



# Transition to School from Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Annabel Marsh  
Valsamma Eapen

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Annabel Marsh, Valsamma Eapen.

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# Executive Summary

## PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

To conduct a literature review of transition practices and research on transition of children including those on the spectrum to school.

To undertake an environmental scan of transition guidelines available in Australia.

To identify key transition practices supported by the literature for parents and educational professionals.

To follow up a cohort of children from the Autism Specific Early Child Care Learning Centres into their first year of school.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Currently, there is a lack of systematic longitudinal studies evaluating the success of evidence based school transition programs for children on the spectrum. There are number of reasons for this. First, research on the school transition process for children on the spectrum is sparse and disparate, particularly in relation to school readiness. Only one study specifically examined a school readiness intervention program based on ABA. This study suggested that behavioural based intervention programs in preschool may not provide children on the spectrum with the social skills they need to socialise with their peers in primary school. This was also evident in school based intervention programs in the early years of school. These behavioural and instructional school-based intervention programs appear to improve skills in a number areas for school success, such as leaning and cognition, behaviour and adaptive living skills, however, do not appear to target peer inclusion and socialisation. It appears that there may need to be a peer modelling element to school readiness interventions and continuing to school-based interventions in the first year for children on the spectrum to help them to have more positive relationships with their peers and improve their socialisation, as well as the behavioural interventions for all other areas.

Children on the spectrum present with unique social and communication deficits and behavioural difficulties and these difficulties can present unique learning and adjustment challenges (Sparapani et al., 2016). However, few studies have specifically investigated the impact of these difficulties on transitioning to school and engaging in the school environment. The few studies that have suggest that as anticipated children on the spectrum have poorer relationships with their teachers, have poor self-regulation and have difficulty being actively engaged in the classroom. This literature also

established some individual child characteristics that may identify risk factors for poorer transition to school. Children with more repetitive and restricted behaviours, social anxiety, less effortful control, fewer social skills, or who liked school less had the most difficulty in settling in and engaging at school. Therefore, this also indicates the need for on-going school based interventions, but also that these programs should be individualised to the child's particular needs.

## IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

### Implications for School Transition Best Practice

To date no studies have specifically evaluated the success of a school transition program specifically for children on the spectrum. However, the survey studies that have sought the opinions of parents and teachers on the best practice for school transition identified a number of key areas:

- transition team established;
- parent involvement in planning;
- child and parent visit to school;
- visit support
- placement identification;
- parent communication and information;
- teacher sharing between preschool and school teacher;
- child preparation (e.g. social stories)
- decision support;
- support identification;
- transition administrator to supervise and evaluate the transition; and peer, classroom and school preparation (Beamish et al., 2014).

The authors of these studies identified these relevant practices from the literature as well as government guidelines. In Australia, all the states recommend school transition practices, some generally for all children and some for children with disabilities (Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia); however, no states specifically target children on the spectrum.

Many of these policies and guidelines overlap with the opinions of teachers and parents, however, these transition practices are generic and rarely individualised to the child's particular needs (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Children on the spectrum experience specific social, behavioural communication difficulties that result in them being particularly vulnerable regarding poor school transition outcomes. Additionally, teachers are more concerned about the ability of children on the spectrum to successfully transition to school than other children with disabilities. Therefore, children on the spectrum require comprehensive and individualised transition plans specifically tailored to suit their needs (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). However,

there are elements that should also potentially be incorporated into all transition plans for children on the spectrum based on the current evidence.

For example, while children's learning and academic development is currently monitored in most Australian schools through learning plans, monitoring of social skills, communication and behaviour may not be adequately monitored. Therefore, transition plans for children on the spectrum should include regular monitoring and evaluating of a broad range of areas such as: active engagement, socialisation and student-teacher relationships. Also, behavioural interventions with peer modelling may need to be incorporated into transition plans for these children. Finally, these programs need to be developed and implemented while children are in preschool and continue through the first year of school.

### Implications for Future Research

There is a paucity of empirical studies that examine transition to school for children on the spectrum particularly in longitudinal monitoring from specific school readiness preparation through to the end of the first few years of school (Eisenhower et al., 2015). While a number of recent studies have examined specific school-based interventions, existing research on the process of primary school transition has tended to adopt cross-sectional survey based methodology (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; Forest et al., 2004; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Beamish, Bryer & Klieve, 2014) rather than longitudinal designs with specific measurement of children's social-emotional, adaptive, and cognitive/academic progress.

A large number of school transition practices has been identified and endorsed from these survey studies; however, the adequacy of these practices has not been established. There is a need for further research aimed at developing evidence-based strategies to enhance the school transition process and these strategies need to be formulated into guidelines and policies specifically for children on the spectrum due to their unique needs and difficulties. Additionally, while the academic progress of children is monitored through systems such as learning plans, for children on the spectrum a more systematic monitoring of developmental and behavioural progress, using standardised instruments is also needed to measure the effectiveness of well-developed, evidence-based individualised, long-term transition programs (Charman et al., 2004).

## STUDY DESCRIPTION

This Study (Part 2) aimed to evaluate transition to school outcomes for children transitioning from early intervention to primary school. It also aimed to determine the individual child characteristics as well as family variables that are associated with successful transition to school in children with autism.

Specifically the child characteristics (cognitive level as measured by Mullen Scale of Early Learning (MSEL), behavioural profile as ascertained using parent version of Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL), overall autism symptoms as per Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ) and repetitive symptoms as per RBS, and adaptive functioning based on Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale (VABS) and family factors such as parental stress and quality of life were evaluated against transition outcomes as measured using parent/teacher reports of behaviours as per CBCL, school adjustment using Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA) and social skills based on Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scale (SSIS).

## Participants

Data were collected from participants transitioning from the six Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres (ASELCCs) in New South Wales (n = 8), Queensland (n = 8), South Australia (n = 5), Western Australia (n = 12), Tasmania (n = 11) and Victoria (n = 7) to school in 2016. Entry to the ASELCC program requires a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder by a qualified clinician. The early intervention programs provided at each ASELCC are varied and include more structured interventions like the Early Start Denver Model, through to more eclectic programs. This total sample of 51 participants included 9 females (18%) and 42 males (82%). The mean age of at exit from the centres was 5.4 years (SD = 0.4). Children had been attending the centre for a mean of 21 months (SD = 8.7). Data were collected on entry to the centre, at exit from the centre and at the end of Term 2, 2016 of their first year of school.

## RESULTS

A large proportion of the sample (84%) transitioned from the ASELCC setting to Year 1, with a full time (5 days a week) school program. Parents reported that the experience of starting school ranged from very good (41%) to fairly good (41%), with a smaller proportion indicating that their experience was just ok (11%) or not very good (7%).

The results of the study indicated that child characteristics had a significant influence on parental quality of life and parental stress with an increase in autism symptoms, particularly repetitive behaviours including self-injurious and ritualistic behaviour, having a significant negative impact on overall outcomes. It is possible that there are also context specific determinants to wellbeing outcomes. For example, certain behaviours may be more prominent in the home setting or parents may potentially be more sensitive to the more challenging or difficult behaviours associated with the autism spectrum. Similarly, it appears that child characteristics such as behaviour, cognitive ability, language and communication skills and adaptive functioning were more relevant for outcomes in the school setting than other variables investigated. Thus as part of a holistic approach to improving transition

outcomes, it is important to target relevant issues as they emerge across both home and school contexts. Targeting these issues in early intervention programs will assist children on the spectrum and their parents with this important transition, allowing them to maximise their learning and behavioural potential.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

### For children on the spectrum transitioning –

Autism symptom severity is not a significant barrier to school transition and less important than behaviour and the language, cognitive and adaptive skills of the child.

In the lead up to and during transition, interventions that address and support

- cognitive and language skills that are important in the development of social skills for the classroom environment,
- communication, motor and adaptive skills important for classroom participation, and
- behaviour particularly attention difficulties and aggressive behaviour should be a focus.

### For Parents of Children Transitioning to School

Children's repetitive and self-injurious behaviours, poor social skills including poor cooperation and low self-control negatively impact on parental quality of life. Autism symptom severity including repetitive behaviours and parental distress rather than the child's cognitive ability or adaptive behaviours also impact negatively on parents' quality of life.

In the lead up to and during transition, interventions that address and support

- parents to manage their distress and
- enhance the parent child relationship are important.

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