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Coping with change and transition

Why does this happen?

- Children with autism are rigid in their way of thinking so they thrive on routine. They like to know what is going to happen next.
- When their routine is disrupted or something unexpected occurs, a child with autism may experience great anxiety, even outbursts of challenging behaviour. It doesn't have to be a major change. Any of the following could cause great anxiety: timetable changes, substitute teacher, new class rules, losing a favorite pencil or a friend / aide being absent.
- Transition times - when children are moving from one classroom to another - can also be problematic for children with autism. They may be distressed by noise and jostling from the close proximity of many other children.

What you can do

- Change should not be avoided; it is a part of life. Try to make it part of the day so that the child begins to learn to cope with change and then he will be able to handle other changes more readily. Allowing for some spontaneity will prevent him becoming too dependent on routine. A 'surprise' card with an exclamation mark can be used to alert the child to unexpected events. Reassure the child that this surprise will be very special and lots of fun!
- Write the classroom routine on the blackboard. Give a copy to the child's parents so they can discuss daily activities with their child and help him learn the timetable. Make alterations to the timetable in the child's presence.
- Make a visual timetable. Use laminated activity cards. These cards can be stuck onto a strip of card, or posted in a box at the end of each activity.
- Give him coping self-talk such as "It's different today." and "It's a new way today". Use these in a [social story](#).
- *Give warnings.* Where possible, give as much warning as possible of any change in routine. This advance warning can help the child cope with the change.
- If an unexpected event occurs, tell the child what will happen in clear, simple language. Children are often reassured by hearing what will happen *after* the unexpected event.
- Have a place for the child to go to if he is lost. Make sure it is a place that is quick and easy to get to and where an adult can readily provide assistance before he becomes too upset. It would be useful to have a copy of the child's timetable here, along with information and strategies that help calm the child.
- *Transition between classes.* Ask the child's integration aide to take him to his next classroom a few minutes before the other students. Older students or those who do not have an aide could go to their next class a few minutes early, accompanied by another student.