

# Preparing For Life Transitions:

## Home to School; Class to Class; Primary to High School; High School to University, TAFE or Work

### General considerations:

Children do better if included. This is based on over 40 years of educational research comparing segregated and inclusive education. They also generally achieve more academically and socially if included full time rather than being pulled out for specialist lessons or therapy.<sup>1</sup> Some key findings have been that:

- *Parent involvement is an essential component of effective inclusive schooling.*
- *Students with severe disabilities can achieve positive academic and learning outcomes in inclusive settings.*
- *They can realise acceptance, interactions, and friendships in inclusive settings.*
- *Students without disabilities experience positive outcomes when children with severe disabilities are their classmates.*
- *Collaborative efforts among school personnel are essential to successful inclusion.*
- *Curricular adaptations are a vital component in effective inclusion efforts*

Almost always, things go better if you plan. If you start thinking of an ideal life for your son or daughter when they leave school, your dream is more likely to become a reality if you start planning when he/she is age 2 than age 17. By starting to plan at age 2, every decision can be framed around “will this make it more likely that he/she will achieve the ideal life?” Similarly, when planning for transitions, some planning is best done many months or even years before the transition occurs. For example, if you know what is required of grade 1 students, you can start building up those skills from the earliest years. If your child arrives at school with skills ahead of other students, it is much harder for the societal stereotypes about a child with a disability to be put on him or her. Reading in particular is one skill that is not only an important life skill, it can transform expectations of a child as well as make it much more likely that he or she will be included in the mainstream lesson. Of course students with a disability do not need to be at a particular skill level or be able to ‘keep up’ and be successfully included. ‘Keeping up’ is *not* a requirement for inclusion.

### Beginning School or Preschool

Work out what are the most important things for you in relation to your child’s education. For example:

- For my child to ‘belong’.
- For my child to be safe and secure from being hurt and teased.
- For my child to be happy.
- For my child to grow up with his/her neighbourhood peers.
- For my child to achieve the best academic outcomes possible.

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive review of the literature on inclusive education can be downloaded from <http://www.include.com.au/resources> or [www.qppd.org.au](http://www.qppd.org.au)

We want them all but have to prioritise. In ideal environments all are achievable but most environments are not ideal for all the child's school life. These decisions become critical when faced with difficult situations in schools. It is very common for parents to encounter at least one teacher in their school career who will consider that your child is best taught elsewhere or by an aide with limited educational knowledge. If you have decided that a key goal for you is for the child to grow up with his neighbourhood peers, it may be that you will hold back from a direct confrontation over the lack of appropriate education so as not to undermine the social gains. In other situations, a different priority might lead to a decision to change schools or directly confront the issue.

- Determine what time and energy you can contribute. Pre-schools and primary schools often welcome parent involvement and this can be a major way for you to be seen as a regular, helpful contributor to the school and class. This is the basis of positive partnerships and a solid positive reputation for the times that things go wrong. It makes it possible for a low-key request for a change rather than having to call a special meeting over an issue.
- Visit potential schools. If you want inclusion, start with your neighbourhood school. Friendships are more easily continued outside of the school if friends live close.
- Get a feel for the welcome. Inclusion depends on will and skill. Is the will there? In most cases it is - don't confuse with uncertainty. If the will is present, skills are much easier to cater for.
- If you don't feel welcome, would another school be welcoming? Will there be a space for your child? Overall, the welcome, particularly from the Principal, is the most important indicator of a likely good inclusive experience.

***When you have chosen your school:***

- Visit the school and perhaps help or at least visit in the classroom where your child is likely to be going.
- Find out key skills that will be required in the school and classroom. Start teaching those skills if your child has not got them.
- Likely important skills:
  - Following instructions.
  - Working in groups. Sharing, taking turns.
  - Using scissors, glue, paint.
  - Staying in a set area.
  - Sitting on a mat looking at a board/teacher.
  - Cooperating on a task with another child/children.
  - Academic skills e.g. alphabet, numbers.
  - Reasonable noise level.

The more of these type of skills that your child has, the easier the transition is likely to be, but even if the child hasn't got them they can be worked on when they are at school.

- If possible, join your school P&F group. If you are seen from the start as a contributing member of the school community partnerships are easier and more likely.

- Develop links with other families. If you are seen as ‘one of the mob’, then your child is likely to also be more easily accepted.
- Work in the school canteen -- alliances are built here.

Of course a lot of this is unfair. You shouldn’t have to devote so much time and energy to what is for other families just a basic expectation. However, remember that until 1980 in most of the western world, students with a significant disability were denied any government education *by law!* So we have come a long way but it is all very new for education systems and schools.

***Before the end of the previous school year:***

- If your child’s teacher is likely to need assistance in the classroom, then this has to be organised by the principal. Giving lots of warning helps him/her to get this assistance.
- ‘Over preparing’ a school can highlight difference of your child. ‘Under preparing’ can leave your child’s teacher feeling put upon. You need to think through the appropriate balance for your child -- you are the expert with your child. Discuss with your Service Provider, advocacy groups, support staff etc.
- If at all possible, meet your child’s ‘next year teacher’ before the end of the previous school year. If there is social contact early, partnerships are easier. Ask what you can do to help prepare.
- Be ***positive, positive, positive***. Teachers are likely to be feeling apprehensive, uncertain if they can cope and have all the societal stereotypes about autism/Down Syndrome/disability.
- Get permission to visit the school with your child. Perhaps your child could join in the routine for a session. Give your child experience of the layout.
- Talk to your child about the school and going there (this will depend on your child - some children want immediacy).

**Prepare a booklet** “Introducing Gertrude”. We must get across the fact that ‘Gertrude’ is a **child first** with an individual personality, a range of strengths and similar needs to other children. In addition she will need some specific attention to some areas due to particular needs, but she is a child first who needs to belong.

Some suggestions for an ‘introductory book’

- Picture of your child on the front.
- If it works for you, write it in first person as though your child is talking.
- Introduce your child as you might introduce yourself to someone at a social gathering with whom you have become friendly. For example:
  - Family background, demographic information (facts about your child and where you live etc.).
  - Interests, important prior events in your child’s life.
  - Areas of particular need for assistance.
  - Likes, dislikes, things to avoid etc.

Consider the possibility of making a PowerPoint presentation or even a short video if you have the capacity. A DVD can be handed to the teacher to have a look at so that she gets to know your child as a 'child first and foremost'. If appropriate the teacher may also show it to the children in the class so that they have some background. This is something that you should discuss with the teacher.

Teachers know about teaching children! They may feel that they don't know about teaching 'disability' so we need to introduce the child in a positive but honest way.

### ***When in school --Preparing your Child for Transition to the Next School Year***

- Find out who the next year's teacher is. If the Principal is supportive he/she will have thought this through and arranged a teacher already at the school. (Not always possible).
- Meet the new teacher and give him/her the 'introductory book'.
- Ask what you can do to help to prepare your child for next year.
- Ask the teacher for advice on how to teach particular skills (teachers love to be asked for advice).
- Arrange for your current teacher, yourself and the new teacher to meet and discuss broad arrangements for next year.
- Teachers and Principals will know less about disability/specific syndromes than you in most cases. They will however know the societal stereotypes.
  - Hence you will be seen as a bit threatening.
  - Your child may be a cause for them to be uncertain, even scared because of the societal stereotypes.
  - However most are willing to be inclusive if they feel that they are being supported and it is not a 'dump' on them.
  - We have an historical habit of treating children with a disability differently and in segregated settings. This habit is ingrained and will be seen as 'right' by many/most.

### **Teachers and Principals need rewards and acknowledgment.**

- Acknowledge acceptance of your child.
- Write **letters** to their **boss**. That is, to the Principal for a good Teacher, District Superintendent for the Principal.
- Don't nit-pick. Choose issues carefully to raise as problems. Go to your priority list.
- Don't sit on issues that are burning you up. You can end up 'exploding' over a 'last straw' and be seen as erratic and unreasonable. Raise issues in the context of seeking advice from the teacher. "It seems that... is not working too well. What do you suggest we could do as an alternative?"
- **Be careful of what you ask for – you might get it!** Asking for lots of individual support/therapy and input might result in your child becoming *less* included due to the impact on the teacher and other children. Similarly, a lot of research has indicated that educational assistants can *reduce* social inclusion, independence and academic achievement if not used appropriately. Think back to your priorities.

## **Transition to High School** (see also the transition information above for primary school – some information is repeated here).

For both parents and (all) students, the transition to high school is a scary idea. It is normally many times larger than the primary school; it is full teenagers moving from childhood to adulthood with all the complexities involved in that; the students continually move from room to room so getting lost is a real possibility; we know that bullying and nastiness are real issues for many students; some teachers are not feeling ready to include a student far behind in the mainstream curriculum and are likely to believe the student is best segregated.

On the other hand, there are great advantages in High School. You are almost certain to get some really good and supportive teachers and the poor ones have less influence due to not being involved full time with the student with a disability. Some teachers pick up inclusion in the lesson as a great professional challenge and do some amazing things. Most important, there are ALWAYS some students with a level of maturity and caring who can be brought in as allies initially, and frequently become friends.

### **Choosing the school:**

In the same way as for the primary school, look for the welcome. The principal is very important in high school. They set the tone and expectations of the school. If the principal expects all students to be included, this carries a lot of weight with individual teachers.

If they recommend a segregated Unit or Centre for all or part of the school day ask what the research is to support that as you have heard that the research indicates that this would be detrimental. If they claim it to be positive, ask for a copy of research evidence or a reference so you can look it up.

Remember that now in Australia all principals know that full inclusion in high school is an option available to parents and it is the school's responsibility to make it successful.

### ***When you have chosen your school:***

Visit the school and perhaps help or at least visit in the classrooms where your child is likely to be going.

Negotiate a transition plan with the school. This should automatically be organised between the primary and high school BUT:

- You must be involved in this as you are the expert on your child.
- Don't assume it will happen or will be done well. Sometimes principals will say they don't know the teachers for the next year and won't know until February so they can't plan a transition. This is unacceptable – most aspects of the transition can be organised without knowing individual teachers.
- Has any needed aide time been organised?
- Will therapy be involved? How - inclusively? Is it organised

- Remember, the better the transition plan, the likely better will be the inclusion. WELL BEGUN, HALF DONE.

***Things to be considered in a transition plan***

- Which classrooms will be used – are they accessible for your child?
- How can we set up several visits in the six months preceding high school entry to ensure your child is comfortable with the environment and knows how to navigate?
- What process is in place to introduce your child to the school and future classmates to ensure that he is welcomed and understood?
- Is there a buddy system to introduce him/her, help him to navigate, get to each lesson period, have a companion at lunchtime etc.?
- How is he or she going to be introduced to each teacher and class?
- Is any in-service planned for the teachers on curriculum preparation?
- What supports are available for teachers?
- Have the teachers had access to in-service training on appropriate use of an aide if one is involved (that is, not an alternative teacher but an assistant to the teacher, crucially focussed on social belonging as well as academic development)?
- What processes are in place to ensure that class rules are set down early and followed through from day 1 to ensure your child is included in normal class expectations?
- Will there be good links to the family and primary school so information and ideas can be shared?
- Is the school aware of and using the Education Department supports – e.g. Centre for Inclusive Schooling, inclusion support teachers etc.?
- Is a good communication system in place between you and the school? (Not always a communication book – phone contact with a home teacher or regular get-togethers with a coordinator may be better alternatives in some situations.)
- Find out key skills that will be required in the school and classroom. Start teaching those skills if your child has not got them.
  - Likely important skills:
    - Following instructions.
    - Working in groups. Sharing, taking turns.
    - Sitting quietly even if bored.
    - Staying in a set area.
    - Moving quietly in corridors etc.
    - Cooperating on a task with another child/children.
    - Academic skills e.g. alphabet, numbers.
    - Maintaining a reasonable noise level.

The more of these type of skills that your child has, the easier the transition is likely to be, but even if the child hasn't got them they are likely to be learned rapidly when at school.

As for primary school, a booklet or PowerPoint/film on 'Introducing Gertrude' can be a great introduction.

### ***Other suggestions***

- Be very wary of suggestions of ‘pullouts’ for special teaching. This is normally the path to a segregated school experience. Any time away from sharing the classroom tasks with peers reduces social and academic inclusion and normally *reduces* academic achievement.
- Join your school P&F group and/or school council. If you are seen from the start as a contributing member of the school community partnerships are easier and more likely.
- Develop links with other families. If you are seen as ‘one of the mob’, then your child is likely to also be more easily accepted.
- Work in the school canteen -- alliances are built here.
- Overall, be aware that in High School parents are much less involved than in Primary School so it is much more difficult to have a direct say. One of the best strategies is to build alliances with supportive teachers who are much more likely to advocate for you in school meetings, whereas you are not likely to even be involved or know about them till afterwards.

### ***Before the end of the each school year:***

- If your child’s teacher is likely to need assistance in the classroom, then this has to be organised by the principal. Giving lots of warning helps him/her to get this assistance.
- ‘Over preparing’ a school or teachers can highlight difference of your child. ‘Under preparing’ can leave your child’s teachers feeling put upon. You need to think through the appropriate balance for your child -- you are the expert with your child. Discuss with your Service Provider, advocates etc.
- Don’t be scared of years 11 and 12. We have found that High Schools normally include *best* in these years as they are much more aware of individual attention to students, classes tend to be smaller, other students are more mature and supportive etc.

## **Transitions beyond school**

As with all students, these are normally worked through over *years*. For example, students normally take on some part time work from the age of about 15 and are also commonly involved in community sporting and recreation groups – often with an element of volunteer work expectations. Similarly, students start planning from at least year 10 on their directions after school by their choice of subjects and development of interests outside of school. For a student with a disability, this planning is critical and should be started as early as possible. Age 2 is a good time! That is, if you have a vision of the ideal life for your son or daughter when they leave school starting at age 2, then every life decision that you make can be held up against “is this going to help or hinder my child achieving that ideal life?” If you wait till the student is 16 before facing up to that issue, the ideal is a lot harder to achieve.

### **Things to consider**

**Home:** What are you doing at home to make sure that your child is becoming more independent day by day and is not slipping into a ‘learned helplessness’ through continuing to have things done for him or her. Look at the normal expectations on a child of the same age: How does your child compare and how much of the difference is really due to an impairment? What opportunities are there for doing things with others rather than direct family members? How much power does your child have over life decisions. Are they

learning to take more personal control of their life and learning how to make good decisions (remember, most teenagers make terrible decisions but they learn from this).

**Work:** Do you have friends or contacts with a business who would be willing to give your child some work experience? Could this be set up so that there is good co-worker support and expectations with real tasks to complete? Note networks are almost always the best means of getting work – for all children but particularly children with an impairment. Is there a club or group where the person could be a volunteer help with good community members as supporters? Do you have friends or contacts who might assist in making this happen?

**Recreation and Leisure:** This is normally best done with clubs or groups that will extend beyond school so that there is less of a major life change when school ends. Scouts and Girls Brigade are often very supportive of inclusion. However, most community clubs are willing to include if given support and guidance in how to achieve this. For example, regular horse-riding clubs, sailing clubs, team sports (where the role may not always be as a team member but as a key support – official roles, looking after equipment, allocating teams etc. Always look for opportunities that will involve regular attendance with the same or similar group of people so that over time links are gradually made and new opportunities can become available.

Two key bits of advice passed on by parents:

1. Make the least dangerous assumption about your son or daughter. Best to assume that they can do it as this is less likely to be damaging than to hold them back from opportunities that might work.
2. When working with schools, agencies, the public or your child – be positive, positive, positive. In the long run this is much more effective than attack or negativity, even though you might want to strike back at real injustices.

R. Jackson PhD  
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