

Many of the challenging behaviours of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders arise as a result of their inability to cope with changes in routine and/or the environment due to poor sequential memory and perception of allotted time. Preferring structure and predictability, even small changes can leave the student anxious and distressed.

Some hints for teachers and support workers

- Structure the day to provide as predictable an environment and routine as possible.
- It is important to warn and prepare the student for any known changes that are to occur (e.g. change of venue for assembly, library lesson in the morning instead of the afternoon). This includes providing clear and concrete instructions so that the child knows what to do in these situations. Do not assume skills and behaviour will be generalised.
- Be aware that students with autism may not cope well with open space classrooms, too many choices, several teachers, high noise levels or a lot of distractions, particularly if they have not been prepared for the change.

Strategies for helping students cope with transitions

- Introduce change gradually. Try small alterations in routine or position of objects as the first step. Once minor changes are tolerated, more changes can be gradually introduced. Try to make changes predictable.
- Use written timetables or picture/pictograph schedules. Photos of activities, people, Compics placed on a schedule board provides the student with a visual representation of the day or week's activities. Refer to the board or timetable as activities change or if an unscheduled change becomes known.
- On occasions, be flexible and allow some choice making regarding the next activity (check first that the student understands choice - if not, this needs to be taught first.)
- Make sure that activities have a clear beginning and end.
- Use timers, watches, clocks or oil timers that visually record the passage of time.
- Provide a physical object which represents the next activity, for the child to carry (e.g. a ball to gym).
- Use social stories to prepare the child for change and what is expected of them.
- Teach relaxation skills at a time when the child is not under stress.

Unscheduled change

Unexpected or unscheduled changes in routine can often be the most difficult for the student with autism to accept and consequently result in negative behaviours. Changes may include special visitors or events, relief teachers, a change in the grouping of tables, moving to a different classroom. Understanding and reassurance is important in these circumstances and backing down on certain requests may be necessary until the student has time to adjust. Referring to the change in a structured way (e.g. on a timetable) is useful, as is offering the student a favoured activity to calm him/her down.

During 2005 Autism SA will be publishing a booklet on making change easier.

For more information check the What's New? section on the website www.autismsa.org.au.