

Ready, steady.....

Preparation for School

Although your child/pupil has probably attended a pre-school for the last couple of years, induction into primary school will be a very new and challenging experience for them. Everything from the building, the people, teaching style of their teacher, to the lights, smells, and materials can impact upon their progress and ability to cope within the mainstream system. Regardless of diagnosis, each child is an individual, and therefore we can never be certain which element will prove most challenging for that particular child. In an effort to prevent a placement failure, it is essential that time and thought is put into the preparation of your child or student for this new challenge and ensuring the first few days of the placement are as calm and comfortable as possible. We will now look at 10 steps which should be explored for each child as they enter mainstream school. Some children will not require all the steps, but it is advisable to work your way through them.

1. Contact the Special Educational Needs Officer (SENO) in your area- The SENO will be able to offer you advice on school placement, liaise with the local intervention team to decide on best placement, and apply for resources in conjunction with the school.

2. Gather relevant assessments and professional reports- Up to date assessments and reports will provide the school with the most comprehensive picture of your child's strengths and needs. Providing the school with all of these documents well ahead of the start of term allows the staff to thoroughly look over the information. Once the information has been read, questions can be posed and answered, and the teacher is then forearmed to cater to your child's individual needs. Examples of relevant reports include:

- Developmental Diagnostic Report (carried out by Multi-Disciplinary Team)
- Disability Act 2005- Independent Assessment of Need
- Psychological Assessment
- Speech and Language Assessment
- Occupational Therapy Assessment
- Pre-school Report - A short synopsis of progress from the Pre-school provider may be possible
- Individual Tutor Reports - If your child has received home tuition from a specialised Tutor, this Tutor should provide you with a Progress Report for the school

Provide copies of each report for the school. These reports should be kept confidential; however I would recommend that all personnel working with the child read through each report, so everyone is up to date on relevant recommendations.

3. **Create a Passport for your child**

Each parent will know their child best. Of all the reports you will read, the one which the parent provides will provide the most personal information, and often the best tips. To create a passport for your child, gather the following information

- **Personal information** e.g. Name, nick names (if any), date of birth, Sibling names, pets names. Some of this information may seem unnecessary, however it can come in very useful for the school personnel when they are trying to build a rapport with the child.
- **Dietary Restrictions** This section should detail foods which your child either is not permitted to have (perhaps due to a restricted casein or gluten free diet) and also foods which they are intolerant to from a sensory perspective. The latter group are foods which may present a challenge to the child's senses of touch, smell, sight or even perhaps auditory e.g. crisps.
- **Sensory information** This information will be vital for all members of school staff. Details should be provided regarding all sensory difficulties you are aware of, and also any information you can provide around coping with these sensitivities. Think of the average primary school classroom, is there any features which would upset your child or cause them to have an adverse reaction? Are large groups a problem? Do they have issues with being in a line? Are they sensitive to certain smells? Do they have issues around clothing? Do they have noise sensitivities? Do they have any sensitivity to certain smells? Forewarned is forearmed, and unnecessary emotional outbursts can be avoided when the staff are aware of this information.

4. Collect support materials It may be beneficial to provide the school with materials that have proved successful with your child in the past. Social stories or schedules are great examples of materials which can carry over into the mainstream classroom with little difficulty. If your child utilises any visual anger management or anxiety relief materials, these should most definitely be given to the school along with guidelines for their use.

5. Arrange a tour of the school and meet & greet This is a vital step for all children. This visit should be arranged before the end of the preceding academic year. I understand that it is policy with a lot of schools to only advise on the teacher allocation on the last day of term, but if at all possible the teacher should be available for introduction to the child during this visit.

The child should be shown their new classroom, the yard and any other areas which the class will use during the year e.g. the gym, hall, art room, and computer room. It is advisable to take pictures of each of these areas. These pictures can later be turned into a book about the school.

Allow enough time for your child to become comfortable in the environment, rushing at this stage will only stress your child and create problems later. Introducing your child to their new principal, resource teacher and other staff (e.g. learning support teacher) is also important. After your visit you can expand on the roles of each of the individuals your child has met in their school book.

6. Try on the school uniform and tracksuit As already stated many children with a diagnosis of Autism and related disorders can have sensory difficulties including textile sensitivities. By trying on your child's uniform and tracksuit, you will be able to identify any garments which are posing difficulty for your child. It may be that they need a short sleeved shirt instead of long sleeved, that tags need to be removed, or that the garments themselves need to be washed a number of times to take the starchy new feeling out of them.

By trying the uniform on early, it avoids any last minute difficulties and first morning tantrums! It's also a great idea to take a photo of the child in their uniform and tracksuit. This can be used in their "My School Book" later.

7. Creating your child's "My School Book" The simplest way to make this book is to use a copy book or scrap book. From your first visit to the school, you should have plenty of pictures of the grounds, classrooms and also the staff.

Place a big picture of the front of the school building on the front of the book, and the title above it. The title you place on the book is completely your own decision, but something simple like "My School" or the name of the school would suffice.

On the first page, place the picture of your child in their uniform, with some explanation underneath e.g. this is me in my school uniform. I will wear this going to school".

The flow of the book from here is completely up to you. I would suggest following the sequence of the school day e.g. Principal, teacher, classroom, yard, gym/hall, and school gate for home time. Be sure to only place short simple captions above or below each picture, trying not to have more than 2 sentences. For the pictures of the staff members, a short explanation of the role of each person is a great idea e.g. under the teachers picture "Mrs. Murphy will help me to learn. I can go to her if I need help".

Under the pictures of different school areas e.g. the gym/hall, you can detail what the area is used for. If your child has access to a Special needs assistant, this person may not be assigned until the start of the school year. It would therefore be impossible to put this picture in the school book. As long as the child knows the key personnel, it will ease any anxieties for their first day of school. The SNA can be introduced to your child once they have settled into the classroom, but you can place a

note in their book with an advance warning that there may be other people in the classroom that can help them.

8. Decide upon a school contact It is important to decide with the school the person who will be your main point of contact. Some schools are very open and have no problem with the SNA being the main contact for the parent. Other schools will be happier for the parent to speak to the teacher, and in some schools, the resource teacher will be the designated contact. Open communication between parents and school staff is vital if full inclusion is to be achieved for the student. Both sides need to be fully aware of any problems which may be impeding on the child's academic or social experience. In an effort to keep these lines of communication open, it is a good idea to agree a school contact with the school before your child starts. It is also important to decide how often this communication will take place. It may be that you can have five or ten minutes of the teachers or resource teachers time once a week, or the SNA can give you a synopsis of the child's day in a communication book daily. Whichever method you choose it is important to be able to update the school of any difficulty the child is experiencing at home, and vice versa. If your child has not slept properly or has not eaten breakfast, please make the school aware of this, as this can have an adverse effect on the child's behaviour in the classroom.

9. Organisation Making sure your child has everything they need for their academic experience is a must, but organising those materials properly is even more important.

Colour coding is a simple tactic that can be implemented easily and once the child is used to the system it can carry them through to secondary school and beyond. Giving each subject a colour code helps the child to recognise the books and copies attached to that subject quickly and easily. Once the colours are set they should not be changed. You can actually cover the books and copies in the colour you have chosen, or alternatively place large coloured stickers on the side or front of the items. Whichever method you choose, make sure that you make the class teacher aware that you are using this method and give them a coding scheme for the colours. In the junior classes, the child may pay little or no attention to the colour coding system, but over time it will become more obvious to them, and become a helpful tactic when more books and copies are introduced into their daily workload.

Your child's pencil case will contain a myriad of tools; pencils, rubbers, sharpener, colouring pencils. Locating one item between these can be awkward for a child with autism. I would recommend investing in a double pocket clear pencil case. In one pocket simply place a rubber, pencil and sharpener, and the other pocket can house the colouring materials and any spare pencils and rubbers. By utilising a clear pencil case, you allow your child to see through the pencil case and find the tool they need quickly. Explain to the SNA or teacher that you have separated the materials for a specific reason, so that they can see that this is kept up in the classroom.

A school bag with wheels may be a more suitable option for your child, especially if they have any tactile sensory difficulties or have poor muscle tone. These bags are usually easy to pack as they have a structured hard back and base. They often have extra side pockets which you can use to pack spare clothes for your child. Keeping a set of spare clothes in the classroom can help to ease any emotional outbursts should your child's uniform become dirty or wet. You know your child best, and will know whether they have sensitivities of this nature, and if this particular step is a necessary one.

10. Provision for lunch breaks and unstructured times

Lunchtimes and unstructured breaks in the class routine can be extremely stressful for a child with autism. Planning for these inevitabilities well in advance can prevent avoidable emotional outbursts and anxiety. Each child will differ in their needs, but having a buddy system at the start of the school experience can really help a child to feel involved in the playground and start developing friendships.

Buddy System- A buddy system is a simple system which ensures that the student is never short of a friend at yard time. There are a number of ways to build a buddy system. You can include all children in the class, or handpick certain children. Children who have social standing within a class, can make superb buddies, as they can help build up the status of becoming a buddy, and entice other children to become involved. It is extremely important though that children are never forced to become a buddy, as this can back fire and actually hinder the inclusion process. Children should be alternated daily, and all social efforts should be praised for all children involved. It is a great idea to have buddy groups for the entire class, as this prevents the child standing out from the crowd, as requiring specific attention.

Although it is important to involve the child in the social world within the classroom it is also vital that you be aware that the child may need some down time. School can at times prove stressful for the child with ASD, so keeping this in mind some down time in the yard should be permitted. If the child would like to be left alone, reply positively that this is no problem, but that a game will be set up for the next break for them to play.

If you have a child who is constantly wandering alone in the yard, set up group games with their buddy for a certain percentage of the break e.g. 5 minutes of a 15 minute break, allowing them to have down time for the remainder of the break. You can build up the ratio of structured time and reduce the allocation of down time as the child becomes used to this system. You may need to use some motivational tactics at first to entice the child to join in the games, so please see chapter 6 for advice on motivation and reinforcement.

Schedules- Providing a lunchtime schedule is also an option for some children. Whether this is a picture schedule or a textual schedule will completely depend on the individual child, so look at what has previously worked for the child before you decide. This schedule can be as simple or as detailed as you would like, but must include all elements of the break and must be a portable size. You can include game time, down time, eating time, chat time, physical play time or any other elements of the yard/ lunchtime which you will encounter. It may be an idea to use a key ring to attach the schedule to the child or SNA's belt out in the yard, and failing the presence of a finished box, the finished pictures can be transferred to the back of the strip which would be highlighted in red.

Quiet Area- An area within the yard or surrounding area should be designated as a quiet area which the child can go to if they need some down time from the hustle and bustle in the yard. Once in this area, the child should be left alone for at least 3 minutes. You should then approach the child and ask if they are okay, and entice them to rejoin the group. If they reply that they are okay but need some space, then a further 2 minutes should be allowed, but the person should stay near the area, keeping an eye on the child in case they need assistance for any reason. If you notice that a child is in this area frequently, this should be looked at carefully, with above supports being explored for the child to aid their social inclusion.

Although these are areas which will be dealt with when the child enters the school, planning for the provision of these supports can happen well in advance of the beginning of term, so it is never too early to decide on courses of action.

All of the steps detailed above will help to ensure a smooth transition into mainstream school. It is vital that this process begins months before the actual entrance into the school so planning is vital. Remember failing to plan is planning to fail!