



Off to School – Starting School on the Right Foot (Part 1)

Isabelle Cowan, MASP., L. Psych, BCBA, Sheri Gallant, M.Ed., BCBA
Autism Learning Partnership
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Sending a child off to school can generate all kinds of emotions for families. Excitement, pride, worry, sadness, and yes, even relief, are typical feelings that families may experience as they send their precious little one to school. For families with a child with autism, these feelings can be amplified making transition to school a daunting and scary endeavour. *Will my child be okay? Will they understand my child's needs and know how to work with him/her? What supports will be in place? Is the school ready for this ... is my child?* As educators, we can help to alleviate *some* of the fears that families may have about the transition through careful planning, communication, and a well-organized case conference in the Spring prior to school entry. In this week's Friday tips and for the next few weeks, we will review the various components of a sample agenda for the transition planning meeting (Appendix A). These tips are based upon our experience in working with families, and best practices for transition planning.

Note: This document does not constitute clinical advice. Transition planning must consider factors such as established processes and policies, resources, unique family situations, and the child's needs.

Note: The New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development collaborated with the other Atlantic Provinces as part of our collaboration with APSEA Autism in Education in the development of an information paper on this topic ([click here for the full article](#)). The paper provides helpful advice to schools and families regarding the steps that can occur well before the first case conference. (Case conference and transition meeting will be used interchangeably).

Setting the Stage for the Transition Meeting

Purpose of the Meeting

Prior to the meeting, a representative of the school team may wish to call the family to let them know that they are looking forward to the meeting to learn more about their child, and to plan for as smooth of a transition to school as possible.

During this initial communication, help to manage expectations regarding meeting outcomes. Typically, the purpose of this initial meeting is to gather information about the child to begin the development of a transition plan. Inform the family that decisions about services are not usually made at the meeting, but that the team will consider the information shared at the meeting to develop a plan according to their child's needs. If known, provide a general idea of when more specific information about their child's plan will be shared.

Agenda

An agenda sent in advance, such as the one below, can help families prepare and collect their thoughts about the types of questions that will be posed to them and service providers during the meeting.

Meeting Participants

- The school representative can also inform the family regarding which team members, from the education system, will be attending the meeting, and confirm which service providers (psychologists,

speech language pathologist, autism intervention services agency, etc.) will be present to share information about their child.

- The number of people who attend transition meetings can be overwhelming for some parents/guardians. Ask them whether they wish to invite a family member, friend, or advocate who can participate in the meeting to listen, and share notes afterwards. This person can debrief with the family afterwards, and help recall some of the details shared at the meeting.
- Inquire as to whether the parents/guardians intend to bring the child to the meeting or whether they have arranged for childcare. If the child is attending the meeting, ask the family about what accommodations may be needed to help keep the child occupied so that the parents/guardians can give their attention to the meeting (e.g. bringing favourite toys, snacks, etc.).

Documentation

- Inform the family about any documentation they should bring to the meeting, such as reports from service providers about diagnosis, the most current intervention plans, and recommendations.
- You may wish to ask the family to bring a photo of their child to share with the team.

The positive and supportive tone of this first communication should not be underestimated to help set the stage for a collaborative relationship with the family, and to develop an informed transition plan. In the next edition of Friday tips, we will explore how to nicely facilitate the transition meeting.

About Us

Autism Learning Partnership (ALP), a branch of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) in New Brunswick (Canada), is the sole provider of the Provincial Autism Training curriculum for preschool autism agencies and educational personnel in New Brunswick. The Autism Learning Partnership provides bilingual, evidence-based, high-quality professional learning and resources to support families, preschool agency personnel and educational personnel in the province, and has a mandate to establish partnerships with organizations nationally and internationally.

Appendix A

Transition to School Sharing and Planning Meeting – Sample Agenda

- Welcome & Introductions
 - Welcome the participants
 - Acknowledge the parents/guardians' anxiety
- Purpose and format of meeting
- Documentation of diagnosis and any additional written information
- Strengths and challenges
 - Communication
 - Social interaction
 - Self-help
 - Safety
 - Behaviour
- Medical and/or dietary concerns
- Current preschool services
- Current programming
 - Program goals and summary
 - Effective teaching strategies
 - Communication method and any required communication supports
 - Visual supports
 - Environmental supports
 - Social supports
- Environmental sensitivities
- Behaviour support plan
- Transportation considerations
- Method of communication between home and school
- Any additional parent/guardian concerns
- Transition and orientation activities
- Next meeting date or follow-up plan
- Closing and thank you