

**Submission
No 67**

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

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Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families

Overview of Toby's Experiences

Our son, Toby Betts, was diagnosed with high functioning autism at 4 years of age. He attended pre-school and was in child care. He started school in kindergarten at a small country school of 44 students. At the start of year 1 he transferred to a larger primary school in Orange. He was in mainstream classes throughout infants and primary but was supported by a teacher's aide. He transitioned into a multi-categorical class within a Support Unit for High School but after 5 terms we withdrew him from school and transferred to Dubbo School of Distance Education.

He underwent a transition with every change from childcare to pre-school and on through to high school. These transitions varied in methods and outcomes.

Childcare to Pre-school

At this time Toby was receiving early intervention at Orange & District Early Education Program. The staff at ODEEP assisted with his transition. We took pictures and made up a story book which showed all of the people and areas that he would encounter. We read this 'book' to him regularly. We also took him to visit the pre-school and to meet the staff. This transition was successful and Toby started pre-school with very few problems initially.

Pre-school to Kindergarten

This transition was undertaken with the assistance of a Department of Education Itinerant Support Teacher. Again we did a story book with pictures of buildings, people etc. We took Toby for visits and my wife and I met with the teachers of the school. The teachers indicated that they knew about autism and would put measures in place to accommodate him. In the first week he escaped from the school and ran onto a main road. This resulted in additional funding to fix the gate. As it turned out the teachers knew nothing about teaching kids with autism and Toby's experience was so bad that DET gave us an apology and we transferred Toby to a larger school.

Kindergarten to Primary

This transition was similar to the one above with pictures and visits. The Principal was more obliging and made some changes to help Toby settle in. While the transition was fairly smooth the teachers that Toby had during his infants and primary schooling had varying knowledge and experiences with kids with autism.

Transitions from Class to Class

The transition that some teachers and the Principal make when a child with autism progresses from one class to another every year varies considerably. The success of this type of transition relies on the Principal identifying the child's next year teacher early in term 4. Then the existing teacher can start preparations before the end of term and the child can make frequent visits to the intended classroom to become familiar with the surroundings, the teacher and the teacher's style and routine under normal circumstances.

Toby's experiences varied. The transitions which were most successful were the ones where the new teachers made the biggest effort to adapt the classroom and routines to suit Toby.

Transition from Primary to High School

We expected the move into High School to be the most stressful for Toby, so we put a lot more effort into this transition. We knew that High School would be very different to primary school. Toby started transition in term 3 and was it largely undertaken with an AP Outreach Autism. We met with the Head Teacher of the Support Unit and Toby started visits outside of school hours initially. Then he visited during school hours. The deputy Principal & Toby's teacher from the Primary school went to the High School and related what strategies worked well.

Although the most effort was put into this transition and the transitioning AP Outreach teacher did a very thorough job, the result was the most unsuccessful of Toby's school experiences. In the first couple of weeks Toby had a complete meltdown at school and declared, "High school is nothing like I expected". This transition failed not because of the effort put in by the transitioning teacher but because the high school did nothing. The Head Teacher of the Support Unit was very negative about having Toby there, everyone in the school discouraged us from helping and they just expected him to cope despite his difficulties in adapting to changes, having poor social skills and being a target for bullies. The High School staff ignored completely the helpful suggestions from the Primary School staff preferring to continue to do what they would always do.

Toby was bullied relentlessly at this high school and he often retaliated with violence. This aggression led to many suspensions. The school never seemed to deal with the bullies and did very little to accommodate children with autism. They were reluctant to make any changes to school procedures and programs to make kids with higher functioning autism safer and less anxious. To reduce Toby's depression and anxiety we transferred him to distance education from Dubbo. He does his school work at home and communicates with his teachers by post, email and telephone.

Major Barriers to Easy Transitions

- The Principal not identifying the new teacher by the start of term 4.
- The new teacher/school not recognizing the individual needs of the student and not creating systems and programs to accommodate that child.
- Teachers/schools trying to make the student mould to the existing systems. Change is a big issue with kids with autism.
- The new teacher/school refusing to make the suggested changes after they have agreed.
- Transitions only succeed on the goodwill of Principals and teachers.
- Children with autism only get a good education if everyone is willing and teachers know what triggers will avoid anxiety, meltdowns and aggression.
- Parents unaware of funding, support and staff available to undertake transitions.

Better Transitions will happen when:

- Parents and multidisciplinary teams are involved. Parents should be informed of all details of possible funding and support.

- There is a properly trained transition manager who is responsible to develop a transition plan and involve the appropriate people. The manager should follow up after the child has made the transition.
- The managers need to network with each other and have some authority to make changes. The current autism outreach and support teachers have no authority in schools and their good strategies and teacher training only works by goodwill.
- The transition plans should be agreed to by all parties and be signed off by parents, principals and teachers. If the plans are not followed then there should be negative consequences.
- Classroom teachers and schools need to identify the individual needs of students and make changes to the classroom, systems and procedures to minimise stress in having to adapt to major changes.
- Teachers need to understand what actions can cause unnecessary anxiety in students with autism and be aware of the triggers to meltdowns.
- Story books with pictures of the new school/class room work well with younger children and students with low functioning autism.
- Transitions to high schools need to include more than just visits and meeting staff. The student needs to have a more realistic inclusion into high school life.