

**Strategies for Transition Planning for
Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder
(ASD)**

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Strategies for Transition Planning for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Introduction

The transition from school to adulthood is pivotal in the lives of all students. For a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) transition of any kind can be challenging and the transition from school to the world of adulthood can seem even more so. However, with thoughtful planning and appropriate accommodations, the transition process for a student with autism can be less disorienting and confusing and infinitely more successful. This can be accomplished by using proactive and creative strategies that specifically address the behavioral and educational needs of these students. And staff will be able to achieve a higher probability of success for students to achieve their desired postschool outcomes.

“So you shouldn't always think a person who is different gets the same balanced information from the world that you do. His eyes and ears can be focused on the same things yours are, but once that information gets onto the pathways to his brain, it can go off in wrong directions or get changed or faded or scrambled or confused. So the information might not get to his brain in the same condition the information arrived at your brain.”

~ Brad Rand

Brad Rand is an adult with autism. In his booklet, *How to Understand People Who are Different*, he describes some of his experiences and how different he feels from others. Most students with autism, however, are not as able to articulate their experiences, interests, and preferences or needs in a way we can understand. Therefore, we must rely on observation and patterns of behavior to better perceive their special needs. When these needs are addressed in a systematic way, achieving their desired goals is given a better chance for success. And so it follows with the transition process; whether or not the student can articulate his/her special needs, the team must find a way to discern the student's interests, preferences, and needs. This can be accomplished by including input from the family and other IEP team members in order to facilitate a navigable course through this challenging time.

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often exhibit characteristics that challenge successful implementation of the transition process. Autism typically presents as a constellation of characteristics that revolve around sensory abnormalities, and impairments in communication and social development. The severity of these characteristics falls along a continuum that roughly determines the functioning level of the student. These characteristics and limitations manifest themselves in a variety of ways including difficulties in processing information and challenging behaviors. Challenging behaviors, in particular, can make transition even more difficult to successfully achieve. Although students with ASD share many common characteristics, all students have unique needs that must be evaluated to determine the best

individualized course of action. Answers to the following questions are found below and may provide guidance in establishing special considerations for students with ASD who are entering into or continuing the transition process:

- What are the characteristics unique to students with autism?
- What are the unique needs of students with autism?
- How can proactive planning be used to address needs in transition and maximize the student's potential for future success and independence?

What are the characteristics unique to students with autism?

The following four categories represent common areas of difficulty and are adapted from OAR 581-015-0015 and DSM IV criteria. Since OAR 581-015-0015 specifies only the general categories in subsection (1)(b)(B); additional details were added for further clarity and explanation of Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, it is the OARs that must be followed when determining eligibility.

The categories of impairment or behavior are designated 1, 2, 3 or 4. Each of these categories poses its own potential challenge to the IEP process and transition. Although there is a pattern of characteristics and behaviors common to students with autism; age, level of functioning and level of behavioral support greatly influence the extent of support needed.

1) Impairments in communication (from OAR 581-015-0015)

“People's talking can be hard to figure out because you use many similar words to mean the same thing, like great and wonderful and excellent and terrific.”
~ Brad Rand

Students within the spectrum have difficulty with both expressive and receptive communication and with the expression and understanding of both verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Specifically, students with autism may demonstrate the following:

Delay in or lack of development of spoken language without the attempt to compensate through other modes of communication such as gesture. This may be manifested as:

- Impairment in the ability to initiate/sustain conversation with others.
- Stereotyped/repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language.
- Lack of varied and spontaneous make-believe or social imitative play at the appropriate developmental level.

And may result in the following behaviors:

- ✓ Lack of attention and response to verbal instructions (lack of understanding)
- ✓ Noncompliance
- ✓ Does not respond to name
- ✓ Frustration (tantrums, aggression, “tuning out”)

- ✓ Noncompliance and/or frustration
- ✓ Difficulty with comprehension
- ✓ Difficulty initiating conversation
- ✓ Difficulty responding appropriately in conversation
- ✓ Difficulty maintaining a topic interesting to a peer or other conversational partner
- ✓ Inappropriate perseverance on a topic of interest
- ✓ Difficulty with topic maintenance in conversation
- ✓ Unusual vocal inflection or tone of voice
- ✓ Uses and interprets language literally
- ✓ Does not volunteer information to initiate conversation
- ✓ Misunderstanding of or inattention to facial expressions in others
- ✓ Misunderstanding and inappropriate response to figurative, metaphorical language and “turns of phrase” used by others
- ✓ Repetition of sounds both immediate and delayed referred to as “echolalia”

Examples: a. *(immediate echolalia)*
 Teacher asks student, “What color is this?”
 Student responds, “What color.”

b. *(delayed echolalia)*
 Student repeats dialogue of a movie watched the morning before.

2) Impairments in social interaction (from OAR 581-015-0015)

“Some people who are different don't interact with other people in the right ways. Some people don't understand when it is the right time and place to talk to other people. They might seem too friendly; they might shake your hand and hug you even at times that aren't really right. Or they might tell you stories and jokes at times that aren't really right. “

~Brad Rand

Although autism characteristics vary, it is the social deficits that most notably compromise the student’s ability to engage with peers and the environment. These students typically have difficulty with social expression and understanding of other’s behaviors. This manifests also in lack of social motivation; social appropriateness is frequently not a priority. With our culture so reliant on social consequences to shape and guide children into adulthood, this lack of social motivation in someone with autism poses a particular challenge in the transition process. The following list describes some of the social challenges common to students with ASD:

- Difficulty with expression of non-verbal behaviors such as eye contact, facial expression, body postures and gestures to regulate social interaction.
- Failure to develop developmentally appropriate peer relationships.

- Lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests or achievements with other people.
- Lack of social or emotional reciprocity.

And may result in the following behaviors:

- ✓ Lack of joint attention
- ✓ Lack of play, unusual response to play objects
- ✓ Lack of parallel play
- ✓ Lack of interactive play
- ✓ Lack of symbolic play
- ✓ Absence of eye contact or fleeting eye contact
- ✓ Appears not to differentiate people
- ✓ Does not initiate socially
- ✓ Lack of interest in other students
- ✓ Failure to develop peer relationships
- ✓ Unusual or inappropriate requests for attention from peers (e.g., pushing a student down, pulling a student's hair)
- ✓ Shows more interest in objects than in people
- ✓ Appears withdrawn or aloof
- ✓ Difficulty shifting attention between people, activities, visuals in the environment
- ✓ Exhibits affect (laughing, crying, anger) that is inappropriate for the situation

3) Patterns of behavior, interests and/or activities that are restricted, repetitive, or stereotypic (from OAR 581-015-0015)

“If I'm looking at something and listening to something at the same time, too much information might come in my eyes and ears at one time, so I might touch something. That gets information going in a different sense, through my touch, and it lets my eyes and ears have a rest.”

~ Brad Rand

Behavioral challenges are what frequently bring attention to the fact that a student may have ASD. Although behaviors can be disruptive and difficult to deal with, they are most often the result of a frustrated attempt at communication and should first be viewed from that perspective—**as a form of communicating**.

Patterns of behavior may include:

- Preoccupation with stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
- Inflexible adherence to nonfunctional (usually) routines/rituals
- Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g., hand flapping, toy manipulation)

And may result in the following behaviors:

- ✓ Repetitive or unusual manipulation of objects and toys
- ✓ Frustration and disruptive behaviors when routines and rituals are disrupted
- ✓ Insistence on sameness
- ✓ Challenging behaviors when environment is changed (note, sensory overload)
- ✓ Preoccupation with parts of objects

4) Unusual responses to sensory experiences (from OAR 581-015-0015)

“When a sound pathway is very sensitive, crowds and traffic can be scary. It can be hard to sleep because of all the little sounds, like wind blowing outside or crickets chirping”.
~ Brad Rand

Unusual responses to sensory stimulation may include but are not limited to the following:

- Apparent under or over-responsiveness to sensory stimuli (sometimes similar to students with hearing or vision impairments)
- Unusual food preferences

And may result in the following behaviors:

- ✓ Unusual or inappropriate response to sounds, textures, visual and auditory stimuli
- ✓ Might appear to be deaf to some sounds, hypersensitive to other sounds
- ✓ Eating a restricted variety of foods (e.g., only French fries, flour tortillas and red licorice)
- ✓ Appears fascinated by some visual stimuli; difficult to break attention
- ✓ Exhibits an extreme aversion to certain textures by screaming, avoidance
- ✓ Appears insensitive to injuries that are painful in a typical student
- ✓ May have unusual fears (e.g., of a certain coffee cup)
- ✓ May crave activities that provide sensory feedback (e.g., swinging, jumping).
- ✓ Resistant to being hugged or cuddled
- ✓ Over-stimulated in activities that involve a lot of talking
- ✓ May exhibit withdrawal or challenging behavior in visually or auditory chaotic environments
- ✓ Usually prefers to be alone

In addition to these four areas, a significant number of students with ASD have cognitive deficits. These deficits exacerbate language, social and behavioral impairments. However, ensuring that the team accurately discerns the student’s choices and that these choices are supported in the transition process should be a priority regardless of cognitive level.

What are the unique needs of students with autism?

Many of the above behaviors defining autism can also be found in students with other disabilities. *What makes autism and the needs of students with autism unique is the pattern of these behaviors and the areas of functioning that are affected.* These areas encompass the communication, social, behavioral and sensory issues explained previously and include: 1) impaired auditory processing 2) difficulty regulating or shifting attention 3) difficulty with sensory regulation 4) impaired speech production and 5) impaired cognitive function.

First hand accounts of students' experiences with autism offer some insight into how the characteristics of the disorder affect their lives. The examples illustrated communication, social and sensory difficulties that may interact to cause problematic behaviors and social difficulties. We must also keep in mind that challenges in one area (e.g., communication) can cause or exacerbate difficulties in another (e.g., behavior and social). For example, a student may have a behavioral pattern of screaming in art class. Screaming is a behavioral concern but it may be a response to some problematic sensory stimulation that occurs in the class. If the screaming is somehow stopped in the class without a change in environment, another replacement behavior will probably occur when the environment becomes challenging again for the student. Viewing these challenging behaviors in light of the difficulties described above (auditory processing, regulation of attention and sensory system, speech production and cognitive function) can help us to develop a fuller understanding of the student's special needs in general. Once we understand the student's individual needs, we are better equipped to intervene appropriately and productively.

Not all students with autism are affected by the entire spectrum of these issues. For example, a student with average or above-average cognitive ability and no difficulty with speech production may have sensory and auditory processing difficulties that compromise his communication, social life, perception and behavior. Therefore, it is important for IEP team members to know the student in order to assure that his individualized needs are addressed in planning for and implementing the transition process.

Once those needs have been determined, some strategies for working with the student might include:

Needs associated with auditory processing difficulty

- a. Liberal use of visual cues (e.g., 2D-3D symbols, pictures or photos, objects in the environment) should be provided whenever possible either as the primary mode of communication or to augment verbal or gesture communication, including sign language.
- b. Careful and intentional use of verbal communication according to the student's needs. Pay close attention to the student's auditory processing time delay (often 3-8 seconds) and the extent to which he can process language.

- c. Avoidance of excessive verbal communication. Appropriate amount of verbal communication varies with each student and even with different days for the same student. For example, a student who uses two word phrases to communicate requests might have difficulty and frustration if he is presented with a complex question.

Needs associated with regulating or shifting attention

- a. Establishment of joint attention prior to a communication attempt. This might consist of securing the student's eye contact or simply breaking his/her attention with other stimuli that might be competing with the communication attempt.
- b. Engage the student whenever possible in joint age-appropriate activities with peers. Keep in mind that the student may tend to focus on aspects of an activity or a peer that do not give adequate information to interact appropriately in the situation. In these situations, the student may need redirection.
- c. If the student engages in repetitive or compulsive use of objects, language or activity, frequently direct the student's attention toward other aspects of the environment. The compulsions will probably not be eliminated, but can be used as a reward for appropriate interactions with activities outside that compulsion.

Needs associated with sensory regulation

Environmental stimuli can affect the student's sensory system and result in increased stress. This increase in stress often results in decreased performance and increased behavioral challenges. The student might not respond appropriately to instructions that he would otherwise respond to in a less stressful environment. Strategies to assist students may include:

- a. A means of communication for the student to indicate the need to leave or change the environment to address over or under arousal of the sensory system. This should be determined keeping in mind that communication is most difficult when the student is in a high stress situation.
- b. A predictable, structured environment. This includes arrangement of the physical environment and a schedule system to increase the student's independence. This schedule should be presented in a way that the student can readily access and that requires minimal processing. Usually, visual schedules are preferred. Change is usually quite difficult for someone with ASD. *Visual schedules also allow for a systematic way to introduce change into the student's life.*
- c. Ongoing consultation with an occupational therapist familiar with the sensory needs of someone with ASD, if determined appropriate as a related service for the student.

Needs associated with impaired speech production

- a. An alternative method of expressive language such as use of pictures, a voice output device or sometimes sign language.

- b. Peers may be put off by unusual speech patterns and intonation. Encourage interaction through education about autism and the special needs of the student.
- c. If the student is capable, encourage him or her to interact verbally even though speech may be difficult.

Needs associated with cognitive impairments

- a. The ability of IEP teams to resist the impulse to limit their hopes and expectations of the student based on perceived cognitive level or low scores on assessments.
- b. The level, detail and complexity of demands should be adjusted so as not to frustrate the student. The student should also be appropriately challenged. This can be difficult in light of scattered levels of development and finding the right balance between challenge and frustration.
- c. Because of scattered skills and uneven development across areas of functioning, careful thought should be given that offers challenges to the student that are developmentally appropriate for the area of functioning and age.

How can proactive planning be used to address needs in transition and maximize the student's potential for future success and independence?

The federally mandated transition process for students with disabilities is designed to provide an optimal structure to assist students in moving through the complexities of leaving school to their desired postschool goals. In order to ensure students with ASD are prepared for the transition from school to adult life, their individual needs, particularly those related to ASD need to be named and addressed. For the student with ASD, successful transition will take into account the communicative, social, behavioral and sensory needs that render the student eligible for services based on ASD.

General requirement categories for the transition planning process include: Notify, Invite, Engage, Plan, and Implement. For students with ASD, accommodations will most likely focus in the areas of preparation for IEP meetings, participating in the meeting process and working toward identifying postschool goals and developing the IEP goals and objectives that will lead them to their desired postschool outcome.

Special considerations for the student with ASD will vary according to the individual student's needs, but generally encompass the following categories:

Communication. All communication with the student must take into account the methods that have been most successful for that student in the past. Some possibilities include:

- Establish a mode of communication that all team members can understand.
- Using visual cues such as pictures to assist the student in processing information.

- Establish a functional mode of communication that can be readily understood across all domains of the student's life (e.g., home, community, work, recreation).
- Using sign language for students who have been successful using that mode of communication
- Attention to the literal content of the communication. Students with ASD tend to interpret literally so turns of phrase (e.g., "You and your friend are like two peas in a pod.") should be avoided when trying to convey important information to the student.

Routine and Predictability. It is important to consider the student's probable need for routine and predictability in the planning and implementation of transition. The following suggestions may assist in addressing these needs:

- Present a clear and concise sequence of expected events in the transition process. This may be broken down into several separate events. For example, the IEP meeting agenda may be expanded to explain the events that will take place and in what order they will be presented. Specific activities such as riding the bus should be broken into a sequence of clear steps for the student to follow.
- Any meetings or activities should abide by the schedule previously presented to the student.
- Give the student ample processing time and warning of any changes to the original plan.
- Take advantage of the student's aptitude for routines by writing small routines for him to follow for each event.
- Use available tools such as "social stories" (by Carol Gray) to assist the student's comprehension of transition events.

Sensory Issues. Sensory issues affect all areas of the student's life. These may be mild or debilitating depending on how severely the student is impacted by these issues. Some students exhibit no sensory issues when in a "friendly" environment and are incapacitated in a less friendly environment. The following points illustrate some ways to address some of the sensory issues that may arise:

- Keep in mind that the student's difficulty in processing auditory information may cause stress that can result in problem behaviors or "shut down."
- A "sensory-friendly" environment should be sought for the student in all situations. This generally consists of high structure and predictability, low noise (talking), access to equipment/activities to address these sensory needs (e.g., a quiet room, a weighted vest or blanket), and adjustment of lighting.
- Sometimes certain visual stimulation (e.g., fluorescent lighting) causes high stress. Address these issues as they arise.
- Ask people who are familiar with the student throughout the day (e.g., parents, teachers) under what circumstances the student is relaxed and try to recreate components of this environment during the transition meetings and other activities.

Behavioral Issues. Behavioral issues or potential behavioral issues must be addressed and planned for proactively. The following suggestions may be helpful in accomplishing that:

- Communicate with individuals who spend time with the student in various environments to develop an inventory of the student's behavioral strengths and challenges. Identify any existing behavioral intervention plans.
- Interpret all problematic behaviors as either 1) the student communicating something he cannot communicate appropriately; or 2) an expression of frustration and/or sensory overload.
- If a problematic behavior occurs, ask yourself or the team; "If the student could more easily access his language, what would this behavior say?"
- Change behavior by changing the environment or program to address the student's needs, not through punishment.
- Teach the student to self manage his/her own behavior using a research based procedure (e.g., Koegel & Koegel 1975).
- Video taping of the student in specific situations can be used as a visual for the student to observe his own behavior. This can be a helpful step in a self-management procedure.
- Video modeling of appropriate behavior can be used to help teach the student.

Student Interests and Aptitudes. Depending on communication skills, it may be difficult to assess a student with ASD for interests and aptitudes. It is also difficult to differentiate student preferences from parent and teacher preferences for that student. Some areas to explore with the student are 1) vocational interests and skills; 2) recreation and leisure preferences; 3) independent living considerations; 4) community participation and 5) educational opportunities.

Whether or not communication is difficult for the student, one of the best ways to assess his or her true interests is to observe the student's behavior in several different environments. Consider the following questions in assessment and planning for transition:

- Without constraints, what would the student choose to do?
- In what types of situations do you observe low stress behavior?
- In what types of situations do you observe high stress behavior?
- What are the variables that seem to determine stress level?
- Are there any subjects or activities (or portions of these) in which the student excels? Or in which the student has difficulty?
- If the student exhibits behavioral challenges, are there environments/contexts in which these behaviors are actually appropriate? Examples of this include compulsive behavior (e.g., insistence on lining up a series of objects) that in a work situation might be functional. There are other areas of potential difficulty that might be strengths in an appropriate environment. These include but are not limited to the following:

<u>Area of Difficulty</u>	<u>Associated Strength/Aptitude</u>
Compulsive adherence to routines	→ Readily learns/retains positive routines
Difficulty shifting attention	→ Ability to focus on details Long attention span for specific activities
Upset by changes in the environment	→ Aptitude for tasks that involve repetition Attention to time limits/guidelines
Obsessive preoccupations	→ Aptitude for working with numbers/letters
Difficulty understanding speech	→ Ability to process visual information
Lack of response to auditory stimuli	→ Highly responsive to visual stimuli
Literal thought process	→ Aptitude for linear processes Exhibits honesty (sometimes without tact)
Prefers to do things alone	→ Independence, focus on task at hand

In addition to the above, some students with ASD also exhibit:

- Exceptional memory
- Isolated areas of skill or aptitude (e.g., computer work or art)

Conclusion

Transition from school to postschool activity can be a challenging and exciting time in a student's life. A well thought out and carefully orchestrated transition plan for a student with ASD will augment strengths and deal productively with challenges in a way that will enhance the life of the student and support and assist the student to achieve a seamless transition to desired postschool outcomes. Patience and an ability to think "outside the box" will ensure success.