



# Mind the Gap: Supporting Neurodivergent Pupils through School Transition

Neurodivergent pupils need coordinated and continuous support through the transition from primary to secondary school.

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## A transitional pressure point

Autistic pupils account for the largest proportion of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in England. Autistic and other neurodivergent children and young people are disproportionately represented in extended school non-attendance figures and often experience challenges to wellbeing and belonging in school. Demands on social communication, sensory processing and executive function increase quickly when children move to secondary school, and research shows that emotional disengagement from school peaks in Key Stage 3 (i.e., from Year 6 to Year 9).

The early years of secondary school are a pressure point for neurodivergent pupils. Without appropriate support to maintain engagement, the long-term impacts on children's life outcomes and families' wellbeing and financial security, can be profound.

## Research with neurodivergent children

Between 2018 and 2025, we worked with two cohorts of autistic pupils in York to understand their journeys through the transition to secondary school and Key Stage 3.

We developed creative and inclusive methods to allow young people with diverse communication profiles to contribute their perspectives, alongside insights from parents and teachers.

We co-produced training resources for schools with the young people to support primary-to-secondary transition.

## Recommendations

Schools, local authorities and families can collaborate to facilitate a positive transition to secondary school for neurodivergent pupils by:

### 1. Maximising predictability in the lead-up to transition.

- Offer additional opportunities for familiarisation, e.g., taster days, transition visits.
- Provide visual resources for young people to refer back to, e.g., school maps, video messages from teachers, visual timetables.
- Develop a personalised transition plan with the young person.

### 2. Facilitating conversations about feelings

- Support pupils to communicate their feelings in the lead-up to transition and while settling into secondary school.
- Creative, inclusive tools like body mapping, card sorts, comic strip conversations and photovoice facilitate difficult conversations, drawing on individual interests and communication profiles.
- Arrange a key, trusted adult for each young person at secondary school for pastoral support; ensure that the pupil knows how and when to contact them.

### 3. Planning proactive support and monitoring

- Ensure that learning support needs are shared with the secondary school in advance of transition, ideally in a meeting to allow discussion.
- Avoid a 'wait and see' approach; anticipate adjustments provided in primary will be needed in secondary school.
- Establish a clear process for monitoring support through Key Stage 3.

### 4. Prioritising home-school communication and collaborative problem-solving

- Agree clear channels of communication between families and key school staff.
- Be alert to indications of distress that may not be apparent during the school day, e.g., meltdowns at the end of the day; anxiety in the mornings.
- Support pupils to develop self-advocacy skills and work together with families to identify practical solutions that help them manage the school day.

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## Call to action

Access our research reports and co-produced resources:

- STEPS report: [www.yorks.ac.uk/media/content-assets/document-directory/documents/STEPS-Final-Project-Report.pdf](http://www.yorks.ac.uk/media/content-assets/document-directory/documents/STEPS-Final-Project-Report.pdf)
- School transitions for autistic young people in mainstream settings report: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/7063/1/School-transitions-for-autistic-pupils-report.pdf>
- STEPS transition resources: <https://padlet.com/jvincent310/steps-school-transition-toolkit-esoec2ryf5ryxez4>

Contact us to discuss training or consultancy on supporting neurodivergent pupils through the transition to secondary school.

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For more information on Innovations in Education Policy, visit: [www.yorks.ac.uk/innovations-in-education-policy](http://www.yorks.ac.uk/innovations-in-education-policy)