is the Potential Impact of Differences in Social Understanding and Communication?

Understanding Communication:

Transitions may involve your child needing to learn and understand some new vocabulary or key phrases that give information. For example, phrases like 'line up,' 'tidy up,' 'busy time,' 'Mrs,' and 'Reception' may, at first be unfamiliar to all children but, on top of other changes, may prove an additional challenge for an autistic child to process.

Adults working with your child need to learn to understand their communication too. Knowing what their key phrases or vocalisations mean, how they show distress and enjoyment and what their body language and facial expressions are communicating.

Not only that, your child may also find it difficult to get the adults to understand the fact that they need to use the toilet, or the fact that they don't like the sound of the hand dryer.

Communication may also be trickier for your child if it requires a lot of inference (having to work out implied meaning). Autistic children tend to find interpreting facial expressions, gesture and tone of voice confusing, and they could become greatly distressed by an adult raising their voice. It is important for staff in schools – and parents and carers at home – to understand this and ensure that they communicate as clearly as possible and support processing with visual cues.

It is important to remember that an autistic child's communication preferences may change depending on the situation, the person they are communicating with or when they are communicating.



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Understanding Social Rules and Expectations:

Autistic children may have differences in understanding social rules in different settings and situations. A change of setting is inevitable during the bigger transition of moving from one setting to another. There will be changes in social rules between these different settings as rules and expectations change as children get older, and your child may therefore have support needs around this, needing assistance to understand the “what” and “why” of these differences.



This may be the case even within the same setting as children move from one phase to another, such as from Early Years into Primary School or Reception into Key stage 1. It is therefore important that when your child moves to a new setting or phase that both settings take steps to prepare them in understanding new rules and expectations, through focused work, visits and providing clear instructions and modelling and then allowing processing time for all of the new information.

It is also important for you as their parent or carer to support any visits or transition ‘work’ that either setting puts in place, and communicate any positives or concerns that your child shares with you so that they can be properly addressed.

Even smaller transitions within a single setting may require your child to understand changes in social rules or expectations. For example, there may be different rules in the classroom, library, playground or dinner hall. For instance, there may be different rules around outside play in pre-school compared with in Reception. Perhaps it is free-flow in one setting and in the other there is a system which states how many children can be outside at one time.

Even within a single classroom, teachers may expect children to follow different social rules. There may be different social expectations on the carpet to sitting at the desk. There may also be different rules during individual activity, compared with a paired or group activity. There will also be different expectations during class learning compared with assessments as children move through Early Years and into Key Stage 1. Social rules are often hidden and should be explained clearly and reinforced visually both at school and at home.



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In school, there may also be different rules within different areas of the building/lessons- sometimes due to safety reasons or to protect clothing. In a pre-school setting, your child may be expected to put on a painting apron before using the paint or an overall before playing in the water. In a school kitchen, there may be expectations about wearing an apron and washing hands before starting. Your child may find these changes and differences to be very confusing and difficult to understand and implement. This is likely to cause them increased anxiety, especially if there are sanctions for 'not following' the rules. Staff may need to provide extra support where necessary in order to help your child understand the expectations and help them to follow them. Instructions regarding safety should be clear and visual as well as verbal and may need reinforcing at home as well as in school.



Forming Relationships:

Differences in communication may mean autistic children require support to form relationships in new settings, with new teachers and with different peer groups. If staff are expecting children to work in pairs or groups, they and their peers may require some support or scaffolding to collaborate effectively due to possible communication differences. Some visual cues and modelling of language will support your child with sharing, swapping and turn taking. These supports could be used at home also.



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What is the Potential Impact of Flexibility and Information Processing Differences on Transitions?

Differences in Flexibility:

Flexibility is about being able to adapt to new places, people and experiences. Adapting, especially when lots of new things are happening, is a challenge for most people, adults included.

However, autistic children, who may have support needs due to this area of difference, will have a much stronger need for routine, predictability and structure. If your child has a difference in this area, then they are likely to find transitions challenging due to the anxiety they cause.

This is because the term ‘transitions’ literally means ‘changes,’ which are the opposite to routine, predictability and structure.

In your child’s early years setting and the primary school they will move to, routines, expectations, processes, lessons, topics, activities, staffing and the children they are with may all change at some point. When they move from one setting to another, the building may change too along with their route in, who greets them and the door they use to enter the building.



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Let's look at an example...

Many autistic children find the transition to **Primary school** to be particularly challenging because of differences in the area of flexibility:

- Different staff (including playtimes, lunchtimes, supply cover).
- Different children from different pre-school settings.
- A different size of setting (perhaps a very small pre-school or childminder to a 3 form entry primary school).
- A different way of getting there or a change in who is dropping off and collecting.
- Longer days at the setting.
- A different timetable - more structure and adult led learning.
- Different lessons or themes.
- Wearing a uniform.
- Introduction of homework.
- School lunches.
- Changing for PE.



It is important that parents, carers and staff, understand that an autistic child will find these changes challenging, so that the appropriate support is put in place to avoid distress and enable successful transition.

Simple adjustments
to prepare children
for these changes
can make all the
difference.



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Differences in Information Processing:

Information processing is to do with the way we take in information, understand it and apply it. Autistic children may have differences in this area and it is important for parents, carers and staff to understand and be accepting of this.

There is lots of information to take in and understand just being in a setting - even when things are fairly settled. However, when there is change, coping with any new or different information around that change, can be challenging and sometimes overwhelming.

Understanding that change is challenging and adjusting how we respond and interact with our autistic children can help to reduce this anxiety.

Shifting Attention:

As a result of differences in the area of information processing, your child may find it more challenging to shift their attention from play to the adult's voice giving information, or when moving their attention from one activity to another. This may be because autistic children often have what is described as a more monotropic focus.

Monotropism describes the theory that autistic people have a preference for focusing on one thing at a time, rather than many different things at once. This may mean they may appear to have particular interests and that they often have real strengths in understanding these areas of interest. It is likely they will have real strengths in being able to focus on one task for longer and go into more depth. They are in their attention tunnel. Being pulled from this attention tunnel too quickly can be highly distressing and is sometimes described as painful.



Whilst monotropism can be a real strength in certain situations, it can also make change, where lots of things may be happening at once, much more difficult. Adults need to provide cues to show that a transition is coming up and allow time for the child to withdraw from their attention tunnel before moving to the next activity.



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Making Generalisations:

Being able to focus in detail on one thing may mean your child has strengths concentrating in detail on a particular activity or topic, especially if it is one they are interested in. However, because of this, it may be more difficult for them to move easily from topic to topic in school or from doing a puzzle at the desk and then switching to singing in the hall. Staff should understand this and can make some simple adjustments to support them in moving from one area of focus to another and you can also support with this at home.

Your child may keep the home and setting environments very separate and therefore find it difficult to communicate about one in the other or do learning from school in the home. It is important for parents and carers and setting staff to communicate effectively around this so that information can be shared and adjustments made.

This focus on detail may also mean that your child finds it challenging to make generalisations. This may impact if they have to 'relearn' expectations or rules from one lesson to another, room to room or when moving from working with one member of staff to another. Your child is likely to find this even more challenging when they move from a smaller setting to a larger school. If staff are not consistent in their application of 'rules' in relation to uniform, behaviour or expectations around work and adjustments made for the individual child. Staff should aim therefore to be as consistent as possible in adhering to agreed processes in and it is helpful if parents and carers reinforce messages at home. This is why it is so important to work together with your child's setting—it is much easier for a child to understand what is expected when everyone is saying the same things.



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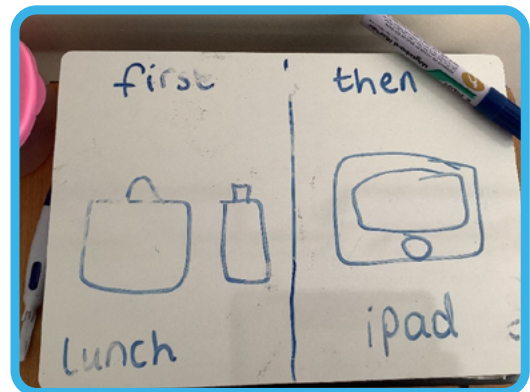


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Following Instructions:

Due to differences in information processing, your child may find it challenging to follow instructions related to making transitions, especially if these instructions are only given once and only given verbally without any visual reinforcement. Whilst they may be able to follow instructions, they may take longer to process the information given and therefore take longer to follow the instruction. This may mean they may transition from place to place or from activity to activity more slowly. It is important that you work with your child's setting to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made where necessary so that your child can transition more successfully. Such reasonable adjustments may include giving longer processing time, providing instructions visually through objects, or photos as well as verbally and prompting. The same strategies can also be applied when giving instructions at home.



Processing Information and Learning:

Autistic children of any age may find it challenging to process the information and learning they encounter over the course of even a single day in their setting. Throughout the day, they encounter more and more information and this may lead to information overload.

They may find it more challenging as they transition through school and the scope of the knowledge gets wider and the volume of work increases. They may also find it tricky to make the links between learning in lessons, units or topics and pieces of information - especially over time. They may need visual supports to connect learning together and recall previous learning. They can also find it hard to learn multiple ways of doing the same process, for example in Number, when they have found one way that works for them.

Settings and parents can work with children, helping them to develop strategies to make connections between different areas of learning more readily.



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Planning and Organising:

Differences in information processing may also mean that your child finds it more difficult to plan and organise. This means they may need support with organising their belongings as they arrive at setting, preparing for snack or lunch or changing for PE.

Differences in this area may mean that your child may feel like they don't know what to do first and in which order the sequence needs to happen. Because they feel unsure, they may seem to avoid these activities.

It is important that we as adults provide additional cues to support these activities and make these sequences easier to understand and follow. For instance, there could be a visual sequence for hand washing in the bathroom, or a visual photo list for what to take off and what to put on to change for PE.

Staff in school and parents at home can help children put in place strategies that will support them enormously with planning and organising.

Making Choices:

Throughout the Early Years phase of education, your child will often have choices about where they would like to play, what with and who with, as well as what they want to move to next. Your child may find it difficult to process too many options or choices and may find it easier to have a smaller range - "this" or "that." Visual supports for these options will also help with processing and understanding.

It is crucial that adults provide support where there is choice in the setting but also in the home.



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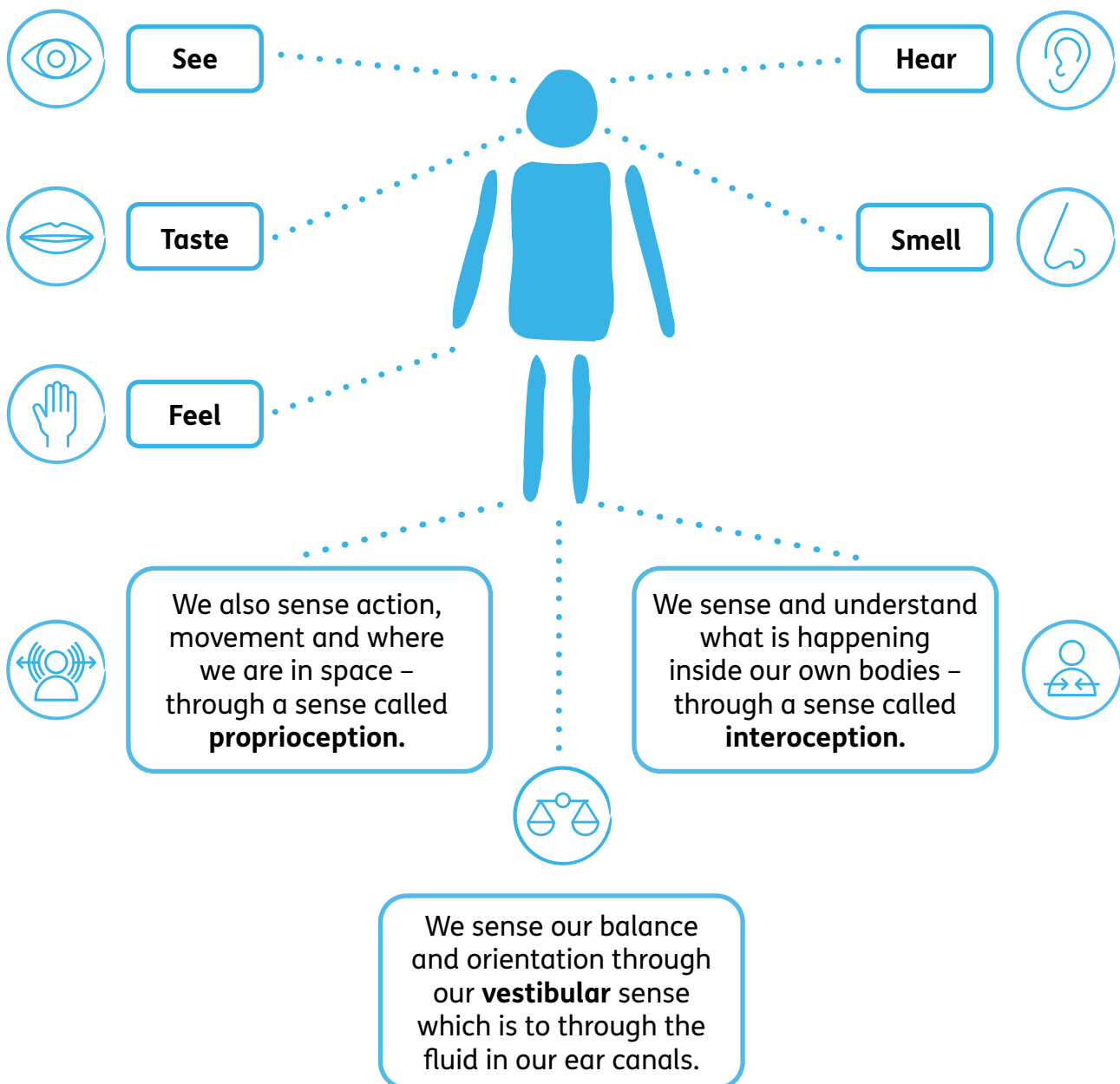
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What Is the Potential Impact of Sensory Differences on Transitions?

Sensory differences describe the differences that autistic children may have in the way that they receive, process and respond to information coming in through their senses.



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Autistic children may have ‘oversensitivity’ (hyper) or ‘undersensitivity’ (hypo) to the information coming in through their senses:

What is: ‘Oversensitivity’?

Your child may be ‘**oversensitive**’ to certain sensory experiences. This means they are likely to **experience them more strongly**. A little information feels like a lot.

In this case, they are likely to **move away** from that particular experience, when it becomes too much.

For example, if your child is ‘**oversensitive**’ to noise, they may move away from things that are noisy or from certain types of noise.

What is: ‘Undersensitivity’?

Your child may be ‘**undersensitive**’ to certain sensory experiences. This means they are likely to experience them **less strongly**. A lot of information feels like a little

In this case, they are likely to **move towards** that particular experience, because they need more of that sensory input to feel they have had enough.

For example, if your child is ‘**undersensitive**’ to smell, they may seek information through sniffing objects and people.

- It is important to understand that every child is different and so their ‘oversensitivities’ and ‘undersensitivities’ will also be different.
- It is also important to realise that your child’s reaction to sensory inputs may not stay the same. Their reactions could change from day to day, in different situations or with different people, for example.
- Think of all of the things you see, hear, feel and smell when you move from one space to another.



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How much sensory information your child needs to process will depend on the transition.

Your child is likely to react to sensory input in various ways - and this is what may impact on when and how they transition and how successfully.

Sometimes, for example, if they react strongly to something they smell, this may lead to them becoming overwhelmed and potentially becoming anxious or distressed. This may lead to them avoiding the move to another activity or environment or your attempts to support them to.

On the other hand, sometimes they may react less strongly to the information coming in through their senses, and so they may want to investigate that particular input further. If your child isn't getting enough sensory input from the feeling of the trampoline, they may want to continue bouncing and find it difficult to stop when you ask them to come and have a snack. It could be that the sensation of bouncing has stopped them receiving the sound of you asking them to stop and come inside to eat.



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Seeing Sensory Differences:

Unfamiliar environments may be challenging for an autistic child if they are too bright, too dark or too visually busy. Autistic children may cover their eyes if transitions involve unfamiliar people or places. Some settings allow children to wear caps, sunglasses or fit blinds to reduce the impact of light.

Some autistic children may find seeing lots of people distressing when they initially visit their setting at a busy time and they may find it difficult to go into the environment, whereas others may find this exciting and want to go and see more.

Equally if something they like to look at, has to go away because it's time to do something else, they could become distressed and try to avoid parting with the object.

Your autistic child may also be distracted by movement during transitions. For example, if other children are instructed to move from one area of the classroom to another or they have to move down a corridor to get in from playtime or to go to lunch. Staff should remain aware of this and seek to limit distractions of this type wherever possible. Lots of settings consider seating very carefully, sitting autistic children where visual distractions may have less of an impact.



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Sound Sensory Differences:

Following Instructions:

Due to sound sensory differences, your child may not be able to easily process verbal instructions that indicate the end of one activity and the start of another. There may be an expectation for instructions to be followed quickly, but your child is likely to need more time to process what has been said and staff should be sensitive to this and support them by reinforcing information and instructions visually and allowing processing and take up time.

Some autistic children will let the others move first before they transition. The use of a meaningful and consistently used song linked to a transition such as 'Tidy up Time' may help to cue your child into what is happening and allow them time to make the transition more easily.

Some autistic children may struggle with a noise taking all their attention. For instance, being able to hear a lawnmower outside of the window. This may cause them anxiety or distress or just pull their attention, so they miss instructions or make their own noise to drown out the uncomfortable sound.



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Noisy Areas:

Transitions to busier, noisier areas may be more problematic - noisy corridors, assemblies or PE, the playground, dinner hall or home time – transitions into (or out of) all of these situations could cause anxiety for a child with sound sensitivities. Settings should look to limit noise and make expectations around noise levels clear and parents should be aware of this at home and when out and about.

Unfamiliar staff will need to understand that a child having their hands over their ears is not an attempt to avoid listening to them but trying to manage the sensory information they are dealing with. There needs to be understanding across the whole staff about why some children may find certain sounds distracting or even distressing. For example, fire alarm practice or the class singing 'Happy Birthday' to another child. Reasonable adjustments can be made such as setting noise expectations, warning of upcoming unpredictable noise, allowing your child to wear ear defenders should they wish to or move away from the sound they find distressing, which is something they can also do at home.



Your child may also like or dislike hearing certain sounds in different environments, and they may react according to their preferences. Sometimes volume that seems okay for one child, feels uncomfortably loud for another.

On the other hand, some autistic children may enjoy these sounds and try to seek them out or make lots of their own noise to help them feel regulated before being able to move on.



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Touch Sensitivities:

Uniform:

If your child is sensitive to the feel of certain materials, then a transition that requires a specific uniform may be difficult. There may be possible issues with uniform if reasonable adjustments are not made, as your child may be distracted by the feel of their clothing and unable to focus on anything else. This is where good communication between home and school is important and there should be a discussion about how your child can be best supported.

For example, some children may hate having long sleeves, and so they may be reluctant to wear a jumper or coat for going outside even in winter, feeling restricted if these items are put on them which then leads to distress.

On the other hand, a child who enjoys certain fabrics and gets a sense of comfort from them, may wear the same thing all the time and be reluctant to wear anything else.

Safety:

Some autistic children may have an altered sense of pain. It is important that staff in settings are aware of this so that the appropriate precautions can be put in place. This may be important during physical activities, where they are using equipment such as cookery. As parents, it is important to be aware of this at home too.

Messy Activities:

Autistic children can really dislike messy activities. This may make transitions to these types of activities more challenging. On the other hand, some autistic children really enjoy messy play activities and will go to these easily but may find it more difficult to come away from them when it is time to do something else. Settings should look to adapt these activities where your child has sensory sensitivities and ensure access to these types of activities where it is a sensory preference for the child to regulate.



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Friendships:

Sometimes autistic children have differences in understanding personal space. They may get too close to another child or may want to stroke their hair or clothes because they are seeking sensory input through touch. This may be more of an issue when they are entering new peer groups where there is less awareness of their support needs. For example, this may be accepted more in Early Years where children have been in a class together from being very young, but less accepted in a class of unfamiliar young people in Primary School. This is where a setting can look to increase staff and peer awareness of differences so that children are more tolerant of each other and staff can support sensory differences effectively.



Taste / Smell Differences:

Eating:

Sensitivities to taste and smell may cause difficulties for autistic children during snack time and the lunch time transition, especially if a child is expected to eat a hot lunch or a snack provided by setting. Your child may react to the smells from lunch being prepared, if they are in a room or space near to the lunch hall.

The setting may need to make reasonable adjustments to support your child around this area of difference, such as providing them with a different space to eat in and warning them what lunch is today.

It is worth knowing this as parents and carers too – when your child rejects the pasta you have spent time making because it is ‘slimy’ they are not necessarily being deliberately difficult – it may be due to differences in their taste responses and their sense that this pasta isn’t exactly the same as the last time when they did eat it. This is often why our children struggle with fruit and vegetables as there are so many potential differences in their taste and texture depending on how fresh or ripe they are.



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Pica:

Some children may try to taste items as they explore and try to make sense of a new environment, through licking objects or chewing them. The process of tasting inedible items to 'test' them like this is called pica. In the home environment therefore, it is essential to ensure any potentially toxic or poisonous items that they may try to taste, are not accessible to your child.

In a transition to school, your child may need to lick objects in the new environment to start to piece together their new surroundings. They may also lick adults' clothes or hair for more information. They may chew objects to self-soothe as well.

Toilets and Hygiene:

If your child has difficulties with the smell of the toilets, they may try to avoid those areas. This could lead to toileting accidents, especially during transitions to new environments or with unfamiliar staff if there are no supports in place.

It is important that the setting is aware of the need to make reasonable adjustments to support your child or young person with toileting, especially during times of transition, so keeping them informed is essential.



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Being with others:

If a transition 'requires' a child to sit near a peer whose smell is distracting to them, this could cause difficulties with focus and attention. This could be a smell that they really enjoy and so they sniff the child often, or a smell they do not like so they move away or comment on the child being "stinky" though the smell may be something others may not notice such as the different washing detergent that their clothes are washed in.

Adults should be aware of this possibility and take steps to consider seating in a way that is sensitive to all of the children in the class.



Proprioception Differences:

Proprioception gives us feedback from our joints and muscles and helps us to understand where we are in space. Autistic children may not always get enough feedback from their muscles and joints, particularly their extremities like their fingertips, feet and the top of their head. This makes it difficult for them to get a sense of where they are in relation to other objects, people or the space around them, which must feel incredibly scary especially in a new environment!

This means that they may use too much or too little force on objects and people. They may stick to the periphery of rooms or spaces, run everywhere or go to the floor or under furniture to feel safer.

Autistic children can need additional input to feel grounded and have that sense of where they are in relation to people and things around them.

Differences in this area may result in challenges moving to their carpet space, across the classroom to another activity or around the setting. Differences in this area may make it more likely that your child could bump into things or other people more easily.

Adults will need to support movements during transitions to keep everyone safe.



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This difference could also mean that autistic children need more support during activities requiring movement of their bodies. For example, during PE, Drawing or painting activities, during play or during fine motor activities such as threading, writing or cutting with scissors.

During transitions, it is important that new adults are aware of why your child may find it difficult to sit cross-legged on the carpet or still on the chair. They may need adjustments to how they are expected to sit, or additional sensory input to feel a sense of where they are in relation to the carpet or the chair. For instance, a weighted cushion or a captain's chair.



Vestibular Differences:

Vestibular relates to our sense of balance and orientation. It tells us whether we are the right way up, upside down, spinning or up in the air. Some autistic children need lots of vestibular sensation in order to feel they have had enough and some need very little.

This means that some autistic children will need to climb, swing, jump repeatedly for long periods of time, never seeming dizzy and yet others prefer to keep their movements small, often not tipping their head to avoid that vestibular sensation.

For transition to primary school, this could mean that your child needs to move, run, jump, bounce and spin more regularly throughout the day or that they prefer not to be part of certain activities which feel uncomfortable.

At home you may have a child who seems to be always upside down or fearful of the swings in the park.

It is important that adults understand this difference so they can help the child feel regulated in order to be able to take part in learning activities in the setting, or functional tasks at home such as getting dressed.



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What Is the Potential Impact of Autism on Transitions?



Interoception: Differences Interpreting Inner Feelings:

Autistic children often have differences in recognising and understanding their inner feelings and bodily sensations. This is called interoception differences.

As a result, some children may miss snack due to not recognising they are hungry and need to eat. This could result in conflict with adults later if the child does eventually feel hungry and cannot understand why they can't eat now.

Some autistic children may be 'oversensitive' to the feeling of being thirsty and therefore need to drink often during the school day. Whereas, some children may not recognise the feeling of thirst and then it is important that adults support with prompts as part of routines and not rely on the child getting a signal in order to drink.

Toileting accidents can also occur for this reason, especially during transitions to new places, environments or with unfamiliar staff if there are no supports in place. This is because autistic children may not recognise the need to use the toilet or may leave it too late to go. There are plenty of supports that can be put in place to help with this such as toilet cards and regular prompting as part of a routine.

As always, effective communication between home and your child's educational setting is vital to ensure any differences are understood and support needs are met. Staff should make reasonable adjustments, and this must be done consistently.



Parent Resources



Section 3:

Top Take Aways:



Top Six Takeaways:

There is a lot to think about when it comes to understanding the possible impacts of autism on Early Years transitions, so below are our *Top 6 Takeaways*:

1

Transition means change.

2

Transitions can be big (macro) or small (micro).

3

What an adult sees as a micro transition may be seen as macro by a child.

4

Transitions can cause all of us anxiety – when things are different or unknown it can be unsettling.

5

Autistic children are likely to find transitions more challenging because of communication differences, preferences for routine, sensory differences and support needs in understanding social rules and expectations.

6

There are lots of reasonable adjustments that settings can put in place to support your child, and good communication between home and the setting is key.



Parent Resources



Section 4:

Take the Next Steps:



Next, check out our guide on **How to: Support Your Child with Transitions in the Early Years.**



Then, check out our **Tools for Transitions**, resources that will help you to support your child or young person more effectively.



Parent Resources





**Autism
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Parent Resources

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