



INFORMATION PAPER

Research to Inform Practice



Transition to School for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Many parents anticipate their children's first day of school with a combination of pride, excitement, and apprehension as they imagine the world of opportunities school has to offer, yet worry about the challenges that may arise. Research indicates that, although parents often report feeling excited that their children will have the opportunity to participate in new experiences, they also worry about their children's social relationships and their individual vulnerabilities, such as being shy or having difficulty adjusting to new situations (Kreider, 2002). As children make the transition from the family home, daycare, or preschool into school, they move into an environment of increased academic demands and more complex social situations, and their role expands to being a student.

Most parents report some apprehension about their children's transition to school; however, parents of children with diverse needs, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) report more concerns. Parents of children with ASD are often concerned about their children being able to follow directions, do the required school work, participate in large groups, and communicate when they need help or want something. Issues such as safety on the playground, problems riding the bus, and general academic and behavioural readiness are also concerns (McIntyre et al, 2010). Since ASD is characterized by difficulties with social interaction and communication, the transition to school may be particularly difficult for children with autism (Denkiyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Fleury et al, 2015; Forest et al, 2004) and for their families. Effective communication and collaboration, along with careful planning and preparation can overcome many of the potential difficulties

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Information Papers provide topical research summaries and recommendations based on empirical evidence in the field of Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is our aim that the information will guide thoughtful educational planning within the context of informed evidence-based practice and build awareness of potential benefits and risks for any intervention implemented.

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Disclaimer

This document synthesizes current knowledge and offers recommendations for consideration.

It does not constitute provincial education policy or commit Departments of Education & Early Childhood Development to the activities described. This document originates with the Interprovincial Autism in Education Partnership.



and make the transition as successful as possible for children with ASD, their families, and the school teams who will be supporting them.

Until recently, very little research specifically examined effective transition practices for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder entering public school. However, studies examining this issue have started to emerge over the past few years (Beamish et al, 2014; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Levy & Perry, 2008; Starr et al, 2014). There are also several studies that focus on the transition to school for children in general (Early et al, 2001; Forest et al, 2004; Pianta et al, 1999) and for children with diverse learning and developmental needs (Janus et al, 2007; Janus et al, 2008; McIntyre et al, 2006). Researchers have identified key skills that may help preschool children transition into school more successfully (Hanley et al, 2007; Kemp & Carter, 2005). The purpose of this paper is to highlight some important considerations for those involved in the transition process for children with ASD entering school. Key findings from the research along with practical strategies that have been successful with children with ASD in the Atlantic Provinces will be provided.

Transition from Early Childhood Services to School in the Atlantic Provinces

Each of the Atlantic Provinces has a range of services designed to support young children with diverse needs, including ASD, and their families. These services are supported by various government departments, including Education, Health, Community Services, and Social Development, among others. When multiple service providers are involved, communication is particularly important to the transition process. Services may include parent information sessions, developmental playgroups for children, individual family and child supports, and so on.

Early and Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) is an evidence-based intervention using principles and procedures from Applied Behavior Analysis to teach adaptive behaviors to young children with autism spectrum disorders. (Klintwall, 2014)

In addition, to address the unique needs of young children diagnosed with ASD, provinces have implemented Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention (EIBI) programs (*See Appendix A*). EIBI service providers use approaches based on principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) to address the unique developmental and learning needs of each child. Depending on the province, the service delivery model, and each family situation, EIBI services may be provided in home, daycare, or preschool agency settings.

Regardless of the services accessed by a child with ASD as a preschooler, the transition to school marks a significant change in the usual routines and expectations, not just for the child, but for the entire family (Podvey & Hinojosa, 2010). There is a natural shift from one physical setting to another and changes to the team of professionals who work with the child and family. Children and families will encounter new teachers and possibly new support staff during the transition from preschool services to school. If a child has been supported by professionals such as speech-language pathologists or occupational therapists prior to entering school, the transition to school may bring changes to these supports as well, which may add to parental concerns (Janus et al, 2007).

Another significant change for many families during the transition to school is a shift in parental involvement in their child's developmental and educational program. Parents are often highly involved in their child's Early Intervention or EIBI services, and service providers may spend a great deal of time with the family. Once a child enters school, parents continue to be an important part of their child's educational program planning; however, meetings may not be as frequent and face-to-face conversations with school staff may have to be more scheduled due to the number of children for whom staff are responsible. Many parents report that they feel much more like "partners in the therapeutic process" (Podvey & Hinojosa, 2010) when children are involved with early childhood intervention services than they do once their children make the transition to school.

Transitioning from EIBI Services to School

Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention (EIBI/IBI) refers to a preschool model of intervention that applies principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) to help young children with autism build important skills. Two of the key features of EIBI are that it begins as *early* as reasonably possible after a child is diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, and that the teaching procedures are applied *intensively* in order to maximize the child's learning. In general, this intensity involves direct and one-to-one intervention from a trained interventionist for up to twenty-five hours per week, depending upon the guidelines of each province. In most cases, there is also an expectation that parents will participate in their child's treatment by continuing to implement behavioural strategies in the home. It is critical that a child with ASD practices newly learned skills with different people and in different settings to be sure that the skills are generalized and maintained. The intensive and comprehensive nature of EIBI programs requires an equally intensive level of data collection, monitoring, and communication among those involved with the child's program.

The skills identified as priorities during EIBI vary from one child to another, depending on each child's unique needs and strengths. In general, EIBI programs focus on building skills across a number of important skill domains such as functional communication, following directions, being able to wait, attending to people and to what is happening in the environment, and basic self-care. The importance of these skills is highlighted by a survey of kindergarten teachers in which they identified following instructions given by the teacher, following classroom rules and procedures, and staying on task for short periods of time as essential skills for kindergarten students (Kemp & Carter, 2005). Many of these school readiness skills have also been identified as "preschool life skills" that are particularly important for early school success (Hanley et al, 2007).

As a child with ASD makes the transition into school, there is a necessary shift in the focus of educational programming and the intensity of instruction. Since the classroom teacher is responsible for all of the children in his or her class, there is typically a change in the adult to child ratio and the intensity of instruction as a child with ASD moves from EIBI into school. In many cases, the priorities for educational programming also shift when a child with ASD enters school. Whereas the focus of EIBI may have been on the "readiness" skills that would support the child to be as successful as possible in school, there is a change in expectations when the

child enters school (McIntyre et al, 2010). Priorities in school tend to shift toward academic objectives and there are often increased social demands and new expectations regarding independence. While both preschool and school programs address the strengths and learning needs of each student, the change in focus and intensity of programming between EIBI and school reflects the different purposes and functions of the two learning contexts.

Why is Transition Planning Important?

Many children have some difficulties with the transition into school (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999). Delays related to communication, problem-solving, and adaptive behaviour experienced by children with ASD and other diverse learning and developmental needs may increase the likelihood that these children will experience more problems with educational transitions than their typically developing peers (Levy & Perry, 2008; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Some children with ASD, for example, may have limited or no functional communication skills or difficulty following instructions, and may require a great deal of adult support. Others may have strong visual and memory skills and have acquired pre-academic skills such as letters, numbers, words, and patterns in their preschool intervention programs. However, these children may have difficulty applying this information or have trouble with play skills, or maintaining attention.

“Ready schools” are those schools that proactively reach out to families and to early childhood service providers to establish strong connections in order to learn about the strengths and needs of the child and to make the necessary preparations to greet the child with the necessary planning and supports in place.

Although the transition to school can be a time of stress for children with ASD and their families, when strong transition planning is in place, the move into school can be a time of new opportunities for learning and developing new skills and new relationships (Vicker, 2009). The more we prepare the child and caregivers for the transition, the greater the likelihood of success for the child and the more prepared the school team and environment can be to meet the child’s needs. “Ready schools” are those schools that proactively reach out to families and to early childhood service providers to establish strong connections in order to learn about the strengths and needs of the child and to make the necessary preparations to greet the child with the necessary planning and supports in place (Early et al, 2001; Schulting et al, 2005). Successful transitions may also increase positive parental involvement in their children’s schools, which has been shown to have a positive impact on educational outcomes (Schulting et al, 2005). Strong school-based transition practices may help parents feel more comfortable communicating with staff at their children’s school and more connected to school activities.

Challenges Regarding Transition Planning and Processes

Preschool and school-based teachers report that the most significant barrier to successful transition planning for children with ASD is lack of time to adequately plan and prepare for each

child's individual needs (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). However, this is not the only obstacle cited by teachers. Other challenges include:

- a child being unknown to the receiving school due to late registration for kindergarten/primary and not participating in school readiness activities at the school (Pianta et al, 1999);
- later diagnosis and/or limited involvement in early intervention;
- no opportunity to meet the child before school opens (Starr et al, 2014);
- the kindergarten/primary teacher being identified too late to participate in transition planning and activities (Pianta et al, 1999);
- lack of training and/or experience related to ASD for school staff (Starr et al, 2014);
- difficulty arranging collaborative transition activities such as reciprocal classroom visits between preschool/daycare and school settings (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011);
- differences in the philosophies and purposes between pre-school intervention programs and schools (Levy & Perry, 2008);
- cultural differences in sharing information about diverse needs (Starr et al, 2014).

Parents of children with ASD have also identified barriers to the transition process. In some cases, parents felt that the transition process began too late and did not include enough transition activities for their children to become comfortable with the new school (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Other parents worried that school personnel did not have enough training about ASD to be able to support their children (Starr et al, 2014). Some parents also indicated that there was not enough communication with staff at the receiving school or that they did not fully understand everything discussed in case conferences and transition meetings. Many reported confusion about the educational jargon used by school personnel and were not entirely clear about what to expect as their children transitioned from preschool services to school (Starr et al, 2014). Language barriers that affect communication and relationship building may increase these challenges for newcomer families. Cultural diversity also plays a role in the transition process, as parenting and communication styles reflect each family's cultural background. In some cases, families may be reluctant to discuss their children's diverse learning and developmental needs due to the stigma that such challenges may carry in some cultures (Starr et al, 2014). These parent perspectives highlight the importance of building understanding, respect, and strong trusting relationships with families, with support from early childhood service providers, early in the transition process. Such relationships support better communication and collaboration (Fox et al, 2002; Starr et al, 2014) among those involved in developing and supporting the child's educational program.

What Does the Research Tell Us About Best Practices for Transition Planning?

Researchers examining effective transition planning for children with diverse learning needs moving from early childhood services into school (Breitenbach et al, 2012; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Forest et al, 2004; Rous et al, 2007) have identified several important considerations, which may be equally important, if not even more important, for children with ASD. The following table outlines a number of actions that schools can take to ensure that the transition into school is as smooth as possible for everyone involved (see Table 1).

Timeframe	Activities
<p><i>From 12 months to 6 months prior to school entry</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Provide families with as much information as possible about the transition process in general, including,</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What to expect at each step in the process;</i> ○ <i>How individual transition meetings are arranged;</i> ○ <i>When individual transition meetings will take place;</i> ○ <i>How educational programs for children with ASD are developed and carried out in an inclusive school setting;</i> ○ <i>Supports available at school, board/district, department;</i> ○ <i>How families can prepare for the transition meeting.</i> ● <i>Begin transition discussions, when possible and appropriate, between family, preschool service providers, and school team.</i> ● <i>Be sure to obtain all necessary consents to share information.</i> ● <i>Identify a transition contact person, and develop a transition timeline with benchmarks.</i>
<p><i>From 6 months prior to school entry to the beginning of school</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Invite the preschool providers to visit the child’s prospective classroom at the new school and arrange for school personnel to visit the preschool/daycare, or observe via videotaped samples.</i> ● <i>Arrange opportunities for the child and family to visit the new school; meet the new teacher and other staff; visit the playground, gym, and cafeteria; practice riding the bus, etc.</i> ● <i>Organize transition meeting(s) for family, preschool service providers and school team to identify the child’s learning needs with respect to the curriculum; discuss any medical, behavioural, or communication concerns; determine any instructional supports, accommodations, and/or adaptations that may be required, and whether or not an individualized plan may be necessary to address the student’s needs.</i> ● <i>Discuss the strengths, challenges, and interests of the child in relation to educational program options and supports</i> ● <i>Determine any staff supports that may be required and plan for any necessary staff training.</i> ● <i>Discuss referrals for services from professionals such as the board/district Autism Consultant as well as Speech-Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, or Physiotherapist who serve school-aged children where appropriate.</i> ● <i>Identify and address any adjustments to the school and/or classroom environment that may be required to support the child’s physical or developmental needs.</i> ● <i>Develop a preliminary version of the child’s schedule to ensure that everybody knows what to expect, that all necessary supports have been considered, and that the child is as prepared as possible for the new school and new routines.</i>
<p><i>Following School Entry</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Create a plan for the method and frequency of ongoing communication with the family.</i> ● <i>Discuss with families the possibility of peer sensitivity sessions for classmates to increase awareness and suggest friendship strategies.</i> ● <i>Schedule review meetings to monitor progress and make any necessary adjustments to the student’s program, schedule, or supports</i>

Table 1. Timelines and activities

Many provinces have developed guidelines and transition-planning documents to support effective transitions to school for children with diverse learning and developmental needs. Information about provincial transition guidelines and additional documents that may be helpful during the transition process may be found at the following links (see Table 2).

Nova Scotia:

<https://studentservices.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/speceng.pdf>

http://www.studentservices.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/transition_planning_web.pdf

<https://studentservices.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/program-planning-process.pdf>

Prince Edward Island:

http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/eecd_eyasguide.pdf

http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/ed_elementtran.pdf

Table 2. Links to provincial transition-planning documents

Summary and Implications for Practice

Social, communication, and behavioural difficulties that characterize autism may cause parents concern that their children may not adjust to new routines, be able to meet the academic demands, or make friends at school. Parents may worry about their children's safety at school. For some families, the transition to school is yet another reminder of the ways that their children with ASD are different from their typically developing peers. It is important for school teams to be sensitive to individual family situations during this transition process. Going to school is an important milestone in a child's life. Encouraging and supporting families to view the transition as a positive step forward in the child's learning and development will ultimately benefit the child and his or her caregivers. This will also help reduce some of the anxiety caregivers may have about the transition.

Communication and information sharing between families, early childhood service providers, and school teams is essential for a successful transition. Positive and proactive exchange of information between early childhood service providers and schools is essential to provide reassurance and support to families as they navigate this process. School teams should ensure that they have an understanding of the services that have been provided to the child prior to entering school in order to provide program continuity, where appropriate. This level of understanding is also necessary in order to appreciate the intensity of communication and level of parental involvement during the early childhood intervention services, and to provide reassurance to parents that their collaboration is important and the school team will be able to develop and implement an effective educational plan for their child. Parents should receive information from school teams on what services their child can access from the school and board/district. It is also helpful if early childhood service providers encourage families to form relationships with schools and assure parents that, although the child's program will look different, school personnel will be able to support the child's educational and developmental needs.

It is helpful to establish a plan to share and update information during the months and weeks prior to school entry. Updated information on the child's progress toward learning objectives, current supports, summaries of assessment results, in-person and/or videotaped observations, and so on will provide critical details that will help with educational program planning. In addition, careful consideration should be given to the type and frequency of transition activities that will be most helpful for each individual child. Transition activities might include a brief visit to the school the week before school starts to meet the new teacher and see the classroom, hallway, desk, cubby, washroom, cafeteria, and so on. It is extremely helpful if the child's classroom teacher and the school-based resource teacher or education support teacher can be identified as early as possible and can participate in transition activities.

The transition of young children with ASD from early intervention to school needs to be carefully managed in order to maintain intervention gains, protect against the risk of child and family anxiety, and enable a successful start to formal education.
(Beamish et al, 2014)

Since the transition case conference generally happens in the spring prior to the child's entry into school, follow-up contact with caregivers just prior to school starting may be very important. This provides an opportunity for updates on the child's progress over the summer, for the family to get answers to any new questions that may have come up, and for further discussion about the educational planning process and the child's educational plan for the first few weeks.

Communication could include developing a daily or weekly system between home and school, making scheduled phone calls, or arranging a follow-up meeting within the first three to four weeks of school. In cases where Early Intervention or EIBI staff have the availability to do so, modeling for school staff the interventions and strategies that have worked well for the child in their programs may also be helpful in the transition process.

All children and families benefit from well-organized transition planning. For children with autism and their families, these processes are even more important. The transition process is most effective when all members of the transition team, including the family, the early childhood service providers, and the school team engage in proactive, collaborative transition planning. A few key considerations, including open communication, teamwork, coordination of services, and inter-agency support can result in a positive transition experience for everyone involved.

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Appendix A: Provincial Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention Services

New Brunswick

http://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/services/services_renderer.13836.Services_for_Preschool_Children_with_Autism_Spectrum_Disorders.html

Newfoundland & Labrador

http://www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/personsdisabilities/fundingprograms_hcs.html

Nova Scotia

<http://novascotia.ca/dhw/mental-health/documents/Early-Intensive-Behavioural-Intervention.pdf>

Prince Edward Island

<http://www.gov.pe.ca/autismservices/>

Appendix B: Tips for Transition Planning Teams

Issue	Consideration
Sensitivity to Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families of children with ASD may experience a range of concerns regarding the transition to school • Language and cultural considerations may be important factors when supporting families in the transition process
Mutual Understanding of Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There may be some differences in purpose, philosophy, and focus between preschool and school services for children with ASD. The more that the professionals involved in supporting children with ASD understand one another's context and reassure families about the school experience, the more successful the transition will be for children and families
Sharing Information and Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage parents to register children for school as early as possible • Consider the appropriate consents required to share information such as documentation of diagnosis, assessment reports, etc. • Information about the child's strengths, challenges, interests, overall functioning, current supports and resources, effective teaching strategies, and behaviour protocols is extremely important for the school team to develop an educational program plan • Parents may wish to prepare in advance some notes of important points they want to share and questions they wish to ask at the transition meeting • It may be helpful to remind transition meeting participants that decisions about support staff cannot be made until a later date • Early Intervention and/or EIBI staff may be able to model effective strategies that will help school staff learn more quickly what works best for each child
Setting Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important school readiness skills include communication, toileting, self-help, social interaction, self-control, following instructions, participating in a group • Once the child enters school, the school team and family will collaborate in the development of the child's educational program plan, based on each child's individual strengths, challenges, and interests
Transition Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is helpful if the classroom teacher and school resource teacher are identified as early as possible and can participate in transition planning and activities • Consider visits for preschool and school staff to one another's classrooms • Arrange opportunities for the child and family to visit the new school, meet staff, explore the playground, gym, and cafeteria, practice riding the bus, etc. • In addition to the transition meeting/case conference, a plan to share updated information prior to the beginning of school is important
Roles and Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly identify and communicate who will be responsible for each component of the transition process • Roles and responsibilities of preschool staff and school personnel should be clearly communicated to families to avoid confusion
Staff and Peer Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School staff may require specific, targeted professional development in order to meet each child's individual needs • Discuss with families the possibility of increasing peer awareness about ASD • A resource developed by the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with the PEI Department of Education (Timmons et al, 2005) may provide some helpful information (http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/ed_autisminc.pdf). Helpful information is also available in documents from various Atlantic Provinces Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development (see Table 2).

Appendix C: Transition Meeting Outline Sample

Transition to School Sharing and Planning Meeting

- **Welcome & Introductions:**
 - **Welcome the participants:** It's our pleasure to welcome everybody here today to talk about Billy, who is going to be starting school in the fall. We're really happy to have him come to school and we're looking forward to getting to know him and learning how we can help him be as successful as possible.
 - **Acknowledge the parents' anxiety:** I'm sure this meeting might feel a little overwhelming, but we want to be sure that you know that we're going to work with you to make sure things go as smoothly as possible as Billy makes the transition to school.
- **Purpose and format of meeting**
 - The purpose of the meeting today is to gather information about Billy's strengths and challenges so that we have the best possible starting point to think about what his educational plan should look like. Everybody has the agenda that outlines the main points we want to talk about today. It's also important to know that we won't be making any final decisions here today. We just want to gather as much information as we can to help with planning and decision-making over the next few months. Our purpose is to help Billy have a successful transition into school. A couple of questions to keep in mind for our discussion today will be: What would a successful transition look like? How will we know if this transition has been successful? We will start with some of the required documents, and then we will talk about Billy's strengths and needs.
- **Documentation of diagnosis and any additional written information**
- **Medical and/or dietary concerns**
- **Strengths and challenges**
 - Communication
 - Social interaction
 - Self-help
 - Safety
 - Behaviour
- **Current preschool services**
- **Current programming**
 - Program goals and summary
 - Effective teaching strategies
 - Communication method and any required communication supports
 - Visual supports
 - Environmental supports
 - Social supports
- **Environmental sensitivities**
- **Behaviour support plan or protocols**
- **Transportation considerations**
- **Method of communication between home and school**
- **Any additional parental concerns**
- **Transition and orientation activities**
- **Next meeting date or follow-up plan**
- **Closing and Thank You**

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