

Autism Spectrum Disorders

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ASD snapshots:

A useful and quick way to get important information across to the people who need it

Because of the complexity of social, communication and behavioural difficulties that children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have, it is important that there is a consistent response to each child. All parents/carers, teachers and therapists who interact with the child need to have a shared understanding of who each child is. Because ASDs are neurodevelopmental disorders where symptoms change over time, it is necessary to review ASD symptoms and presentation along with any changes in other skill areas including communication, play skills, special interests and social relating. A formal assessment and checklist of each child's current means of communication, strengths, favourite activities, fears and anxieties, social responsiveness, play skills and behaviour is helpful when planning intervention and teaching programmes. After this information has been gathered, a student/child snapshot can be completed to get across important information in an easy format to the people who need it. We have found that the snapshot has been particularly effective for children who attend multiple settings with many carers and for those children who have complex needs.

Starting school is one instance when a student snapshot is very helpful. This is an important and exciting step for young children and their families, but it can also be a difficult time for some. When a child has an ASD the transition usually involves extra challenges and may be a source of considerable stress and anxiety for parents/carers, professionals and the child. Successful transition to school requires careful planning, preparation and communication that lead to a shared understanding of each child. In 2012, we developed a training workshop and manual for parents and professionals working in early childhood services, primary schools and specialist schools who are planning the transition for young children with an ASD (Brereton & Bull, 2010). The focus of the training is to assist these people (the transition team) to work together to develop a shared understanding of the child and prepare a transition plan. It provides basic information about the core features of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) and how they affect young children's thinking and learning, communication, social relating, play skills, emotions and behaviour. It also provides templates to guide the transition plan and the gathering of relevant and useful information prior to the student with an ASD coming to school.

A particularly popular template from the workshop is the student snapshot that we developed to inform school staff at the new primary school about the child with an ASD. On one A4 page, it includes information about:

- Diagnosis
- Medical needs
- Need for supervision
- Communication and social skills
- Use of visual communication system
- Need for structure and routine
- Stress and anxiety: triggers and responses
- Motivation and favourite activities

Here is an example you might like to use as a template to develop your own snapshot for your own child or the child you are working with.

The snapshot could also be used for any child with an ASD who moves between different settings such as child care, preschool, or respite care.

Student snapshot

Name: Evan
Teacher: Mrs. Jones
Grade: Prep A. (Wombats)
Diagnosis: High Functioning Autism
Health: Epilepsy



Supervision:

- See medical plan for epilepsy management
- Hides when anxious (usually climbs trees)

Communication and Social skills

- Uses a photo timetable (has on a small card in his pocket)
- Buddy is Sam Smith, Grade 5
- Brother Peter in Grade 6
- Doesn't answer when called
- Needs help to find someone to play with
- Responds well to structure and routine

Is anxious when

- There is too much noise
- Thinks he has made a mistake
- In new situations
- There is unexpected change

How to help:

- ✓ Let him pace boundary of playground for 10 minutes then direct to a structured activity (he likes sandpit and balls)
- ✓ Let him read his emergency vehicle books (also use as a reward)
- ✓ Let him go to his quiet corner when anxious. Use the timer to get him back on task.
- ✓ Give him TIME to think about what is said or what is happening
- ✓ Tell him what to do, not what not to do (positive instructions)

References and suggested further reading

Brereton A.V. and Bull, K.J. (2010) Planning a successful start to primary school: Workshop for parents and professionals. Monash University and Govt. of Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Melbourne, Australia.