

## TRANSITION TO SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Many children with autism require individualized educational programs and often have significant difficulties with transition. In order to make the transition to school as smooth as possible, careful planning must occur. Many of these children may be receiving Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) services. The Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development, as well as school boards/district, schools and early childhood staff will collaborate with the family to facilitate the transition from home or centre-based services to school based. This planning process begins in January of the school entry year. In general, it is assumed that students will start school as determined by the age of entry guidelines established by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Exceptions to this are discussed at individual case conferences.

### Preparing Schools, Parents and Students

#### Step 1: Sharing Information

Information on transitioning children will be shared with school boards in a timely manner to allow adequate time for transfer of information, training of staff and transition activities for the child. Informed consent from parents is required before documents or information about the child are shared with the school. For most families this will occur when they agree to access Intensive Behavioural Intervention services or as they prepare to enter school. The Preschool Autism Coordinator will request this permission from families. In addition, documentation of a diagnosis on the autism spectrum is required in order to access autism specific services.

- By January 15th, the Preschool Autism Coordinator will provide the Special Education Autism Coordinator with a list of diagnosed children *receiving IBI services* who will be eligible for school entry the following September.
- By January 15th, the Autism Diagnostic Team Psychologist will provide the Special Education Autism Coordinator with a list of diagnosed children *not receiving IBI services* who will be eligible for school entry the following September.
- The Special Education Autism Coordinator will forward a list of the eligible children and contact information to each School Board/District.

#### Step 2: Parent Information Meeting

Transition to school is often an anxious time for families, particularly those whose children have special needs. In order to assist with this, a general information meeting for parents will be held at each School Board/District in February prior to scheduled school entry. The meetings will be coordinated by the Preschool Autism Coordinator and designated School Board/District Consultant and will be attended by the parents, the Preschool Autism Coordinator and Autism Consultant and/or Autism Coordinator. All parents who have a school eligible child with a diagnosis of autism are invited to the meeting regardless of what intervention or program the child may have participated in as preschoolers. The purpose of the meeting is to share general information and answer questions about the upcoming transition process and is not to specifically address the needs of individual children. Points of information will include:

- Description of the transition process and steps involved.
- Explanation of confidentiality guidelines and the importance of sharing information with involved professionals. Parents are requested to forward documentation of diagnosis as

well as other relevant available reports.

- Description of the assessment process and how this will help guide programming.
- Information on the planned case conferences and the scheduled date.
- Overview of school programs, highlighting services and options currently available
- Information about the application of behavioural teaching strategies in inclusive school settings
- Overview of supports available from schools, school board/ district and department
- Clarification of the process for establishing the need for Educational Assistant support and when/how those decisions are made by the school boards/district.
- Written information on options and availability of services if the child will not enter school as planned. Pending the case conference, parents are encouraged to register their child in their respective schools at the appropriate registration times.

### **Step 3: Formal and Informal Assessment**

Following the parent information meeting, receipt of documentation of diagnosis and written consent, additional information will be collected to assist in planning for school transition. This will include the following:

- The Board/District Autism Consultant will schedule an observation of the child at the home or Early Childhood Centre. During the visit, informal assessment will be conducted by the Board/District Autism Consultant. A report of the observation will be forwarded to the parents and the School Principal.
- If the child is receiving IBI services, the Preschool Autism Coordinator or Preschool Autism Specialist will complete curriculum based assessment and forward a Transition-To-School report to the family, the Board/District Autism Consultant, the Special Education Autism Coordinator and the School Principal.
- The Department of Health may arrange for standardized assessment of the child's cognitive or adaptive skills by a Psychologist.
- If the child receives speech and language or occupational therapy services, the respective professionals are requested to forward updated standardized assessment reports to the parents, board/district autism consultant and the school principal prior to the case conference.
- If the child is enrolled in an Early Childhood Center, the staff is encouraged to provide a brief written summary of their impressions regarding the child's skills in the preschool setting. This summary can be brought to the case conference or forwarded ahead of time to the family, Board /District Autism Consultant, and the School Principal.

### **Step 4: Case Conference**

Individual case conferences for all transitioning students with autism will be scheduled and held by each School Board/District before May 1st. The date for these meetings will be given to all involved participants by March to allow all essential participants to plan for attendance.

Essential participants are the family, Preschool Autism Coordinator or Preschool Autism Specialist, Board/District Autism Consultant, Early Childhood Program and other direct service providers. Participants will discuss the child's strengths and needs, review assessment information, as well as the continuum of supports available in the school. The child's successful entry into school will begin with discussion of the following:

- Support Staff

- Transportation issues
- Visual or other communication supports
- Medical or dietary concerns
- Orientation activities for the child
- Individual Education Plan process

### **Step 5: Preparing Students- Orientation**

The school and the family will make a plan for orientation activities to introduce the child to involved staff at the school and to help the child become familiar with the school setting and routines. This will be individualized and may include the use of visual supports (photos, maps, videos, social stories, etc.) and one or more visits to the school. Children may also attend the regular school orientation if the parents and school feel this would be beneficial.

### **Step 6: Personnel Preparation**

Following the case conference, the principal will discuss in-service needs of school staff with the Special Education Autism Coordinator and/or the Board/District Autism Consultants. The Autism Coordinator and the Board/District Autism Consultants will collaborate to provide any training needed. The Principal may arrange for the identified classroom or resource teacher to observe the child in their home or Early Childhood Program, either in person or through video review.

The child's classmates may need to have information about the child with autism. Once the child is in school, the teacher and the family will discuss the specifics of this. Age appropriate materials for presenting information to peers about autism are available from the Autism Coordinator. [see also *Educating Children About Autism in an Inclusive Classroom* and *A Resource Guide for Parents of Children with Autism: Supporting Inclusive Practice* (Timmons, MacIsaac, Breitenbach, 2006)]

### **Step 6: Transition to School individual Education Plan (IEP) Meeting**

In May or June, the involved school staff, parents, Autism Consultant and Preschool Autism Specialist (if applicable) will meet to share initial IEP goals and objectives to provide direction for the Fall. If any environmental accommodations or visual supports are needed, decisions are made about who will provide these. Potential challenging behaviours and preventative measures are discussed, as well as how staff will initially respond. A plan for communication between home and school is agreed upon. Detailed information about the expected classroom schedule is discussed.

### **Step 7: Follow-up**

In September, each student with autism will continue to be followed by a School Board/District Autism Consultant who will assist with program and IEP development, provide individual consults and support for school staff as needed. Following Board/District policy, the school schedules a followup meeting in the Fall to formalize and revise the IEP as needed for the school year