Understanding the High School Transition for Autistic Learners

Why does this research matter to the autism community?

Starting high school can be both exciting and stressful for many families. It is more than just moving to a new grade. It means getting used to new routines, a new school, new teachers, classmates, and different expectations. Research shows that this change can affect an autistic learner's learning, mental health, and how connected they feel at school.[1,2]

Knowing what helps make the transition successful can help autistic learners, families, educators, and schools work together to plan for this important step.[1,2]

What does the research show?

1 **Autistic Learners' Experiences and Concerns**

Many autistic learners feel unsure or worried before starting high school. The right supports can help them feel more confident and have a more positive experience.

- Many autistic learners are nervous because they do not know what to expect.[4]
- Common worries include finding classrooms, making new friends, and keeping up with harder schoolwork.[4]
- With the right supports, many learners say high school is better than expected.[4]

2 **Preparing for High School**

Planning ahead can help autistic learners feel ready and more confident.

- Good communication between elementary and high schools helps make the transition easier.[1]
- Choosing the right school placement can improve a learner's experience.[1]
- Visiting the school, meeting staff, and making a transition plan before school starts can help learners feel more prepared.[1,3]
- Research shows that not all schools have clear or consistent transition plans.[3]

3 **Relationships and School Support**

Supportive people and a welcoming school can make a big difference.

- Supportive educators help autistic learners adjust to high school more successfully.[4]
- Good friendships can help learners feel connected and supported.[4]
- Schools that are kind, welcoming, and inclusive help autistic learners feel like they belong.[4]

What does this mean?

A successful transition to high school depends on the learner's strengths and the supports they receive.[1] Families, elementary schools, high schools, and other support services should work together to help make the transition easier. Good communication and ongoing support can help learners feel more prepared and confident.[1,3,5]



Before high school starts, encourage learners to ask questions, share their worries, and learn what to expect. Planning ahead can help set them up for success.

It is also important to create schools that are welcoming, flexible, and supportive of autistic learners' needs.[1,4] Positive relationships with educators and classmates, along with staff who understand how to support autistic learners, can help learners feel safe, included, and ready to succeed.

What's still missing or unclear?

- We do not yet know which transition supports work best for different autistic learners.[1,3]
- We need more research on how school resources and community services affect the transition to high school and the supports families receive.[3,5]
- Many schools are still learning how to provide consistent transition planning and support. More research is needed to understand how these approaches can be used more consistently.[3]

Looking for more support on navigating the transition to high school? Check out Autism Ontario's "Supporting the Transition to High School: Caregiver Checklist."

References:

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