

# The back-to-school issue

## Transitions: a general timeline for the child with an ASD

Change is the one constant in life, but for a family living with a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), change can have a greater impact on home life. The parents of a child with an ASD need to understand the changes—or transitions—faced by their child so they can help the child prepare—and be prepared themselves.

A transition is a process for moving forward in life and achieving a goal. When faced with a transition, you may ask yourself *What do I want in life, and what do I need to do to get it?* For a child with an ASD, the question is asked and answered by the child's support system. Thanks to laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the process includes specific procedures. The goal is to help the child move forward through childhood and grow into an independent and active adult in the community. Here is a general timeline to help with this process.

### Between home and early intervention

The first transition requires recognizing that a child has an ASD and needs treatment. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the child should receive developmental screening tests at the 9-, 18-, and 30-month doctor visits.

If the child exhibits behavior in areas of concern and is younger than three, contact Child Development Watch. In New Castle Co., call (302) 283-7240; in Kent or Sussex Co., call (302) 424-7300.

If the child is three or older, he or she needs a multidisciplinary development evaluation. To begin this process, contact your school district's director of special education or the coordinator of the local IDEA Child Find Project.

The school district is responsible for providing free, diagnostic educational evaluations to determine the child's educational needs. Any referral to the Delaware Autism Program (DAP) needs to be made through the school district.

**Note:** In Delaware, the medical diagnosis of an ASD differs from the educational classification of autism. Some children with an educational classification of autism do not receive placement in DAP.

"You should be talking about the supports your child needs to become a participating student in the classroom," advises Heidi Mizell, Autism Delaware's Asperger's resource coordinator, "as well as the services that are available. Have an understanding of what your child's needs are. Don't get stuck on a diagnosis or label."

Once your child has been evaluated, an individualized education plan (IEP) should be created. Members of the IEP team should include

- the parents,
- at least one regular-education teacher if the child is or may be participating through the regular-education system,
- at least one special-education teacher,
- a representative of the local school district who is qualified not only to provide—or to supervise the provision of—specialized programming that meets the unique needs of children with disabilities but is also knowledgeable about the general-education system and the availability of resources in the local school district, and
- a person who can interpret the instructional implications of the evaluation results.

The team collaborates on long-term planning, assures that due process is followed, meets at least once every 365 days to determine the child's educational needs (according to state and federal law), provides information relevant to the child's progress, creates IEP goals and measurable objectives, analyzes evaluations, and documents the decisions in the IEP. For more about IEPs, visit the Parent Information Center of Delaware website at [www.picofdel.org](http://www.picofdel.org) or the Delaware Department of Education website at <http://regulations.delaware.gov/AdminCode/title14/900/925.shtml#TopOfPage>.

### Between early intervention and elementary school

The second transition involves the child's move out of the early-intervention program and into elementary school. By law, schools are required to provide a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) that is appropriate to each child's needs. With the appropriate supports and services, your child can succeed in the classroom.

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## The back-to-school issue (continued)

**Note:** When choosing a classroom setting for your child, consider the LRE as well as your child's developmental needs. For example, does your child learn better by listening or doing?

### Between elementary school and middle school

The third transition—out of elementary school and into middle school—is often the most challenging for children with ASDs. Why? They have difficulty making friends. Because a child with an ASD struggles with empathy and social cues, the child cannot tell the difference between teasing and sincerity, which is a major step in adolescent progress.

Another reason is the “hidden curriculum,” the unwritten rules that govern the social atmosphere of your child's school. (For more, see the box entitled “Defining the hidden curriculum.”)

“Have your child shadow a sixth grader in the same school your child will be attending,” suggests Mizell, “and learn about rotating classes so you can explain the process to your child. Help your child by beginning to work on the organizational skills and self-advocacy needed to successfully negotiate middle school.

“And ask the IEP team or the school counselor what the other children are wearing and talking about,” continues Mizell. “Armed with this information, you can help your child to fit in better at school.”

“Transitioning to middle school can be difficult,” adds Dafne Carnright, Autism Delaware's southern Delaware service coordinator, “because of all the changes in school. The schedule is very different. Your child will have several different teachers throughout the day and may have to use a locker for the first time. The building itself is likely to be much larger. And the activities in physical education may present more challenges. All of these differences may need to be examined in the context of your child's abilities and needs. Consider what supports will be needed for each area, and make sure they are in place prior to the start of middle school so all parties are aware of what needs to happen.”

On the other hand, you are now more familiar with your child's learning style. Use this knowledge when discussing your child's IEP. Also, discuss the tools

used to teach your child organizational skills and how to break down large assignments. “Your child should be part of this process,” says Mizell. “Find out how your child works in a group setting. Does your child contribute to the process, or is your child letting everyone else do the work? Whatever the answer, the appropriate supports and services need to be added to the IEP.”

### Between middle and high school

The fourth transition is into high school. The choices include the diploma track and the life skills track. For the child on the diploma track, the IEP should address the supports your child needs to succeed in college or in the working community after high school. Work with your IEP team to determine what is needed and the best way to deliver it.

“Understand what your child needs and what will be provided to help prepare your child for college,” notes Mizell. “If your child needs more time to prepare, consider some creative scheduling. Set up a class schedule that gives your child extra time. Even if your child is a student in special ed, he or she can walk through graduation with the rest of the class. The point is to focus on what your child needs to best prepare for college life.”

For the child on the life skills track, focus on developing work and independent-living skills, including communication skills. Make sure your child has the opportunity to try a variety of jobs so your child can discover what he or she enjoys and does well.

At the same time, start looking at adult-services providers, such as Autism Delaware's POW&R. (For more, see “Seamless transition into adult life in the community.”) Available services vary widely—as does the knowledge and understanding of the needs of young adults with ASDs. To become educated on the topic, attend service provider fairs and visit some of the available programs. Ask what the participants do during a typical day, how many have paying jobs, and about the program's experience with people with autism.

Also, consider applying for social security insurance for your child and the need for establishing legal guardianship and power of attorney for your adult-child's affairs.

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Finally, become familiar with the state's legislative process. Your child's entitlement to services ends at the age of 21; after 21, services are dependent on state funding. The challenge grows every year to add services for young adults with ASDs. As a parent, you need to advocate for these services.

Nationally, adults with ASDs are sitting home and losing their hard-earned skills from school. Fortunately for Delawareans with ASDs, many are working and living happily in the community. Getting to this point takes time and planning—and the courage and means to face a lot of change—but seeing our young adults grow, improve their skills, and live independently makes the effort worthwhile.

### Defining the hidden curriculum

Generally, a “neurotypical” child intuits positive social skills with little effort or instruction from others, but a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may be unaware of the unwritten social rules governing the world we live in. The variables change across age, gender, culture, and location, ranging from socially acceptable dress to which backpack to carry to school in childhood, and in adulthood, from how to disagree with your boss to behaving appropriately in a public restroom. For this reason, a child with an ASD often needs direct instruction on the unstated social rules.

In the book *The Hidden Curriculum: Practical Solutions for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations*, Brenda Smith Myles, Melissa L. Trautman, and Ronda L. Schelvan explain the hidden curriculum, how it affects people living with ASDs, and how to teach it to them. The authors give numerous examples of different situations, including airplane trips, bathrooms, birthday parties, clothing, school, and slang.

Another resource that helps teach the hidden curriculum is a flip calendar called the *2011 Hidden Curriculum One-A-Day Calendar*. This resource explains a new item each day of the year and comes in a child's, adolescent's, and adult's version. It's available at Amazon.com.



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# Seamless transition into adult life in the community

by **Katina Demetriou**

The transition from school to adulthood is pivotal in the life of any student, but for a young adult with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), transition of any kind can be challenging and stressful. The transition can be made less confusing and much more successful with careful planning and the appropriate accommodations. In fact, a seamless transition can minimize the impact on the young adult and assure a positive outcome. Here's what needs to occur.

When a student is between 18 and 21 years old, the individualized education plan (IEP) should reflect clear goals for preparing the student for post-school life as an adult. These goals should include employability and independent-living skills, community participation, job sampling, résumé development, and supported employment when appropriate.

Outside of school, planning for post-school life should begin at least one year before graduation, and both the parents and the student need to prepare. The process should allow for a slow transition from school to an adult-services provider. School personnel need to share their knowledge and expertise with the adult-services provider that, in turn, shares valuable information and knowledge concerning services, employment, social opportunities, and the skills and supports needed for the seamless transition.

From the start, the student needs thoughtful help and reassurance during the move away from the familiarity of the school setting to an unknown

adult-services provider. Without this preparation, the scenario exists for backsliding at the most critical time of a young adult's life.

At POW&R, Autism Delaware's adult-services provider, our transition practices begin with our staff observing the student in the classroom, at community vocational sites, and during social and recreational activities. In this step, POW&R staff observes the student's current skill sets and considers the young adult's potential to live in the community and the supports needed.

In the next step, the student works directly with POW&R staff at community sites. Here, the staff sees how the student learns new tasks and generalizes skills. During this time, interactive training also occurs between the school and POW&R staffs. As a result, the POW&R staff acquires knowledge on how to effectively support the transitioning student. Over the course of the final school year, the school staff fades out, and the POW&R staff takes over.

During this process, the young adult transitions into a post-school schedule. The goal is for him or her to fill the schedule with work, training, an internship, or a volunteer position as well as recreation and social opportunities.

With this step-by-step process, POW&R has a proven track record of seamless transitions for students with ASDs. And we will continue to work at minimizing the stress of transition and to promote a positive outcome.



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