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### **Coping with change and transition**

#### **Points to note**

- Children with autism are often 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, the student may experience great anxiety, even outbursts of challenging behaviour. It doesn't have to be a major change. In fact, some students seem to cope well with a major change, like moving house, but a minor change can cause a surprising response. Any of the following can cause an emotional reaction; timetable changes, substitute teacher, new class rules, losing their favourite pencil, a friend or aide absent from school.
- Transitions between classes, particularly in secondary school, can be problematic and unsettling. The student may become distressed when moving through noisy, crowded hallways. Some students are tactile defensive; they have an intense dislike of the inadvertent bumping and jostling that naturally occurs in a crowded hallway. Some students have proprioceptive difficulties; they have difficulty judging where people are headed, so they might bump into others unintentionally.
- Students with poor spatial ability will easily become lost moving through hallways, leading to great distress and frustration.
- The anxiety caused by a fire drill could potentially upset the student for the rest of the day.
- Change should not be avoided entirely as it is a part of life. The student needs to learn how to cope with change in a supportive environment.

#### **What you can do**

- Write the daily routine on the whiteboard or provide the student with a hard copy and stick it in his diary. Give a copy to the student's parents so they can discuss daily activities with their child and help him learn his timetable.
- Younger students will benefit from a visual schedule. Print the timetable onto A3 colored card, use a magnetic button to identify the current activity. Children can take it in turns to be timetable monitor and move the button to the next activity. This will help all students in the class, but particularly those with autism who require constant visual reminders. This simple strategy can decrease anxiety about 'what happens next' and reduce interruptions with questions that may have been relevant to a previous activity.
- Classes need to have a clearly defined structure. Chaos and disruptions can be unbearable to the student with autism.
- On a map of the school, use highlighters to color code areas and routes between classrooms.
- Give the student a 5 minute warning prior to the end of class so that he can prepare for the transition. This might be a verbal signal, a visual signal or both.

- Where possible, give as much warning as possible of any change in routine. This advance warning can help the student cope with the change.
- Arrange for a quick telephone call to the student's home if a teacher will be absent.
- If an unexpected event occurs, tell the student what will happen in clear, simple language. Many children are reassured by hearing what will happen *after* the unexpected event, eg. an evacuation drill.
- 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 the child becomes too upset. It would be useful to have a copy of the student's timetable here, along with information and strategies that help calm the child.
- The student will need a constant and stable person at school he can rely on and talk to, such as a counsellor. Prepare the student well in advance if this person will no longer be available.
- If you think the student can cope, allow for some spontaneity to prevent him becoming too dependent on routine. A 'surprise' card (laminated card with an exclamation mark on it) can be used to alert the student to an imminent and unexpected event. Reassure him that there is nothing to fear and that possibly it will be lots of fun! (Avoid promising that it will always be fun or he will come to expect this.)
- Give the student positive self-talk phrases to help him cope with change, such as "It's different today" or "It's a new way today". Social stories can be a good way to introduce this concept.
- To avoid the stress of moving between classes, have the student's 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 a peer.