

**INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS
WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR
FAMILIES**

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Background: I have been a disability researcher within the SPRC (Social Policy Research Centre) for four years. During that time I commenced my Masters by Research on mothers supporting children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) in three regional cities: Bathurst, Orange and Dubbo. A total of eighteen mothers were interviewed for my thesis. The theme of the research was the impact having a child with ASD had on a mother's life. This submission is based on my Master's research in regional cities.

Findings:

1 Transition from pre-school to school:

Overwhelmingly, the mothers found that whilst the pre-school years were adequately catered for with additional support teachers and teachers with a reasonable knowledge of early intervention, once the child commenced school all therapies offered as part of the curriculum ceased. In addition, the transition from pre-school to the kindergarten year were difficult, with little communication between the teacher and parent taking place.

Parents often felt they were discouraged from communicating with the school. One mother was told "We are the experts, leave it to us". When she did leave it to the school, the child spent much of the time outside the classroom and was excluded from many classroom activities. There was little understanding of the needs of this child. Parents found this lack of communication stressful, particularly as preparing children with ASD for change is fundamental to a successful transition. Another mother was not informed or invited to attend a meeting about her child. Three other mothers had offered to talk to the class about what having autism meant for their sons and how to interact with their children. All were denied this opportunity. As a result their children were even more excluded, with few establishing friendships.

In particular children with ASD found the transition to school very difficult. They found the move between one classroom to another hard, the use of shared teachers or relief teachers' difficult and daily activities such as playground recreation daunting. Of the children with a normal IQ (intelligence quotient) all the mothers reported that the children found it hard to "keep up" with school work. Access to teachers' aides was limited with a teacher's aide typically being shared across a number of children.

2 Options for schools in regional centres

There are an adequate range of schools in regional cities, both public and private, however, there is a lack of special classes within those schools for children with additional or complex needs, and thus parents are faced with the options of either placing their children in special schools or in mainstream school. During my research I came across two children who had tried to attend mainstream school but were forced to attend special school as a result of bullying and classrooms being ill equipped to manage children with ASD. Both children had a normal IQ but had severe ASD symptomology. Neither of these children were offered transition options back to mainstream school.

3 Relations between school and parents

Of the eighteen mothers interviewed, only one had not experienced problems with communication with the school. This mother had a pre-school child. Communication was typified by the perception that schools did not want to enter into a dialogue with parents about how best to support the child with ASD. Meetings appeared to be only held when a crisis occurred. These meetings were typified by the parent being faced with a large group of professionals including those from the Education Office. The parents found these meetings intimidating, and at times confrontational. While the parents wanted to find solutions for their child they often found the large group protective of their practices and unwilling to work together for solutions.

One mother was told by her local school that the school already had its quota of children with a disability and that the mother should look elsewhere. It was only after attending a disability conference in Sydney that the mother found out that the school had a legal obligation to take her child.

Three mothers found that their child's lack of fine motor skills were not catered for. The children were refused the right to use a laptop even if the parents would pay for it, and often a scribe was not available. Parents reported that their children were refused extra time to complete their tasks.

3.1 Integration of therapy into school hours

One effective way to support transition to school is to allow therapies started in pre-school to continue during school times. The therapists can support the teachers in offering strategies to deal with specific areas of need.

4 Recommendations for transition school

The presentation of ASD is different in each child, one child may have behaviour problems, another be quiet and fail to participate in class. The following recommendations came out of discussions with the mothers of children with ASD regarding transition to school:

- It is important that the parent/s be recognised as the expert in his/her child's needs and level of support. By establishing early on in the child's school life routines and techniques to make school a positive experience the child is far more likely to succeed (Barnard, 2002).
- Prior to transitioning to school, parent/s of children with ASD should have a detailed discussion with the school of their child's needs as well as the child's particular strengths. For example, Victoria uses the Transition Statement (<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/transitionschool/>) to ascertain the child's readiness for school. This statement is completed by the early years educator, therapists and parents. This statement allows the school to become "child ready" with appropriate supports and preparation completed prior to acceptance of the child.

- Support be made available to assist the transition process for as long as is needed by the child, parent/s and the school.
- Regular meetings be held with the parent/s during the first year of school to circumvent problems (Martin and Hagan-Burke, 2002).
- Development of a strengths based approach to educate peers in mainstream schools on how ASD affects children.
- Establishment of special classes within mainstream schools from which children are gradually transitioned into the mainstream classes.

References

Barnard, J. (2002) *Autism in schools: crisis or challenge?* , National Autistic Society,

Martin, E. J. and Hagan-Burke, S. (2002), 'Establishing a home-school connection: Strengthening the partnership between families and schools', *Preventing School Failure*, 46(2), 62-65.