

Easing the Transition:

SUPPORTING A STUDENT WITH ASD AS THEY MOVE INTO HIGH SCHOOL

Starting high school is a major milestone, and for students with ASD, it can bring both excitement and anxiety. The routine they've gotten used to in elementary school is about to change—new teachers, a bigger school, a locker, multiple classes to keep track of, and a greater expectation of independent functioning. That's a lot to take in! But with the right support, this transition can be made much smoother.

IEPs & Connecting with the Resource Teacher

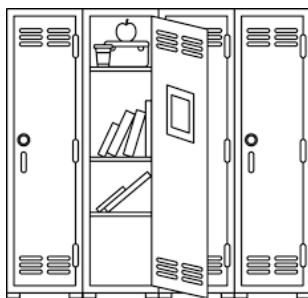
Although the transition to high school can be difficult, the good news for students with ASD who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is that it usually carries over to high school. This means that the supports and accommodations provided in elementary school should still be in place. With that said, it is important to recognize that high school is a different environment, and it may take some time for the new resource team to get to know the student.

A key person that autistic students need to connect with is the high school resource teacher. They are there to support them when they need clarification, help with self-advocacy, or assistance with co-regulation. Whether they need a quiet space for a break, guidance on how to approach a classroom teacher for help, or reassurance during overwhelming moments, the resource teacher is an excellent first point of contact. Students with ASD should be encouraged to check in with them when needed, and parents can also reach out to build a strong support system.

It's important to allow space for this major physical and psychological transition—teachers, support staff, and resource specialists will need time to observe, adjust, and tailor supports to fit the high school setting. Patience is key! It may take a few months, but autistic students will find their footing.

Getting Comfortable with the New Routine

One of the biggest adjustments for students with ASD is having several teachers instead of just a few. High school also necessitates moving from classroom to classroom throughout the day. To make this easier, it helps to have a printed schedule with teacher names, room numbers, and even color-coded subjects. In some cases, visiting the school before the first day and practicing *walking the schedule* can ease a lot of stress. For others, having a social narrative with photos of important spots—like classrooms, bathrooms, the cafeteria, and the main office—can also help with familiarity.



Mastering the Locker

“ Lockers can be tricky at first, especially remembering the combination. Knowing that autistic individuals thrive on pre-exposure and routine, getting a similar lock at home and practicing with it over the summer can make the task easier. Once school starts, additional supports such as a step-by-step visual guide near the locker (or saved on their phone) can serve as a quick reference for autistic students. Inside the locker, using bins or labeled sections can help keep things organized so that finding books between classes is stress-free.”



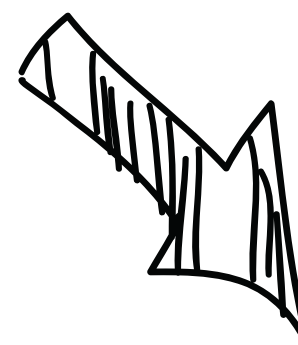
Keeping Up with Homework & Organization

High school means juggling homework from multiple teachers, often with different expectations; something that is typically experienced as challenging by students with executive functioning difficulties such as individuals on the spectrum. Many teachers post assignments on Google Classroom, but some may use other platforms. Creating a system—whether a paper planner, a Google Calendar, or even a whiteboard at home—can help the student with ASD keep track of due dates. Parents can check-in regularly about academic demands and help break assignments into manageable steps for their teenagers with ASD. Monitoring their school emails on a routine basis is another way that parents can support their teens with ASD and ensure that they stay on track

Making New Friends

High school is a fresh start, and while it can feel intimidating at first, it's also an opportunity to meet new people. Many students with ASD prefer structured social interactions, so joining a club, lunchtime group, or special interest activity can be a great way to connect with others who share common interests. It can also help to have conversation starters ready—simple questions like “What’s your favorite class?” or “Have you played this game before?” can make social interactions easier.

Parents and teachers can support this by role-playing different scenarios, discussing social cues, and helping ASD students recognize when a friendship is developing. It's also okay for autistic students to take their time and build friendships at their own pace. Just having one trusted person to sit with at lunch or share a class with can make all the difference.



Navigating the Cafeteria & Social Spaces



For many students, the cafeteria and hallways during transition times can be overwhelming—lots of noise, bright lights, and unspoken social rules about where to stand, sit and what to do. If these areas feel too intense, students may want to explore other options, like quieter hallways, the library, or a designated safe space. When eating in the cafeteria, knowing where to sit ahead of time can reduce stress. It might also help to have a plan—such as always sit with a particular friend or always sit at the same table each day.



Practicing the Route to and from School

How a student with ASD gets to high school may be different from elementary school. Some students with ASD will be taking a bus or public transit for the first time, while others may be walking a new route. Practicing the journey before school starts can build confidence and reduce anxiety. Parents can ride the bus or rehearse the train ride with their teenagers a few times, showing them where to wait, how to pay (if needed), and what to do if they miss their stop. If walking or biking, planning out safe routes and practicing crossing busy streets can help autistic students feel more comfortable. For those who are driven to school, knowing where to be dropped off and picked up is important. Practicing this routine, even if it's just once or twice, can make the first week go much more smoothly.



Getting Involved in Extracurriculars

High school offers all kinds of clubs, sports teams, and activities that weren't available in elementary school. While these can be great for starting new friendships and exploring interests, it's okay to start small by establishing a basic comfort level to assure future enjoyment. Attending a club meeting with a trusted friend, asking a teacher about what to expect, or even just watching an activity first can help the ASD student ease into the group. Parents can help by looking into school clubs together with their autistic teenagers and discussing what might be a good fit.



Communicating with Teachers & Developing Self-Advocacy



Unlike elementary school, where teachers routinely check-in with parents, high school students are usually expected to communicate with teachers on their own. Teachers often use email for communication, so learning how to write a simple email (e.g. asking for clarification on an assignment is an important skill). Practicing email writing with parents using a template can help ASD students feel more confident when they need to reach out to a teacher.

Self-advocacy is another important part of the high school transition. Students in Grade 7 are expected to speak up when they need help, but this can be a challenge for students with ASD. Parents and caregivers can help by role-playing different situations, like asking a teacher for extra time on an assignment or requesting to sit in a quieter area. Encouraging autistic students to identify what adaptations help them most—like written instructions, noise-canceling headphones, or movement breaks—can make it easier for them to ask for what they need. A simple script or checklist are great tools that parents can use to scaffold their child's self-advocacy skills.

ASD TEAM MEMBERS

JACALYN ARMSTRONG
Consultant for Inclusive Education

PATRICIA ASSOUD
Consultant for Autism

Dr. ANDREW BENNETT
Coordinator/Psychologist

Dr. PATTY CLORAN
Coordinator/Consultant for Autism

KATIE COHENE, PhD
Coordinator/Consultant for Autism

SASHA DESMARAIS-ZALOB
Consultant for Autism

OLIVIA DI MARINO
Occupational Therapist

DATEVIG ETYEMEZIAN
Consultant for Autism

JADE LAWSANE
Consultant for Autism

LISA MANCINI
Consultant for Autism

HELENE PACKMAN
Speech & Language Pathologist

ANITA PERNO
Consultant for Autism

EITHNE SHEERAN
Consultant for Autism

CARLING TESTER
Consultant for Autism

Building Resilience



It is important to remember that the transition to high school will not always be smooth, and that is completely okay. There will be challenges, moments of frustration, and days that feel overwhelming. Encouraging ASD students to see these as learning opportunities—rather than setbacks—can help them build resilience. Remind them that it’s perfectly normal to have some rough days and that they’re still making progress, even if things don’t go exactly as planned. Parents can further reinforce this adaptive mindset by celebrating small victories, offering positive reinforcement, and reminding their autistic teenagers that growth happens over time. With patience and perseverance, they will find their rhythm.

If things are not going as expected or if you are concerned about your child’s progress, do not hesitate to request a meeting with the school’s resource team, teachers, or counselors. It is a great way to check-in on how things are going, discuss what is working, and add or fine-tune any support that might be needed. Regular communication ensures everyone is on the same page and can help prevent small issues from becoming bigger ones.



Change can be hard, but with a little planning and support, students with ASD can transition successfully and even find things to love about high school. Every student is different, so what works best will depend on their unique personalities and needs. The most important thing is that they are not expected to do it alone!

Additional Tips

TO CONSIDER

Despite the significant distress that transitioning to high school might cause, there are many ways to prepare our students for the big change. This can be done through practicing various skills and routines ahead of time to help make this key transition easier. Examples of the skills that can be taught or reinforced in preparation for high school include, how to:

- Lock and unlock a **locker** (combination lock or one number lock).
- Tell **time** by using a digital clock, phone, or a timer as a visual support.
- Get to a **room** by referring to room numbers. Tip: This can include being able to match the numbers from a schedule.
- Follow a **schedule** to transition from activity to activity.



Pay particular attention to where you set up the schedule to allow for ease of accessibility to it.

- Organize and follow an **agenda, study schedule**, etc.
- Take advantage of **transition times** between classes to self regulate using previously rehearsed strategies.
- **Work independently** for 10-15 minutes.
- Maximize **independence in tasks related to** the locker routine (e.g. dress, undress, fasteners, packing/unpacking the schoolbag, getting clothes for physical education, tying shoes or using the appropriate adaptations).
- Maximize independence in personal hygiene and **toileting** such as the use of deodorant, shaving, feminine hygiene products etc.
- Organize **materials** for multiple classes.



Some schools have formats already in place (e.g. single binder with separators, color coded copy books).

- Manage a **lunch box** such as opening/closing containers/packaging and proper disposal of items.
- Purchase things in a **cafeteria**.
- Use technology (laptop or tablet) as independently as possible.
- Rehearse **asking for help** as a way of developing a self-advocating, problem solving mindset and as a means of stating one's needs and obtaining practical assistance in navigating challenging situations or dealing with the unexpected.
- Navigate the **commute** to and from school (e.g. if taking public transport, practice the route by waiting at the assigned stop, getting on the bus, paying, choosing a seat, and getting off at the destination).