

A resource pack to support autistic children Starting school during and post Covid-19

T-Res Project



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Introduction

We have developed this resource pack to allow you to work with your child or student to prepare for the transition to primary school and all of the adjustments that go along with that, especially with Covid-19 in mind.

It will help you to:

- i) Prepare to start school in the 6 weeks beforehand
- ii) Provide some important tips for those first days in school
- iii) Keep communication open and clear between families and the school.

About T-Res

The T-Res Project is funded by the Health Research Board (HRB) under the COVID-19 Rapid Response fund. It is led by Dr Sinéad Smyth for the Dublin City University School of Psychology.

Preparing to start school

Starting school is always a big change and may be a time filled with excitement but sometimes nerves, for children, families and the school community. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought with it a raft of changes that have further complicated this transition. Lots can be done in advance of the first day at school to begin to prepare your new student. This includes familiarising children with the new environment, outlining the daily schedule, getting to know your student a little in advance. Preparation is the key to any successful transition and with this in mind, we have created a toolkit of resources to help navigate this milestone. This toolkit is not a complete transition plan but instead it is somewhere that you can access relevant resources and pick and choose those that are relevant to your situation. We would like our resources to help as many people as possible so feel free to share with anyone that may be interested.



Getting acquainted

You may already know your new student but in many cases, the first few weeks are spent getting to know each other. Gathering information and planning before the start of the school year and maintaining communication with home can help with this.

1. Gathering information

As well as gathering information from your student's previous educational setting and any assessments they may have experiences, you can work with parents to gather some more personal information.

When communicating with parents to let them know what will be happening around the start of the new academic year, this is an ideal opportunity to ask parents some questions to help gather any relevant information about new students before their first day of school.

Things you might want to know about your new student include:

- How they communicate
- What they like and dislike
- How they like to spend their time
- Who they like to spend time with
- What might be challenging for them about starting school.

2. Planning

As you get to know your new student, you can begin to plan for the first weeks.

- Identifying new activities and how to integrate them into the schedule (more on schedules below)
- Identifying possible challenges so they can be navigated
- School is such a rich social opportunity and so focusing on this side of things is also important. As you get to know your student, you can identify opportunities to develop social skills initially in the class environment and then elsewhere in the school and even in the wider community. consider what you can do including:
 - Using icebreakers to get to know your student
 - Visual stories around starting school (1 and 2) can help with preparation.
 - Conversation cards (for emotions and introductions) that may help in this process. Depending on the child's language and social abilities, the conversation cards will help them to express themselves and give them some conversation prompts for meeting new people.

3. Communication with home

Remaining in contact with parents is important as well and developing a communication system can help with this.

- This eBook has some tips for parents. You may want to circulate it to them in Advance.
- Communication passports are a very useful way of developing means of communication between caregivers and teachers. It is a good way of gathering relevant information about the needs of a child, how they are progressing or where they may need further support. They provide a quick way of keeping in touch. We have developed an eBook which is available on our website (autism-toolkit.ie) called Tips for Starting School - Parents. You may want to circulate it to them in advance.

Familiarising children with the new environment

Things that are unfamiliar can feel strange or overwhelming. Give time to planning how to introduce new students to the school environment.

- Is it possible for children and parents to visit the school premises before the first day? This may already have happened and is such an important step but it may not be possible depending on the current COVID-19 restrictions.
- Developing a suite of materials or an ebook for children and their families would be a simple way of building familiarity. This might include photos of the school, the yard, the classroom, the teacher or even a video introduction. You might find our Starting School information Template useful for this.

Outlining the daily schedule

We know that establishing a routine is an important part of making a transition. Many children will already be using visual schedules in their pre-school and even at home.

Is it possible for parents to begin to introduce visual schedules in advance? Parents may be willing to work with you a few days or weeks in advance to practice some routines like rising times, practicing the commute to school or even scheduling lunch and snacks at specific times.

- Develop your visual schedules in advance. Our anxiety and routines resources have more information on this.
- Begin to communicate with parents to see what can be done in the lead up to the first day of school including sharing information about the daily schedule and any visual schedules you might have.
- Prepare for changes that occur within the first weeks of school such as starting with shorter days and stretching these out. How can you communicate this with both the child and parents in order to prepare and smooth this transition?



Preparing for success/Top tips

1. Lengthen the school day gradually
2. Use visual schedules to create routine
3. Ensure communication between families and the school remain clear
4. Practice social skills (eg with social stories and conversation cards)
5. Don't forget to take regular sensory breaks.

Our Resources

We have linked to a number of resources throughout this document and have also included a resource pack to help you as you support a child

- A teacher's checklist for getting ready
- Getting to know me - a brief form for parents to fill in, helping you to get to know your new student
- A communication passport-- to maintain open communication with parents throughout the school year.

Supporting students starting school checklist

Student name: _____

Date: _____

Getting yourself ready	Yes	No	Not relevant
Have you gathered information about your student?			
Have you gathered the supports to prepare your student?			
Have you set up a communication system with your student's parents/guardians?			
Getting your student ready			
Have you had a visit to the school?			
Have you prepared your student and told them what is happening?			
Have you prepared and sent out materials about the school and school day?			
Have you broken down the steps for your student?			
The first few days			
Have you used the right supports?			
Have you rewarded best efforts?			
Have you identified what extra reinforcers / rewards you can use if necessary?			
Have you considered how extending the school day might be achieved?			
Are you and your student well established for a successful school year?			

Getting to know me!

My name is: _____

Family: _____

I communicate by: _____

Likes, Favourite
Items/activities, etc.

Toys
Food
Activities
Other (e.g. sensory)

Dislikes & what
bothers me:

Toys
Food
Activities
Other (e.g. sensory)

Diet & allergies:

Medical info that
you should be aware
of:

Self-help skills &
abilities:

I am working on:

What I may need
help with:

The people who work
with me (SNAs, SLTs,
OTs, psychologists,
etc):

Contact details for
caregivers:

Anything else that
may be important:

Communication Passport

Date:

Who is writing this note:

How did today go?:

What I am working on:

What I am finding challenging:

What I need support with:

Date:

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