

Children, teacher and parents' perspectives on the transitions between home and school

Executive Summary

Ciara Boys (BSc Education and Psychology) & Professor Sarah Parsons
Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

Background

Daily transitions between home and school can be experienced as challenging by autistic children and their families (Brede et al, 2017). Parents talk about children having meltdowns upon returning home from school (e.g. Carrington and Graham, 2001), and autistic adolescents suggest that such meltdowns often arise because of having to 'mask' or 'camouflage' their autism characteristics during the day (Tierney et al., 2016). This raises questions about the extent to which what happens at home is known about at school, and vice versa, since knowing more about strategies that work well, or circumstances that may cause problems, can help teachers and families to be consistent in their approaches to support. However, little is known about how schools and families manage the daily transitions between home and school for autistic pupils and what children themselves have to say about these. Therefore, this project sought the perspectives of children, parents, and educators from a mainstream primary school in Hampshire to address the main research question: **What are the views and experiences of autistic children, and their teachers and parents about the daily transitions between home and school?**

Method

Six children (one female, five males) were included, two from Reception year (aged 4-5), one from year 2 (aged 7), and three from year 6 (aged 10-11). Seven parents / carers (6 females, 1 male) of the six children also participated along with 5 education staff from the school. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the parents/carers, and education staff. A cue card activity supported two of the children in Year 6 to give their views in a child-centred interview (Figure 1), while other children were observed in their classrooms, at lunch or break time, or at the end of the school day.

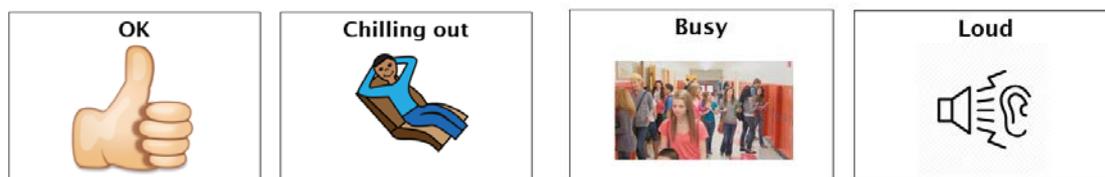


Figure 1: examples of cue cards used in child interviews

Key Findings

- Having **well-established routines** at home in the morning, and after school in the evenings, were noted as important by all parents. These routines seemed to help with preparing for a more positive transition between home and school. One of the children talked about how if he gets up late in the morning this can make him '*stressed and worried*', and so sticking to the routine as much as possible was important.
- Once at school, teachers and parents talked about the value of being able to '**meet and greet**' at the same time and place each morning, and to have a space where the child can adjust to the school day outside of the classroom. Teachers also noted how these sessions helped their pupils to settle and prepare for the school day, and helped them transition from their parents' to their teachers' care.
- Parents also valued **regular communication** they had with the school, and commented that the school adapts what it does to meet the child's needs as much as possible. This was particularly noted in relation to **sensory sensitivities** where, for example, teachers said that they were careful about where children sat and who they sat next to, and accommodated different approaches at assemblies and lunchtimes where

children could spend time quietly by themselves or with a teacher so as to avoid the 'noise'. Children also valued these accommodations:

'Well my teacher makes it quiet, most of the time definitely not too busy... Mr _____ makes sure it is quiet in my classroom at school... he's literally the best teacher in the school... I'm like, if it's too noisy and too busy I feel like please get out, or please be quiet'

'I like break times, maths, especially ICT I really like, lunchtimes, where I tend to just be quiet and read...'

- Teachers considered **structured routines** to be beneficial at school, including getting prepared for class and responding consistently to particular situations. One of the children mentioned this too i.e. appreciating doing 'normal lessons' in the morning. One of the parents also mentioned how important it is to understand the significant impact that even ostensibly small changes to the child's routine can have.
- **Unstructured time was discussed as more problematic** i.e. at break or lunch time, not least as these were times that were also considered 'noisy' by the children, and where peer interaction difficulties came to the fore.
- Some parents felt that children's engagement at school (and, subsequently, behaviour at home) can be impacted when **children's interests and skills are / are not appropriately taken on board** or when parents are unaware of incidents at school. One child noted how he feels happier in lessons that he knows he is good at:

'[I feel] happy, I know it's something I enjoy doing... and when we are in ICT people come to me or my friend...because we're like the people that do that sort of stuff'

- The main area where parents would have appreciated some further input from the school was in receiving **more regular, and positive, communication** about what had happened during the school day. One parent said she would have liked to know more about the positives at school 'even if it's just one piece of work' as otherwise negative behaviours tended to dominate the communication: 'it drowns you'. Other parents valued the regular communication but said this tended to happen when 'behaviour was more extreme' or was mostly 'behaviour related'. Another Mum commented:

'That's the thing I find really hard as they kind of get older and older you get less and less information about how the day is going. So we don't have a communication book or anything like that but...it'd be quite nice have that where you can see how the day is going for him, or have the teacher let me know how his day has been going.'

Conclusions

Children's experiences of daily transitions between home and school, and between different activities at school, are well supported at home via predictable routines in the morning and evening, and at school by structured approaches to smoothing the transitions. These approaches include: regular opportunities for communication with parents, a familiar 'meet and greet' routine in the morning, and accommodation of children's sensory sensitivities throughout the day, especially during less structured times. Parents and children value the areas in which children show interests and skills, and feel positive about these. Aligning with other research (Zilli et al., in press), using children's interests effectively can be vital for supporting their engagement (and, therefore, behaviour) at school. Linked to this, parents would have appreciated more regular communication from the school about the things that had gone well for the child that day, even if only 'small'. As noted by Charman et al., (2011) such regular communication also works both ways, enabling parents to let school staff know about anything that may impact on the child's day.

References

- Brede, J., Remington, A., Kenny, L., Warren, K. and Pellicano, E. (2017). Excluded from school: Autistic students' experiences of school exclusion and subsequent re-integration into school. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 2, 1-20.
- Carrington, S. and Graham, L., 2001. Perceptions of school by two teenage boys with Asperger syndrome and their mothers: A qualitative study. *Autism*, 5(1), 37-48.
- Charman, T., Dockrell, J., Peacey, N., Peacey, L., Forward, K., & Pellicano, L. (2011). *What is good practice in autism education?* Autism Education Trust. Available at: <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/the-good-practice-report-charman-et-al-2011/>
- Tierney, S., Burns, J., & Kilbey, E. (2016). Looking behind the mask: Social coping strategies of girls on the autistic spectrum. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 23, 73-83.
- Zilli, C., Parsons, S., & Kovshoff, H. (in press) Keys to engagement: a case study exploring the participation of autistic pupils in educational decision-making at school. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*.