

How Do Autistic Children Experience Transitions in Primary School?

Executive Summary

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Background

Children on the autism spectrum experience difficulties in social interaction and communication across multiple contexts (APA, 2013), alongside restrictive and repetitive behaviour or interests or activities. These experiences impact on multiple aspects of development and experience, across home and school settings. Given the amount of time that children spend in school, the educational context is especially important to understand from the perspectives of the autistic children themselves. In particular, transitioning through school (both small horizontal transitions e.g. moving between activities, and larger vertical transitions i.e. moving between schools) can be especially challenging for many autistic children due to the novelty of educational activities, people (teachers, teaching assistants and peers), and settings (classrooms, corridors, playgrounds) that are ever-present and often-changing in school (Lee, McCoy, Zucker, & Mathur, 2014).

Research Aims

The current research aimed to develop an understanding of the views and experiences of primary school aged autistic children about their educational transitions within one local-authority state funded school in the South of England. Specifically, we aimed to explore how children and young people could be supported to share their views and experiences of transitions to find out what has helped, what has hindered, and what could be done better. We also sought to involve teachers and parents' views to find out about their experiences of supporting children's transitions.

Method

The children took photographs of people and things that they liked and disliked about the school and these pictures served as the basis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the children in the school setting. Semi-structured interviews were also used with the parents and teachers, and were thematically analysed using the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Key Findings

Data analysis led to the generation of one overarching theme, which was that transitions were viewed as difficult for children on the autism spectrum. Four main sub-themes were derived from the interviews: (1) relationships, (2) children's behaviour in school, (3) difficulties, and (4) solutions for successful transitions during the school day.

- **Transitions are Difficult** – this was described as an overarching theme by the majority of parents and all teachers. It was highlighted in accounts of the individual struggles that autistic children faced when transitioning, and the implication that these were more frequently experienced relative to neurotypical (non-autistic) peers.
- **Relationships** – This theme captured descriptions of support from teachers for the child through transitions, and this was also linked to the support available for parents. Two sub-themes emerged in relation to this theme: (1) the relationship between the child and teacher, and (2) the relationship between the parent and teacher. All participants discussed these in some way, suggesting that strong

relationships were viewed as core to the transitions of children on the autism spectrum. Teachers reported that the relationship between the school and home, as well as communication between both parties, was a significant strength of the school as a whole, whilst parents mentioned that they would appreciate more frequent communication with the school.

- **Children's Behaviour in School** - The majority of parents were concerned that children with more overt behavioural issues received more support. Parents sometimes mentioned that funding has an impact on the perceived support that is available, particularly when a child is undiagnosed, but they also recognised that allocation of funding was outside the school's control. A teacher also mentioned that being able to draw upon additional resources would be welcome but that budgets are generally under pressure. All parents discussed their children hiding their struggles, often due to anxiety. Therefore the school may not always be able to fully support children as needed, not because they do not want to do this but because of resource constraints that impact on their capacity.
- **Difficulties in transition** - this was the most frequently endorsed theme by all participants, and included two sub-themes: (1) anxiety and (2) social struggles. Anxiety referred to both parental and child anxiety. Children reported that they experienced worry around teacher changes, both supply teachers and yearly teacher changes. Social struggles referred to friendships. Parents noted that their child had friends, but also that they struggled with this aspect of school. Children also discussed bullying in some detail.
- **Solutions for positive transitions** - two sub-themes emerged: (1) time out of class, and (2) extra transitions/time spent with autistic children. Time out of class referred to providing the child with the choice to leave the room when feeling overwhelmed or needing to calm down. Parents mentioned that extra transition afternoons helped with transitioning between years. Teachers mentioned that when they discover which children will be in their class in the next school year, they make an effort to spend extra time with any children on the autism spectrum. All parents and teachers endorsed this.

Conclusions

Overall, parents and teachers reflected similar concerns as well as positive accounts of transitions in school. The finding that parents believed that communication between home and school could be more frequent is consistent with previous research (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). The voice of the child reflected more themes common to their parents. Here, parents and children expressed worries about transitions and these worries could be said to underlie many of the themes and sub-themes found in the current study. This research highlights the resource issues common to many state schools, and concerns reflected by parents and teaching staff that support may be limited by necessity to those with the most severe needs. However, this means that those with less severe, but no less important needs, may not always be met as fully as possible. Positive transition practices were also revealed by all, including extra time and transitions and special consideration for children who require additional breaks/support.

References

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