

STARTING PRIMARY SCHOOL from Raising Children in Australia

Key points

- Work with primary schools to develop transition and individual learning plans for autistic children.
- The transition to primary school will be easier if children can get familiar with school and practise new routines before they start.
- The first few weeks might be tiring and confusing. Give children time and space when they get home.
- Good communication with schools is an important part of starting primary school.

Preparing autistic children for starting primary school: strategies

With some planning and preparation, you can help your autistic child make a successful start to primary school. These strategies can help:

- Make a transition plan for your child.
- Develop an individual learning plan for your child.
- Get your child familiar with the school and school equipment.
- Practise school routines.
- Get organised at home.

If your child is starting school, moving schools or changing teachers, it can help to develop a profile of your child. This document can describe your child's strengths, needs, likes and dislikes, and cover any other information that you think teachers will find useful. You can give the profile to your child's new teacher.

Make a transition plan

A transition plan is a set of **activities and strategies designed to help your child adjust successfully to school**. You develop a transition plan with your child's early intervention service, preschool teacher and primary school staff.

A transition plan might include:

- a profile of your child, including your child's strengths and interests, health, medical and therapy reports, and current medical and therapy needs
- an extended orientation program or extra orientation activities to help your child get to know the school

- times for your child to meet teachers and support staff before school starts
- school visits a few days before term starts, so your child can visit the classroom, spend time in the playground and move around the school
- a photo album with pictures of the school, your child's classroom and teachers.

Ideally, your child's transition activities would start at the beginning of their last year at preschool.

Develop an individual learning plan

An individual learning plan is a document that sets out:

- your child's existing skills, strengths and interests
- your child's learning needs
- specific and measurable goals for your child
- any adjustments or curriculum modifications your child needs
- strategies and resources to develop your child's skills, meet your child's needs, support your child's wellbeing, and help your child reach their goals.

Your child's individual learning plan might also include strategies to help them cope if they get upset or behave in challenging ways.

You develop an individual learning plan with your child's school.

Good communication with your child's school is an important part of your child's transition. It creates a shared understanding of your child's goals and needs, and makes it easier for you to speak up for your child if you need to. If you need help communicating or working with the school, a support person or disability advocate might be a good option.

Get children familiar with the school and school equipment

A gradual approach is the best way to help your child get familiar with the school. For example:

1. Walk or drive past the school on your way to somewhere else. This will help your child see the school as part of their everyday routine.
2. Visit the school out of hours. If you can, try to do this several times so that your child gets to know the school environment.
3. Start formal transition activities, like visiting the classrooms.

It can also help to slowly introduce the things that your child needs for the school day. This way your child can get familiar with these things before your child starts

school. For example, you could put out the new school bag, lunch box and uniform so your child gets used to seeing them around.

These small steps can reduce any [anxiety](#) your child is feeling about the big changes ahead.

To help your child understand what to expect, you could make a [social story](#) about starting school or a visual storybook with photos of the school, classroom and new teacher. You could include how your child will get to school, who will pick them up and how they will get home. If your child understands the concept of time, a countdown calendar to the day they start school can reduce their anxiety about when it's happening.

Practise school routines

Practising school routines at home before your child starts school can help your child feel comfortable with new routines. It can also help you spot any potential problems and find solutions.

For example, your child could practise:

- putting and taking off on their school uniform, especially jumpers and shoes
- eating out of a lunch box
- wearing a school hat
- walking to school
- wearing school shoes
- following a visual timetable
- using their [augmentative communication system](#), if they have one
- asking simple questions like 'Where is the toilet?' or 'Where is my teacher?'
- sitting still on a mat or carpet on the floor.

Check whether your child's preschool has a uniform or lunch box day, where they can practise wearing their uniform and eating lunch from a lunch box.

School uniforms can upset autistic children with [sensory sensitivities](#). If your child practises wearing the uniform, you can work out how to handle their sensitivities. Options might include removing labels, washing uniforms with fabric softener, or letting your child wear something under the uniform. Or you could get second-hand school uniforms, which are worn in and feel softer on the skin.

Get organised at home

If you're organised when your child starts school, it'll help things go well and ease stress.

It's a good idea to make sure you and your child have everything you need well in advance. Schools usually give you a comprehensive list of what children need, which means you can buy – or make or borrow – things in plenty of time.

You could also make a [morning routine for school](#). Here's how to get started:

- Write down what you and your child need to do to get ready for school – for example, pack lunch box, pack bags, get uniforms and shoes ready and so on.
- Put the activities into sequence.
- Take photos and make a visual plan of the routine.
- Follow the plan for a couple of weeks, then review it to see how well it's working.

If you need help developing a school morning routine, ask your child's early intervention teacher.

The first few weeks at primary school: helping things go well

Starting school can be tiring and confusing for all children. Your autistic child might react by behaving in more rigid or repetitive ways, or they might have tantrums if you ask them to do something. Here are some tips to help in the first few weeks.

At home

- When your child gets home from school, give them half an hour before starting any routines. Your child might need even longer at the end of the week when they're really tired.
- Give your child extra time to process and respond to instructions.
- Try not to ask your child a lot of questions about school.

At school

- Use a communication book or app or exchange regular emails with your child's teacher or aide as often as you need to. This can highlight potential problems or solve problems quickly.
- Ask for your child to have a buddy for support at school.
- Make sure your child has a safe place to go if they feel overwhelmed.
- Give your child a help card. This card reminds your child to ask an adult for help. It can help your child feel less stressed and anxious when they get overwhelmed.
- Ask the teacher to give your child short, timed breaks so your child can do their favourite activity or de-stress for a few minutes. If your child doesn't speak much, they could use a 'break' card when things feel overwhelming.