Supporting transitions for children on the autism spectrum

Transition into early childhood services

Transitions into and out of services, including child care, kindergarten and school, are significant and sometimes challenging events for children and families. Transition to new services can be a stressful time for children and families, particularly if the child has an ASD or other additional needs. Children on the autism spectrum often feel unsettled or anxious when environments are altered or changed. Clear processes need to be in place to support everyone - families, children and early childhood educators. The process begins with the enrolment.

The enrolment processes of a children’s service should be the same for everyone. A separate enrolment process for children with additional needs may make families feel unwelcome. Enrolment is a time for sharing information about your program and procedures, and for the family to provide information about their child and family. A detailed enrolment form together with an interview can provide useful information about the child’s abilities, interests, background and needs. Every child is an individual and will have different needs and the information we need to collect will reflect this. A flexible orientation process is an important part of enrolment. Families should be offered the opportunity to visit as often as they need, and at different times of the day before the child commences.

Consider the following points to support enrolment:

- remember that families are the best source of information about the strengths, abilities and interests of their child
- provide one enrolment form that includes information about the child’s individual needs, interests and abilities
- provide an enrolment form that is easy to read and understand
- provide families with a package of information about the service
- access an interpreter and translated materials for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- let families know that they can bring a support person to the initial visit
- inform families about the service’s policies and procedures, and the care and education program
- discuss orientation, and invite new families to visit the service and participate in the program before the child starts at the service. Children on the autism spectrum may require more time to settle into a new service or room, and may benefit from additional preparation through increased visits, a social story and/or photos of staff and the environment
- determine whether other supports or information may be required to include the child successfully in the program, e.g. training or additional staffing resources
- identify other agencies or community organisations that may be working with the child and family, e.g. early childhood intervention and/or private therapists and make time to learn from them. They, along with families, will have valuable information to share with you about the child’s learning and development.
Daily transitions within the program

Transitions within a program occur on a daily basis and include moving between activities and routines and from indoors to outdoors. Children on the autism spectrum may require additional support during these times. They may have difficulty understanding and following instructions, anticipating what comes next, or coping with change. However, transitions can be valuable opportunities for children to develop social, communication and self-help skills and should be planned for.

Consider the following points to support smooth transition within the program:

- include transitions in the daily program plan. Discuss strategies at room and staff meetings. Allocate tasks (e.g. one educator to sing a song while the other sets up an activity or packs away)
- consider whether all transitions are essential (e.g. could some transitions be eliminated by having progressive snack or meal times)
- avoid lining up whenever possible as this leads to frustration and tension
- avoid long waiting times by ensuring that that the next activity is prepared ahead of time
- keep in mind that children respond more calmly when asked to move to a person rather to an activity or area of the room
- give children prior warning about changes
- include the children in routine tasks (e.g. helping to clean up)
- provide photos of the sequence of daily routines and activities (Deiner, 2005).

Transitions between rooms

When children move from one room to another within an early childhood service, it is important that educators share information about the child before they move. This should include the child’s strengths, interests and abilities. If the child is on the autism spectrum or has other additional needs information should be shared about other professionals who may be working with the child and family (e.g. the early intervention workers). A transition meeting with the family, early intervention workers and new and current educators from within the service provides an opportunity to exchange information, goals and strategies and ensure a smooth transition for the child. An orientation process that includes visits to the new environment will allow the child, family, educators and visiting professionals to become familiar with each other.

Consider the following points to support transition to another room:

- arrange orientation visits when children are moving from room to room. This is essential for all children but particularly for children on the autism spectrum, who may have specific care needs and may find changes difficult to cope with
- share written information with educators in the new environment. Include information about the child’s strengths, interests and abilities, and any resources or strategies
that have been provided by visiting professionals, or that you have found effective within the program

- arrange a transition meeting with the family, educators and possibly the visiting consultants
- always include families in the process. Families are the best source of information about their child
- consider whether the child may benefit from some additional supports (e.g. photos of the new educators, a social story to help explain any different expectations or routines within the room)

References