# Improving School Transitions for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

**Final project report, May 2026**

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STEPS
School Transition Experiences for Pupils with SEND

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# Executive Summary

## Background

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) system in UK schools faces long-established systemic pressures: inconsistent approaches to inclusion, significant underfunding, a breakdown of trust between families and institutions, and significant attainment gaps for children with SEND. At the same time, demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has risen sharply without increases in local authority budgets, thus, diverting resources away from inclusive mainstream classroom support.

Autistic children are particularly affected by these systemic factors with less than half reporting being happy at school and around 31% persistently absent according to recent surveys. The transition from primary to secondary school is a particularly high-risk period during which the increased scale, complexity, and expectations of secondary environments can overwhelm neurodivergent pupils.

The STEPS project (School Transition Experiences for Pupils with SEND) was designed to investigate this school transition in depth, with particular focus on autistic and multiply-neurodivergent young people in mainstream education. The project adopted a bioecological framework, collecting longitudinal, multi-stakeholder data across three inter-related work packages.

## Work Package 1: Longitudinal survey study

A two-wave national survey was conducted with 88 parents/carers of children with SEND (Wave 1, final year of primary) and 62 of the same respondents nine months later (Wave 2, second half of first year of secondary). Parents/carers were drawn from across the UK; 84% of children were identified as autistic, 51% as ADHD, 27% had a specific learning difference and most had multiple co-occurring neurodevelopmental differences. Approximately one-third had an EHCP or equivalent. At each wave, respondents completed a set of measures on their children's profiles, school settings, and transition experiences, supplemented by open-text boxes to allow more detailed responses.

Key findings:

- Families prioritised nurture, inclusion, and SEND provision more than academic reputation when selecting secondary schools.
- Approximately 35% of parents/carers anticipated their child would not settle well at secondary, with social integration with peers the primary concern.
- Parents/carers who rated their children to have more emotional difficulties (e.g., anxiety, low mood) and demand avoidant profiles were more concerned about how their child would manage the transition to secondary school.
- At Wave 2, on average parents/carers perceived transition outcomes more positively than they had predicted nine months earlier. However, there was substantial variation, with some reporting that their children had experienced very difficult transitions.
- Children with emotional difficulties, demand avoidant profiles and/or hyperactivity were at increased risk of poor transitions.
- Average school attendance across the sample was approximately 82% at both waves but the proportion of children with current or previous attendance difficulties rose from 66% (Year 6) to 74% (Year 7).
- Parents/carers associated positive transitions with strong home-school communication, additional opportunities for children to familiarise with the secondary environment before starting, and children having a named individual member of staff, typically Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCos) or year leads, to talk to.

## Work Package 2: Longitudinal qualitative study with neurodivergent young people

Thirteen autistic and multiply-neurodivergent young people from mainstream primary schools were recruited in Year 6 and followed to the end of Year 8 of mainstream secondary (five data collection points over two years; 63 interviews with young people and 37 with parents). Personalised, creative methods, including draw-write-tell, photo-elicitation, comic strips, walk-and-talk, body mapping, and card sorts, were used to support inclusive participation across diverse profiles.

Key findings:

- A 'Year 7 honeymoon' period was often followed by increasing difficulties from mid-Year 7 and into Year 8, linked to the withdrawal of initial transition supports.
- Transition is an extended process: many young people were still getting used to secondary school by the end of Year 8.
- Young people experienced significant emotional burden from cumulative stressors including time pressure and processing demands; unexpected changes to timetables and routines; sensory overload; complex social interactions, bullying, and the use of 'autistic' as an insult; variable teacher understanding of neurodivergence; and punitive behaviour management systems.
- Masking was common and young people expended considerable effort appearing to cope during the school day, making distress visible only at home. This meant that many 'flew under the radar' and received support only when a crisis emerged.
- Friendships with neurodivergent peers, especially in 'safe' spaces like inclusion bases, were experienced as meaningful and protective.
- Reactive support, where intervention was only available only once problems escalated, was a recurring frustration for both young people and parents.
- Anticipatory, collaborative, and preventative strategies were identified as essential.

## Work Package 3: Co-produced resources and training

Three animations were co-produced directly with young people, drawing on their own words to illustrate school transition experiences, what helps, and what Year 7 feels like. A freely available toolkit was published, including the animations, transition activities (card sorts, body mapping, comic strip formats), and supporting materials.

Pilot training workshops were delivered with professionals across North Yorkshire, including SENCos, teachers, educational psychologists, and safeguarding leads, and work is underway to embed STEPS training within City of York Council's ongoing SEND continuing professional development offer.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Primary-to-secondary transition is a vulnerable period for pupils with SEND, including neurodivergent children and young people. While some thrive, others experience marked and escalating difficulties through Year 7 and 8, which can contribute to escalating mental health challenges and school attendance difficulties. Drawing on converging evidence from across the three work packages, we identify 10 practical recommendations for educational practitioners and policymakers with the aim of adopting an anticipatory approach to SEND support during this key transition.

1. **Strengthen primary-to-secondary information sharing.**
2. **Extend and personalise transition preparation and support.**
3. **Assign every pupil with SEND a named, consistent key contact at secondary school.**
4. **Prioritise anticipatory support and preventative approaches.**
5. **Facilitate conversations about feelings.**
6. **Work collaboratively with parents to address problems.**
7. **Engage in high-quality, ongoing neurodiversity training for all secondary school staff.**
8. **Review behaviour management systems for neurodivergent pupils.**
9. **Actively foster positive neurodivergent identities through peer education.**
10. **Scale up access to co-produced, evidence-based transition resources.**

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# Background

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) system in UK schools is frequently described as being in crisis [1]. Systemic problems include inconsistent approaches to inclusion across schools and academy trusts, a lack of accountability for inclusive practice, public spending on SEND that is perceived to be out of control, and a breakdown in trust between families of children with SEND and educators and policymakers [2]. The net result is impoverished outcomes for children.

Children and young people identified with SEND are at substantially increased risk of suspension and permanent exclusion from school [3], extended school non-attendance [4] and poor mental health [5], while the attainment gap between children with SEND and their peers remains wide at all stages of education [6]. Most children with SEND are educated in mainstream schools [7]. At the same time, demand for specialist school provision outstrips supply, as families often perceive that mainstream settings do not meet their children's needs [8].

The Children and Families Act, 2014 [9] introduced a set of reforms for SEND provision in England with the aims of integrating personalised support across agencies and increasing the involvement of children, young people and families in decision-making. Key reforms set out in this legislation, and the accompanying SEND Code of Practice [10], include the introduction of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs: statutory documents for children whose support needs exceed what is available through in-school SEND support); the extension of eligibility for SEND support from 0 to 25 years; and a mandatory duty for local authorities to maintain a 'local offer' website detailing all available support services. In practice, applications for EHCPs have increased year on year, while local authority budgets have not increased to a commensurate level [11], creating a bottleneck of delayed assessments and appeals against local authority decisions. In England, available data indicate that over 90% of tribunals find in families' favour [12]. These procedural problems divert time and funding from where it is needed most: directly supporting children and young people in the classroom. While legislation and processes vary, comparable problems for equitable SEND provision are found across the four nations of the UK [8]. The Schools White paper, released for consultation by the UK Government in early 2026 [13], acknowledges the scale of the problem and sets out a series of proposals including increased funding, resource and accountability for inclusion in mainstream schools. The ensuing legislative changes are likely to come into effect from 2029.

Autism is the most common primary need among children with an EHCP in England [14]. Many autistic children have co-occurring neurodevelopmental (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia), mental health (e.g., anxiety, OCD) and physical health conditions (e.g., hypermobility, gastrointestinal issues). Cognitive, communicative and socio-emotional profiles vary widely among autistic pupils [15]. The available evidence on educational experiences and outcomes for this group is concerning. Survey data from the National Autistic Society indicate that less than half of autistic children are happy at school, identifying better understanding of autism among school staff as the factor that would most improve their experience [16]. Research from Ambitious about Autism suggests that 31% of autistic children are persistently absent from school [17]. A growing body of academic research shows that aspects of the school environment contribute to high levels of school distress among autistic pupils, including noisy and unpredictable spaces, punitive behaviour systems, and bullying within the peer group [18, 19, 20]. Despite many autistic pupils having strong academic potential, educational attainment can fall below ability [21]. A renewed policy focus on inclusion, belonging and wellbeing, underpinned by adequate funding, training and professional development for schools, is crucial if equitable access to education for autistic and other neurodivergent children is be achieved.

Typically, children move to secondary provision at age 11 across the UK nations. Secondary school environments differ from primary schools in important ways: increased scale, expectations for independence and self-organisation, range of academic subjects and interactions with different teaching staff, and more formalised behaviour management systems. With appropriate support, young people can manage these

changes and thrive in the more complex surroundings of secondary school. Nonetheless, the transition from primary to secondary school is a sensitive time for pupils with SEND, including autistic pupils [22]. Emotional disengagement from school peaks in the early years of secondary education [23] and there is accumulating evidence that neurodivergent pupils are over-represented in these statistics.

The STEPs project aimed to investigate the primary-to-secondary transition for pupils with SEND, with a particular focus on the experiences of autistic young people. The project adopted a bioecological approach [24], in that children's development is understood to occur through bidirectional interactions between children and aspects of the microsystems that they inhabit (e.g., home; school; peer groups), which are in turn influenced by macrosystemic factors (e.g., education policy; societal attitudes to disability). To gain a comprehensive picture of what happens for young people through this key transition, a longitudinal approach integrating perspectives of multiple stakeholders was needed. Importantly, we wanted to develop inclusive and flexible data collection methods to allow a wide range of neurodivergent young people to contribute their insights. A final aim of the project was to co-produce resources with young people that can be used by families and schools to support pupils with SEND through the transition to secondary school.

To achieve these aims, we delivered three work packages (WPs):

- WP1: A two-wave longitudinal survey of parents of children with SEND across the UK.
    - Key objective: to understand a wide range of family experiences of primary-to-secondary transition and identify child- and school-level correlates of transition outcomes for children with SEND.
- WP2: A longitudinal, qualitative study with 13 autistic and multiply-neurodivergent young people, supplemented by parent perspectives.
    - Key objective: to employ individualised creative methods to allow autistic young people to contribute their insights on the transition into secondary school over five time points between Year 6 and Year 8.
- WP3: Co-creation of a set of resources to support positive transition into secondary school for neurodivergent pupils.
    - Key objective: To develop an open-access set of resources grounded in autistic young people's lived experiences, which can be used by families and schools to support young people through the transition to secondary school.

# Work Package 1: Longitudinal survey study

## Objectives

Work package 1 comprised a two-wave survey of parents/carers of children with SEND across the United Kingdom. Wave 1 was completed when children were in the final term of primary education (England and Wales Year 6; Scotland and Northern Ireland Primary 7); Wave 2 was completed when children had completed approximately half a year of secondary education (England and Wales Year 7; Scotland Secondary 1; Northern Ireland Year 8).

*Note: The year group designations from the mainstream education system in England and Wales are used from this point for simplicity (i.e., Year 6 - Year 7).*

The objectives of this study were:

- To understand factors that influence the choice of secondary school for families of children with SEND.
- To understand children's and families' experiences over the transition from primary to secondary school.
- To identify correlates of parents'/carers' expectations for transition in Year 6 at the child and school level.
- To identify correlates of parents'/carers' perceptions of transition outcomes in Year 7 at the child and school level.
- To describe school attendance patterns over the transition to secondary school.

## Method

### *Design and Measures*

We compiled a two-wave survey that included demographic questions and several standardised measures alongside open-text boxes in which respondents could elaborate on their responses to the quantitative scales. Most measures were repeated at both waves of data collection to allow analysis of change over time. Table 1 summarises the components of the survey at each time point.

**Table 1: Summary of measures used in WP1 parent survey**

| Construct | Measure | Unit of analysis | Survey wave |
|---|---|---|---|
| Factors influencing school choice | Parent/carer ratings of 18 factors influencing choice of secondary school (from not at all important to very important) [25] | Transition | 1 |
| Parental expectations for transition | Predictions of how well child would settle at secondary across four domains (academic/ social (peers)/ social (teachers)/ new routines [26] | Transition | 1 |
| Parental perceptions of transition success | Perception of how well child has settled at secondary across four domains (academic/ social (peers)/ social (teachers)/ new routines) [27] | Transition | 2 |
| Emotional, social and behavioural strengths and difficulties | Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) [26]<br>• Emotional difficulties subscale<br>• Conduct problems subscale<br>• Hyperactivity subscale<br>• Peer problems subscale<br>• Prosocial behaviour subscale | Child | 1 & 2 |
| Demand avoidance | Extreme Demand Avoidance Questionnaire (EDA8) [28] | Child | 1 & 2 |
| Parent perceptions of school environment | PIRLS Perceptions of Child's School (PCS) [29]<br>• Items probe parental engagement, safety of environment, academic standards | School | 1 & 2 |
| Bullying | Parent ratings of frequency with which child has experienced bullying across four domains: Physical, verbal, relational, cyberbullying [30] | Child at school | 1 & 2 |
| Wellbeing at school | Parent ratings of:<br>• How happy child is at school<br>• How school impacts child's wellbeing | Child at school | 1 & 2 |
| School attendance | (a) Estimated % school days attended during school year<br>(b) Categorical rating of school attendance difficulties [never – in the past – currently] [18] | Child at school | 1 & 2 |

*Participant recruitment and sample characteristics*

Families were recruited to the study between April and July 2024. Information about the study was posted to SEND parent-carer forums and support groups across the country and advertised on social media. Any parent or carer of a child who was currently in the final term of primary education (Year 6) was eligible to take part. Respondents provided informed consent to take part in Wave 1 and were asked to provide both a unique participant code and an email address, so that they could be contacted nine months later to take part in Wave 2. Respondents were emailed with their unique participant code and a link to the second part of the survey between February and May 2025, when their child had experienced at least six months of secondary education. Parents/carers who took part in Wave 2 provided informed consent again.

In total, 96 responses to the first wave of the survey were received, of which 88 had completed at least 50% of measures and were therefore included in analyses. Respondents who provided a contact email address were invited to complete the second wave of the survey nine months later, with up to three reminder emails sent if no response was received. In total, there were 62 responses to the second part of the survey, giving an attrition rate of 29.5%. There was no evidence that families who did not take part in Wave 2 differed from those who did in terms of socioeconomic status, child gender, disability status, or any of the measures taken at Wave 1.

The respondents at Wave 1 were almost exclusively mothers (N = 83) with the remainder identifying as grandparents or carers. Families lived across all regions of the UK except Wales, with South-east England (n = 38; 43%), Yorkshire and Humber (n = 11; 13%) and North-west England (n = 10; 11%) represented most frequently (see Figure 1).

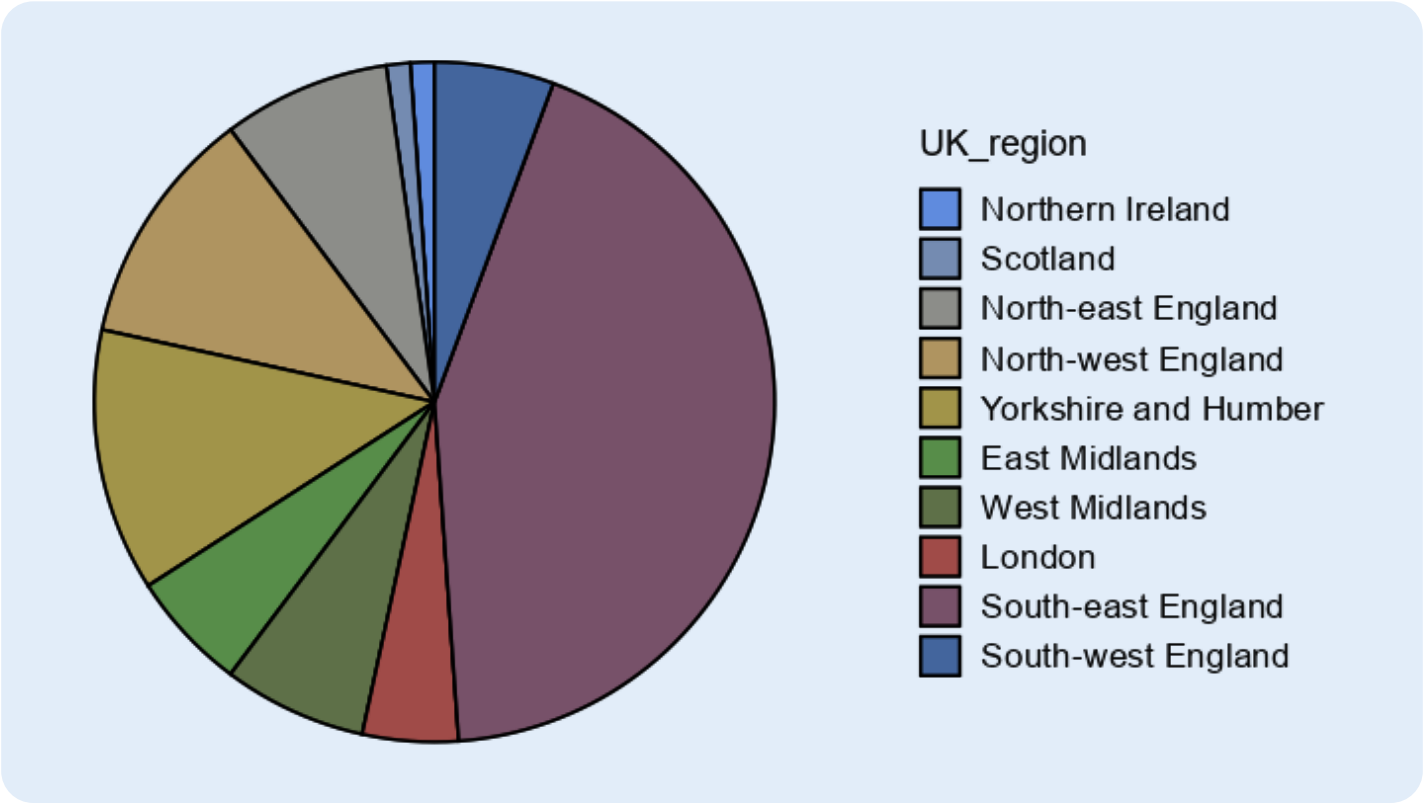



*Figure 1: Geographical spread of participating families across the UK*

Table 2 presents demographic characteristics and SEND status of the children reported on by parents/carers in the survey. There was an even gender split, and approximately even split of relative age in the school year. However, White British children were over-represented in comparison with other ethnicities, as were families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (as indexed by child eligibility for free school meals and caregiver level of education).

In terms of SEND categories [10], respondents identified most children to have communication and interaction needs and social, emotional mental health needs. Approximately half of children were identified as having cognition and learning needs and physical or sensory needs. Almost all children were identified as neurodivergent, with respondents indicating that 84% were autistic, 51% ADHD, and 27% had a specific learning difference, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia or dyspraxia. Many children were identified as having multiple, co-occurring neurodevelopmental differences. Most children were receiving some SEND support at school, with approximately one-third having access to statutory support via an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or equivalent.

**Table 2: Demographic characteristics of participants in WP1 parent survey**

| Demographic/ SEND Variable | N | Categories | Sample characteristics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Child gender | 88 | Girl (including transgender girl) | 44 (50%) |
| | | Boy (including transgender boy) | 44 (50%) |
| | | Prefers to self-describe | 0 (0%) |
| Child birth season (Relative age within school year) | 88 | Winter-born (Sep-Dec) | 29 (33%) |
| | | Mid-year (Jan-Apr) | 31 (35%) |
| | | Summer-born (May-Aug) | 28 (32%) |
| Child ethnicity | 88 | Asian/ Asian British | 0 (0%) |
| | | Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British | 1 (1%) |
| | | Multiple/ mixed ethnicity | 6 (7%) |
| | | White/ White British | 79 (90%) |
| | | Other (self-described as White Other) | 2 (2%) |
| Eligibility for free school meals | 84 | Yes | 11 (13%) |
| | | No | 72 (86%) |
| | | Not sure | 1 (1%) |
| Primary caregiver education level | 84 | No formal qualifications | 4 (5%) |
| | | GCSEs or equivalent | 5 (6%) |
| | | A-levels or equivalent | 11 (13%) |
| | | Professional qualification | 5 (6%) |
| | | Undergraduate degree | 25 (31%) |
| | | Postgraduate degree | 33 (39%) |
| SEND category: Communication and interaction needs | 88 | Yes | 76 (86%) |
| | | No | 12 (14%) |
| SEND category: Cognition and learning needs | 88 | Yes | 44 (50%) |
| | | No | 44 (50%) |
| SEND category: Social, emotional and mental health needs | 88 | Yes | 77 (88%) |
| | | No | 11 (12%) |
| SEND category: Physical and sensory needs | 88 | Yes | 51 (58%) |
| | | No | 47 (42%) |
| Autism (diagnosed or suspected) | 88 | Yes | 74 (84%) |
| | | No | 14 (16%) |
| ADHD (diagnosed or suspected) | 88 | Yes | 45 (51%) |
| | | No | 43 (49%) |
| “Specific” learning differences, e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia (diagnosed or suspected) | 88 | Yes | 24 (27%) |
| | | No | 64 (73%) |
| SEND support in school | 88 | EHCP/CSP/ Statement in place | 33 (37%) |
| | | EHCP (or equivalent) application in progress | 33 (37%) |
| | | On SEND register (some support) | 13 (15%) |
| | | No additional support | 9 (10%) |

*Note:* EHCP = Education, Health and Care Plan; CSP = Co-ordinated Support Plan

None of the transition outcomes, child or school factors analysed in the study differed according to demographic or SEND variables, with the exception that parents of girls were more concerned about secondary transition than those of boys at Wave 1.

## Results

### *Choosing a secondary school*

Respondents identified the factors that influenced their choice of secondary school (Figure 2). The most influential factors related to nurture and inclusion (e.g., SEND provision, pastoral care, smaller size). Academic factors (e.g., exam results, Ofsted report) or practical factors (e.g., sibling attends school, partnership with primary school) were less important to families. When invited to identify other factors not listed, parents/ carers reported preferring schools with specialist provision (e.g., autism units), a reputation for good communication with parents, and/or an explicit focus on pupil happiness and wellbeing.

Across the sample, 87.5% of families were allocated their first choice of secondary school and 2.8% their second choice, with the remainder allocated schools outside their preferred choices (5.6%) or not sure (4.2%).

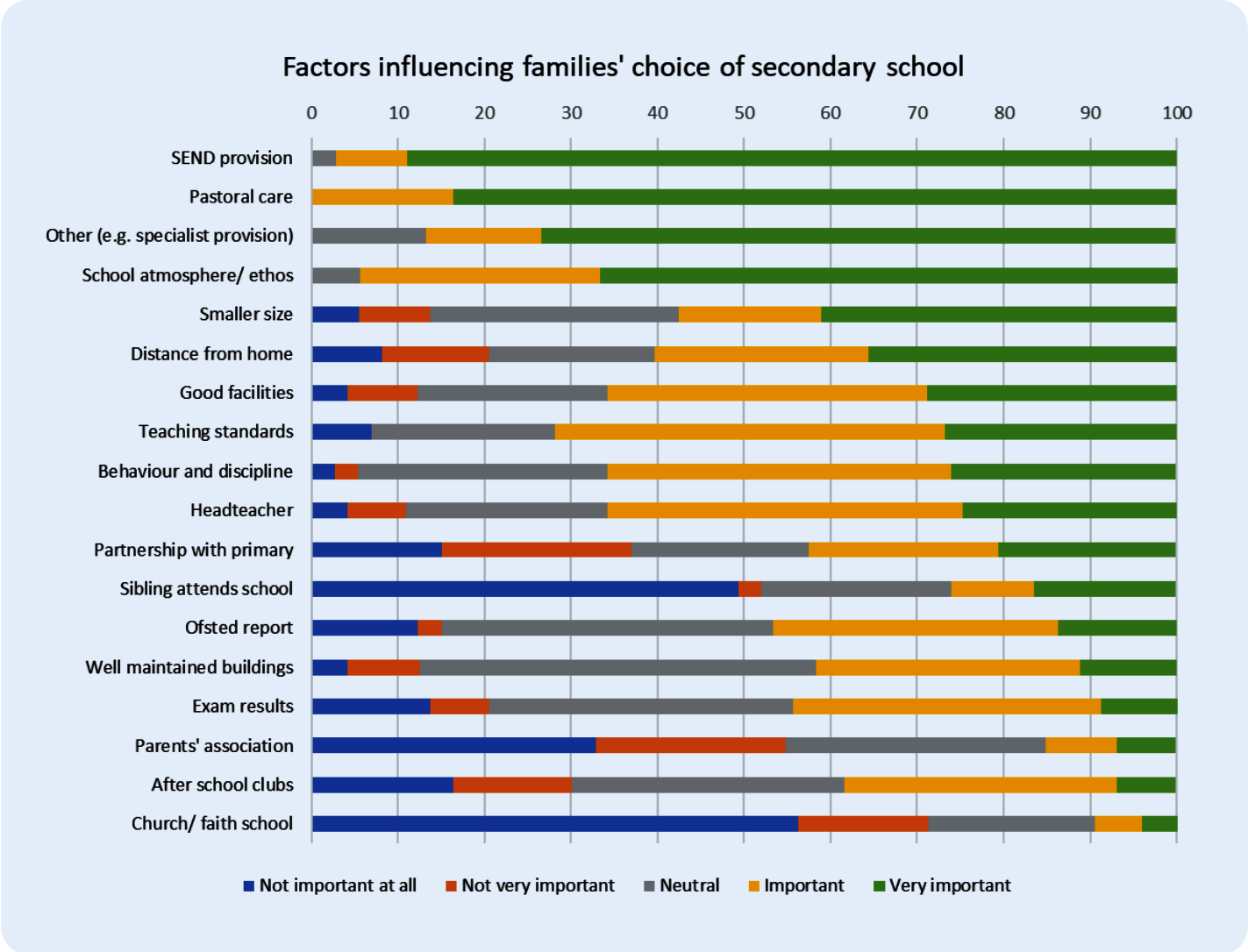



*Figure 2: Factors influencing families' choice of secondary school*

*Anticipating transition in Year 6*

Respondents indicated a high level of uncertainty about how their child would settle into secondary school at Wave 1 of the survey. Approximately 30-40% of respondents anticipated that their child would not settle in well academically, socially (with peers and/or teachers), and in terms of new routines. Settling in socially with peers was a primary concern; only 14% of respondents predicted that their child would settle in well in this domain (Figure 3).

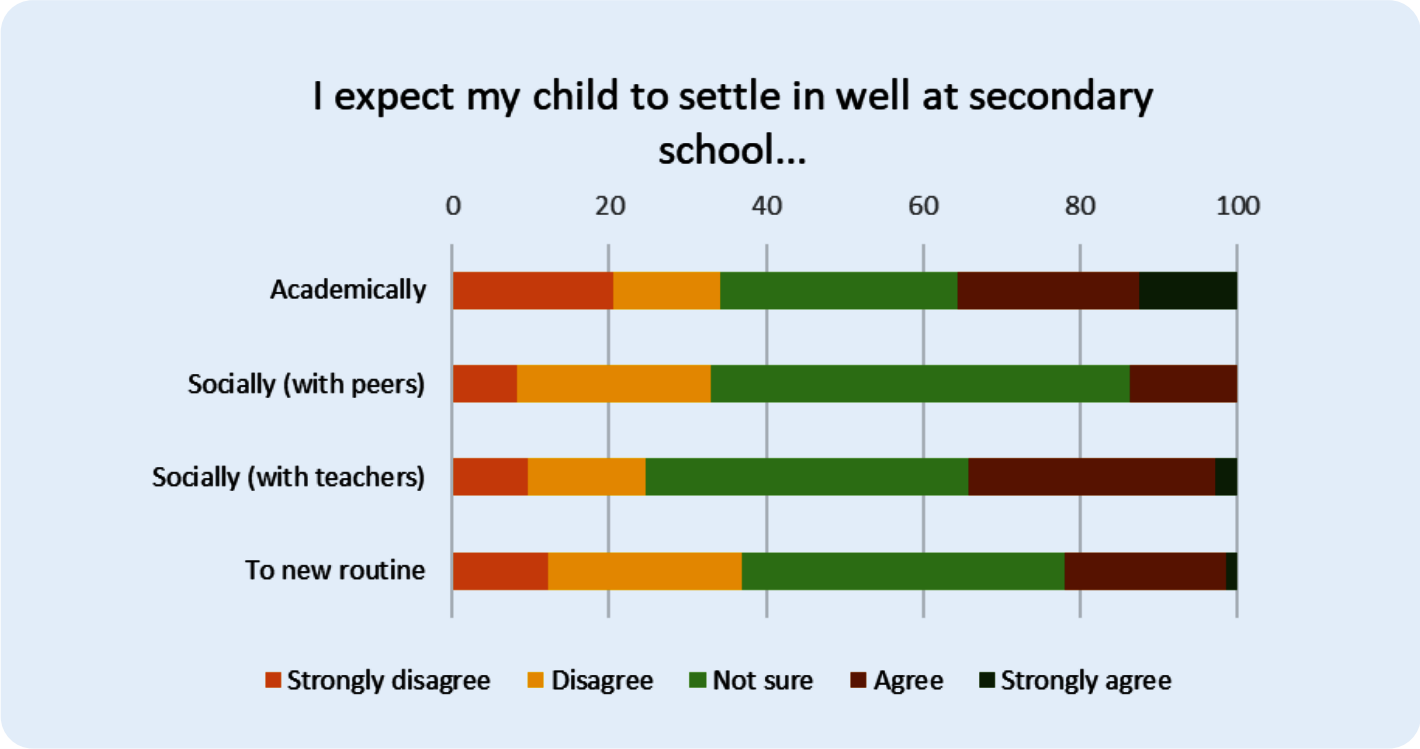



*Figure 3: Parent/ carer expectations about upcoming transition to secondary school at Wave 1*

We ran correlational analyses to identify the child and school factors that related to parents'/carers' expectations for secondary transition (Figure 4). Two child factors were significantly negatively correlated with transition expectations: emotional difficulties and demand avoidance. In other words, parents/carers who rated their children to have more internalising difficulties (e.g., anxiety, low mood) and demand avoidant profiles were more concerned about how their child would manage the transition to secondary school. Other child factors (e.g., conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems) were not significantly related to expectations of transition. At the school level, parent/carer reports of bullying that children had experienced at primary were not related to their concerns about transition. However, respondents who evaluated the primary school climate more positively were more likely to anticipate a successful transition to secondary. Similarly, parents/carers predicted more positive transition experiences for children who had attended school more often in Year 6 and those whose current wellbeing at school they rated more positively.

Respondents elaborated on their hopes and concerns for their child's transition to secondary school in open-text boxes. Many of these responses were offered by parents/carers who were most concerned about the transition to secondary. Worries often focused on their child not being understood, challenges of building relationships with the many different teachers, and/or the unpredictability of what support would be received in the secondary setting.

*I'm worried they won't understand his behaviours are self-regulating, rather than not paying attention.*

*Complete unknown, hopefully positive but we have experienced what can happen without the correct understanding and support.*

*Again, as my child seems "normal", I expect for him to be misread as a "naughty" child. At the school they are given demerits for not having the correct equipment, not being ready with pens out, being late into class and are very strict on rules. This inflexibility may not work with my child.*

*He already says he doesn't want to go and is refusing to wear shoes (he has uniform adjustments at his current school which the new school won't agree to.) I honestly don't know if he will even go in on day 1.*

*I'm very scared and if I have to, ready to home-school.*

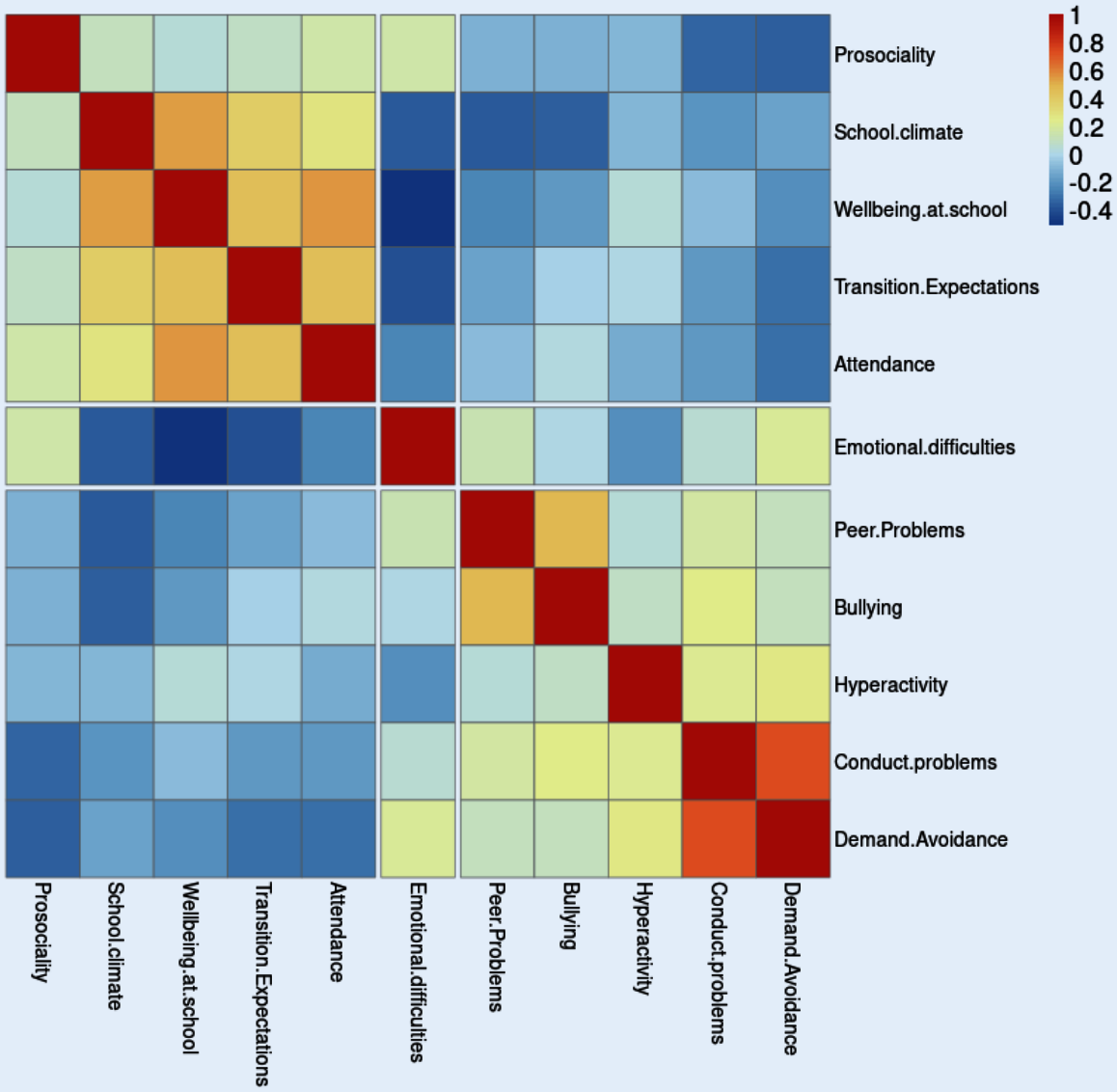



*Figure 4: Heatmap showing correlations (Pearson's r) between child, school and pre-transition variables in Year 6/ Wave 1 (Credit: ScatterPlot.Bar)*

### *Parent perceptions of transition outcomes in Year 7*

At Wave 2, respondents rated how well their child had settled in at school along the same four domains as at Wave 1 (Figure 5). Overall, parents/carers perceived transition outcomes more positively than they had predicted nine months earlier and this was a statistically significant difference ($t$ (53) = -2.32, $p$ = .024) with a small effect size ($d$ = 0.32). However, there was substantial variation among the sample, with some families reporting extremely negative experiences of transition.

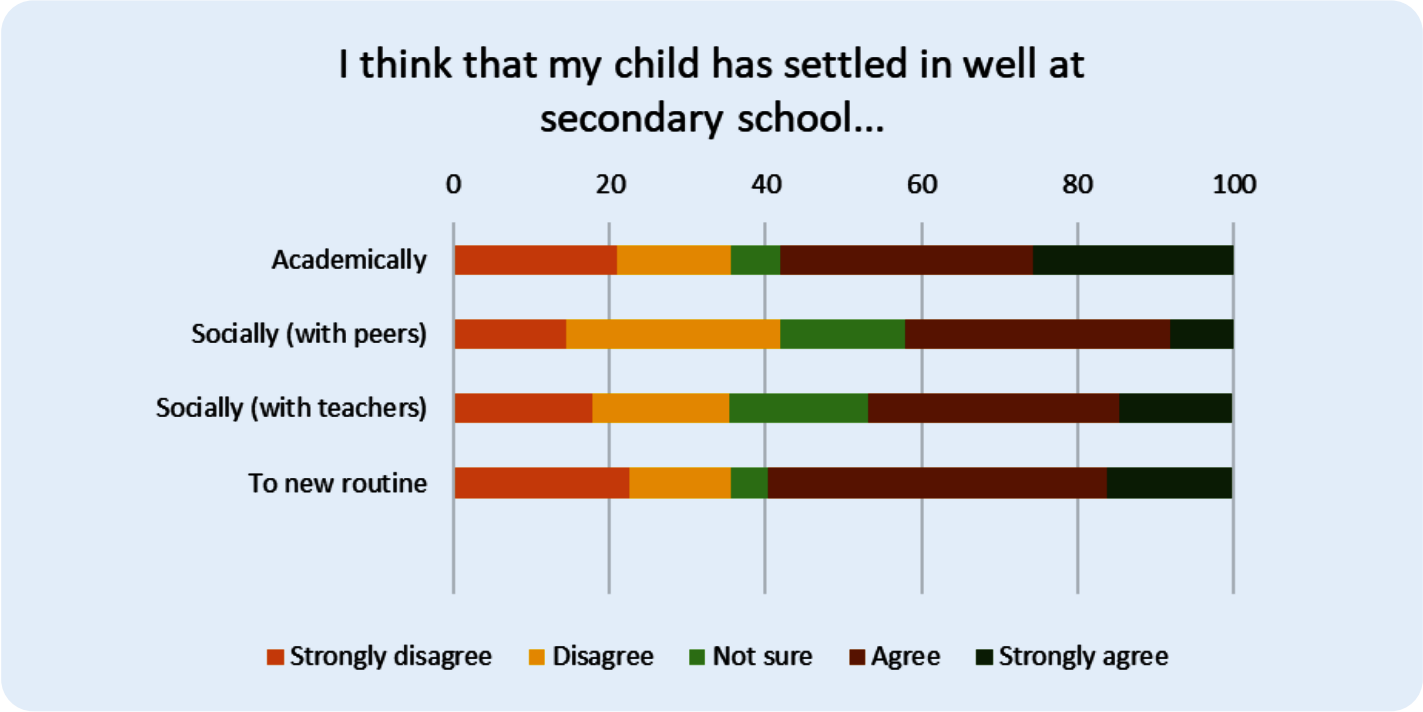



*Figure 5: Parent/ carer ratings of children's transition outcomes at Wave 2*

Pearson's correlations were used to identify factors that are related to parent/carer-rated transition outcomes at the child and school levels (Figure 6). As with the pre-transition data, children with more emotional difficulties and demand avoidant profiles were rated as having had more negative experiences of transition to secondary. At this post-transition wave, hyperactivity was also negatively correlated with transition outcomes, while prosocial behaviours were positively related to successful transition. Unexpectedly, peer problems and experiences of bullying did not relate to ratings of transition outcomes. As at Wave 1, family perceptions of the school environment were positively related to transition outcomes. Finally, children's attendance and wellbeing at school were strongly correlated with transition outcomes. In other words, children considered to have settled into school less well were significantly more likely not to attend school and to be unhappy at school.

Respondents supplemented their ratings of transition success with open textbox responses. For some, the transition to secondary had been a more positive experience than anticipated and parents/carers often attributed this to the input of SENCos or tutors, successful relationship building with school staff, effective specialist provision and/or the challenge and opportunities of new academic subjects or extracurricular opportunities.

> *It has been a lot smoother than we had been expecting. The change in routine and different teacher for every lesson has the potential to cause anxiety and dysregulated behaviour but our daughter has been mostly steady. She has an excellent tutor who is aware of her needs and a lovely group of friends. She is engaging in after school clubs and activities.*

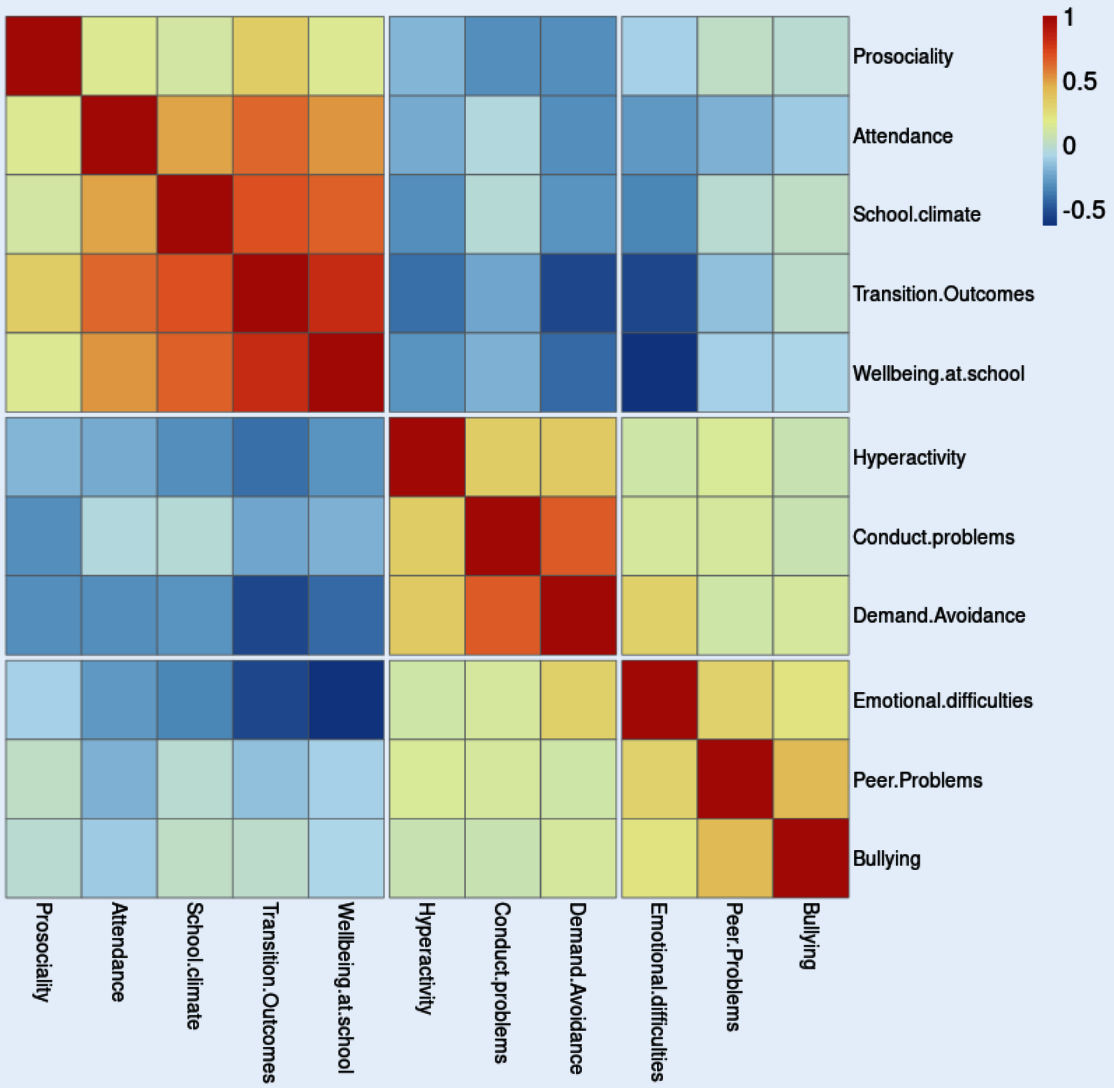



*Figure 6: Heatmap showing correlations (Pearson's r) between child, school and post-transition variables in Year 7/ Wave 2 (Credit: ScatterPlot.Bar)*

*Incredibly well. School have worked with us to help her settle and make connections. I can't praise the high school enough. 100% better experience than primary school.*

*She has benefitted hugely from being in the base with other autistic young people. She always struggled maintaining neurological friendships as they were not on the same wavelength, but she has made friends with several people in the base and have seen her confidence grow as a result.*

For many families, the primary-to-secondary transition had been a mixed experience, with some aspects of school life going well and others posing challenges. This was particularly the case where children were reported to be "high masking".

*He has really loved the variety of learning and has made some really good relationships with teachers and other staff. He is very rule-bound and gets quite anxious about accidentally breaking the rules. He has struggled with other children who sense he is different and ostracise or marginalise him for that.*

*He has managed the new routine, with support. The challenge is the amount of energy that he uses to manage the additional cognitive load of different teachers, homework, peers/social group, etc. He has had days when he is upset and this term has asked to not go to school on two days as he is feeling overwhelmed.*

*Coped well until the school did a big uniform crackdown and instant detentions with no warning, now is very anxious about going.*

For other families, the transition had been extremely difficult with direct impact on children's attendance at school, mental health and family wellbeing.

*Daughter has shown regressive behaviours since 4 weeks into first term in Year 7. She continues to need support getting dressed for school every morning, breakfast made for her and packed lunch. She wakes up every morning and says she doesn't want to go to school, she hates school. I or her Dad have to walk her to school. She won't walk home alone very often as her fears about strangers have increased since starting secondary school. She has meltdowns every day and refuses help and support from professionals.*

*As he did in junior school he masks. He wakes up each morning begging to not go to school, he's angry or he's upset or he's just quiet because he's broken down. Mornings are a big source of trauma for us as a family: am I able to get him into school? Is today the day he can't attend? What do I do about work? Who will look after him if I can't have time off work?*

*Sadly we had to change school after the first half term as no SEN plan was initially considered as school wanted 'to take a wait and see approach' even after us advising this would fail. My son had emotional based school non-attendance within 2 weeks, wasn't able to sleep and ran away from school gates twice. School did very little other than question our parenting and routines at home and telling us he must be in everyday and will get a detention if late.*

*Most of the issues have been with peers or because information about his needs was not shared by primary, or not passed onto teachers by the SENCo when I had flagged potential issues. He's also had massive problems with bullying which has caused school distress. His attendance is below 80% (never an issue in primary) and it has really impacted his mental health at home too. It has been a very difficult transition.*

### *School attendance over the transition to secondary school*

As the data extracts above indicate, attendance difficulties related to school distress were common among the sample. Pre-transition, the mean estimated attendance in Year 6 was 82.7% (*SD 22.1*), a pattern which remained broadly stable post-transition in Year 7 (mean attendance: 81.6% (*SD 29.5*). Figure 7 shows the proportion of children rated by parents/carers as having attendance difficulties. Pre-transition, 66% of the sample reported that their child had current or past difficulties attending school; post-transition this had increased to 74%.

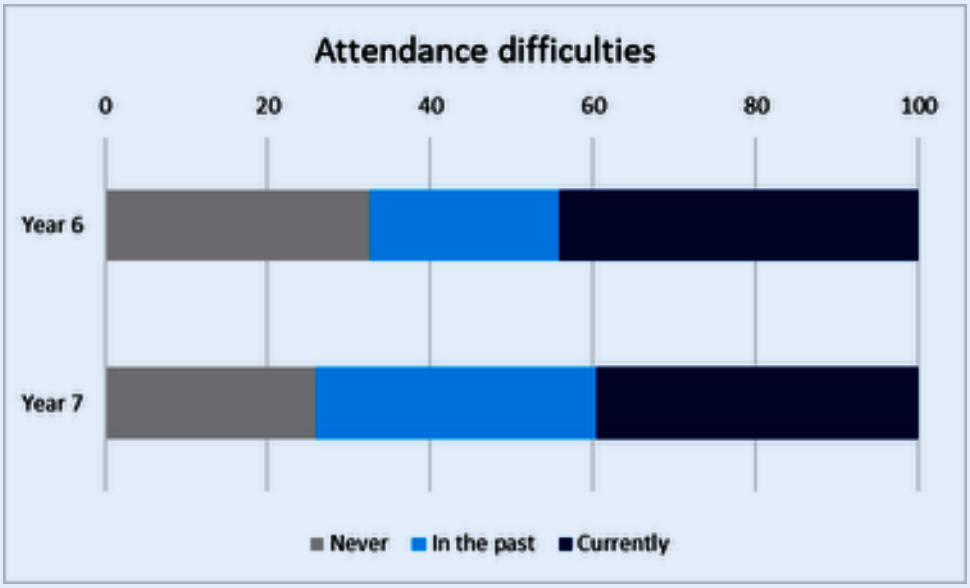



*Figure 7: Proportion of children with attendance difficulties in Year 6 and Year 7*

When asked to elaborate on children's struggles to attend school, parents referred to a lack of inclusive practice and understanding of neurodivergence among school staff. Several respondents also described a punitive response to school absence, with minimal attempt to understand the causes of non-attendance for individual children. For some children, absences were related to bullying in school.

*School not in position to meet SEN needs and therefore child remains at home where mental health and well-being can be supported and maintained.*

*Attendance at primary school dropped to 85% due to EBSA [Emotionally Based School Avoidance]. We were repeatedly sent letters but there was no meaningful intervention or proactive attempt from school with us/our daughter to improve/unpick the reasons.*

*All of his absences have been in relation to incidents of bullying or physical harm, there is no other reason why he misses school.*

### *What helps transition to secondary for children with SEND?*

At Wave 2, respondents were asked to identify factors that had supported positive transition for their child and/or supports that would have been helpful if they were experiencing a difficult transition. Table 3 summarises the supportive factors identified by parents/carers in free-text responses, alongside illustrative data excerpts.

**Table 3: Factors supporting transition as identified by respondents to the WP1 parent survey**

| Supportive factor | Illustrative response |
|---|---|
| Home-school communication | *Excellent home/school communication. A school welcome and knowledgeable about neurodiversity. Good home support.*<br>*He also has an outstanding form tutor, and the Inclusion Team have been responsive when we need help. Having a good (rather than combative) relationship between parents and school is immensely important, in my view.* |
| Information sharing between primary and secondary | *Follow on of SEN provision from primary to secondary. Interventions from primary were completely stopped and it was a sink or swim scenario to see if she still needed them.*<br>*More information sent up from primary school would have been valuable. Her secondary school have had to fill in a lot of gaps that should have been complete at primary.* |
| A consistent, trusted adult in place before the start of secondary | *Having an adult she has built trust with and who she feels comfortable knowing about certain worries.*<br>*More relationship building with her head and deputy head of year. They were unaware of various things until parents evening at the end of term 2.* |
| Additional opportunities to familiarise with secondary environment pre-transition | *He attended after school clubs there in Y6 and also a summer school for a week in July. This meant the teachers got to know him.*<br>*Lots of transition days – the whole year 7 did 3 full days, plus kids with SEND did an extra day, and there were 3 or 4 evening events. By the time September came round, she was looking forward to starting.*<br>*Better arrangements for children with SEND to familiarise themselves with the setting & staff. The single day was not adequate & child became lost in the setting as staff did not have suitable understanding of needs.* |
| Proactively enabling child to communicate their views | *The SENCo and Advisory Social Communication Teacher completed a Talking Mat to find out his views and what they could do to support him. The SENCo has been open to communication and responsive.*<br>*A completely different leadership approach, engaging, experienced and productive management with the capacity to take on the learner's viewpoint of the world and their struggles. The transition plan was adapted to the pace my son could cope with rather than the agenda of the school's teaching staff.*<br>*The school he is at now has done a lot of preparation work and really taken time and effort to get to know my son. Active listening that everything he had to say was said was meaningful and with purpose.* |
| Siblings or friends in school to support psychological safety | *Being grouped with particular children from primary and equally being kept away from other children from primary.*<br>*Having a sibling at school with him for emotional support. Close friends and family in the same class would have been fantastic but they split him into a different class from his familiar school peers and he had to start over.* |
| Parental advocacy | *Being on and on at the school to ensure everything is in place.*<br>*Sharing her pupil passport with all adults involved. Me having email contact with all teachers at all times.*<br>*My persistence.* |
| School understanding masking | *School aren't always supportive when we have had issues at home because they don't see any issues at school.* |
| Neurodivergent representation and peer support | *Social / peer groups for neurodivergent children* [would help].<br>*A state school which caters for children who seem normal but struggle with neurodivergence and need to learn in a [different] way. Rest breaks and less academic pressure.* |

## Summary of Work Package 1

In this two-wave survey of parents/carers of children with SEND – almost all of whom were identified as neurodivergent – a mixed picture of the primary-to-secondary transition emerged. Families tended to select secondary schools based on indicators of nurture and inclusion rather than academic reputation or convenience. At the end of primary school, many parents/carers were unsure about how their child would cope with the move to secondary, expressing concerns about how they would be understood and supported in a larger school environment populated by many more school staff than in primary school. They were least confident about how their child would settle in socially with peers. Respondents were especially worried about transition if their child displayed internalising difficulties (e.g., anxiety, depression), demand avoidant behaviours and/or if they were unhappy in their primary school setting. Conversely, if parents/carers rated their child's current school environment positively, they were less likely to have concerns about transition.

At the group level, the reality of transition was more positive than had been expected nine months earlier. There were many examples of children who were doing well in Year 7, with respondents noting individual members of secondary staff (often SENCos or year leads) whose support had allowed their child to settle into the new environment. However, a substantial minority reported that the transition to secondary had been "a disaster" for their child, citing unrealistic expectations, an increase in demands, and a lack of relational practice as contributing factors. Again, young people with high levels of emotional difficulties and demand avoidant profiles were at elevated risk of negative transitions, and hyperactivity was also negatively related to transition outcomes. According to parent/carer accounts, children who had a negative experience of the transition to secondary often struggled to attend school; the proportion reported by parents/carers to have current or past attendance difficulties increased over the nine-month time window of the study.

Parent/carer-identified factors to support transition were generally simple and achievable, and included: positive home-school communication; effective information sharing between primary and secondary settings; increased opportunities for children to familiarise themselves with the secondary environment, and the identification of a consistent trusted adult for the child to speak to before the transition to secondary. However, it was clear that these measures were not consistently in place across schools, suggesting a "postcode lottery" of support for children with SEND through the transition to secondary. When support was absent, the detrimental impact on children's mental health and access to education could be significant.


# Work Package 2: Longitudinal qualitative study with neurodivergent young people

## Objectives

WP2 comprised a longitudinal qualitative study with a small cohort of autistic and multiply neurodivergent pupils, following their school journeys from the end of primary school (Year 6) through the first two years of secondary school (end of Year 8). Five waves of data collection with young people were supplemented by three waves of interviews with parents to gather a holistic picture of school experiences.

The objectives of this study were:

- To develop individualised, creative data collection methods that allow young people with a range of communication profiles to participate authentically;
- To understand young people's first-hand perspectives on positive and negative aspects of transition and the first two years of secondary school;
- To identify potential causal mechanisms that influence positive outcomes (e.g., belonging, wellbeing) and negative outcomes (e.g., school non-attendance, academic disengagement) of transition to secondary for individual young people.

## Method

*Participant recruitment and sample characteristics*

Year 6 pupils were recruited to the study via the SENCo Forum in the City of York. SENCos were asked to pass information on the study to families of children whom they judged to be at risk of a difficult transition to mainstream secondary school based on their experiences supporting them at mainstream primary school. Consent forms were received from parents of 13 young people.

Before data collection began, a member of the research team arranged a preliminary call with parents to find out about their child's interests, communication preferences, individual strengths and challenges and potential behavioural indicators of stress. This information allowed the researchers to plan individualised research protocols. A familiarisation session with each child then took place to affirm their interest in the research. During these meetings, the young person and researcher shared details of things that were important to them through writing, drawing, spider diagrams or discussion (Figure 8). These familiarisation meetings were particularly important for autistic children, who might struggle with new people or situations, to build trust and rapport in a low-pressure environment. Anonymised profiles of the 13 participating children are provided in Table 4.

*Figure 7: 'About me' spider diagram completed during a familiarisation session by a researcher (alongside a child completing the same activity)*


**Table 4: WP2 participant profiles**

| ID | Gender | Additional needs | Specific considerations and preferences | Interests |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Male | Autism, ADHD, tics when stressed | Likes to be active; Visual timetables are useful; Fine in a group | Transformers, Fortnite |
| P2 | Male | Autism | Use clear language and break questions down; Check understanding/ rephrase where needed; Doesn't need visual timetable but likes to be kept informed; Happy talking once comfortable but can feel anxious; No video diaries; Can struggle with change. | Lego, racing cars, Fortnite, YouTube |
| P3 | Male | Autism, English as an additional language (EAL) | Very happy chatting; Easily distracted and can quickly lose motivation or interested if bored; Sensitive to sound, light and touch; Enjoys anything technical e.g., clocks and computers. | Electronics, computers |
| P4 | Male | Autism, ADHD | Can be anxious and quiet, need to build rapport so he feels comfortable, then has plenty to say; Enjoys art activities and can focus well on these; Prefers to understand activities and expectations in advance. | Art/Drawing, Cooking, Swimming |
| P5 | Male | Autism | Chatty and communicative, enjoys talking to adults; Can focus for a short time then needs movement breaks; Struggles with fine motor skills; Doesn't enjoy drawing or writing, prefers active activities or just talking. | Music, drumming, toy soldiers |
| P6 | Female | Autism | Communicative once comfortable; Doesn't like eye contact; Can become nervous or stressed in unfamiliar situations or when demand is high; Visual schedule would be useful; Doesn't like writing | Drawing, Harry Potter, mythical creatures |
| P7 | Male | Autism | Would prefer a drawing-based method; Doesn't like eye contact and this can make him very anxious; Needs structure, visual schedule would be useful; Fidgets with fingers/hands when feeling distressed; Can struggle identifying and controlling emotions | Drawing, Pop its, computers/ electronics |
| P8 | Male | Autism, hypermobility | Enjoys drawing and artwork; Happy to talk with adults | Dinosaurs, Netflix, Disney |
| P9 | Male | Autism, ADHD | Activity alongside interview would be useful e.g., card sort/photovoice; Use clear language and structured questions, likely to give short answers to broad questions; Doesn't enjoy drawing | Football, being active, science |
| P10 | Male | Autism, ADHD, Tourette syndrome, selective mutism | Enjoys drawing and creative writing; Can withdraw or stop talking when anxious or stressed; Take time to build rapport | Drawing, Minecraft, Roblox, Stranger Things, YouTube |
| P11 | Male | Autism | Articulate and communicative 1:1 with adults; Can be anxious in groups or with other children; Benefits from structure and specific questions; May pick at fingers, shrug, or become less verbal when distressed; Games can help to distract when anxious | Ships, Lego, Marvel, mysteries |
| P12 | Female | Autism, Hemiplegia, Cerebral Palsy | Articulate and communicative once comfortable; Take time to build rapport, initially Use direct questions and clarify when needed; Less likely to talk about school when parents present; Activities to reduce pressure during interview could be useful (e.g., card sort, walking and talking) | Baking |
| P13 | Female | Autism | Enjoys talking with adults and very communicative; Would prefer not to miss lessons, so meet in break/lunchtimes where possible; Needs reassurance and positive feedback; | Learning, school, writing/drawing |

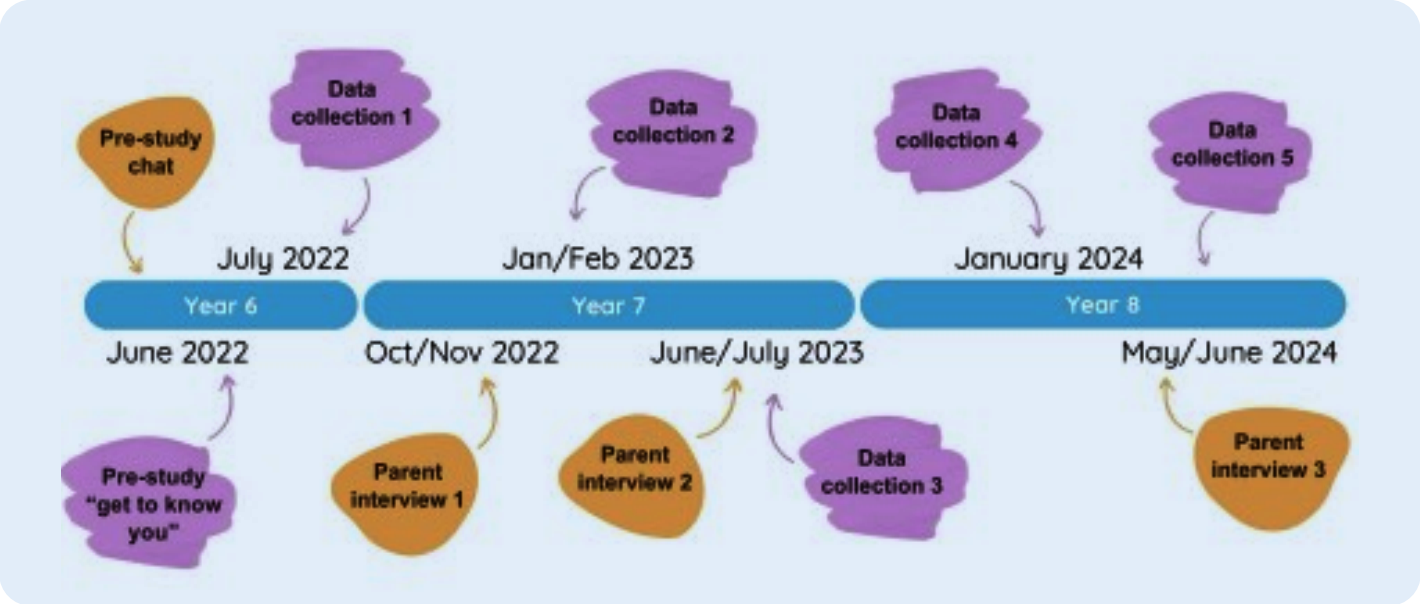



*Figure 8: Data collection points between Year 6 and Year 8*

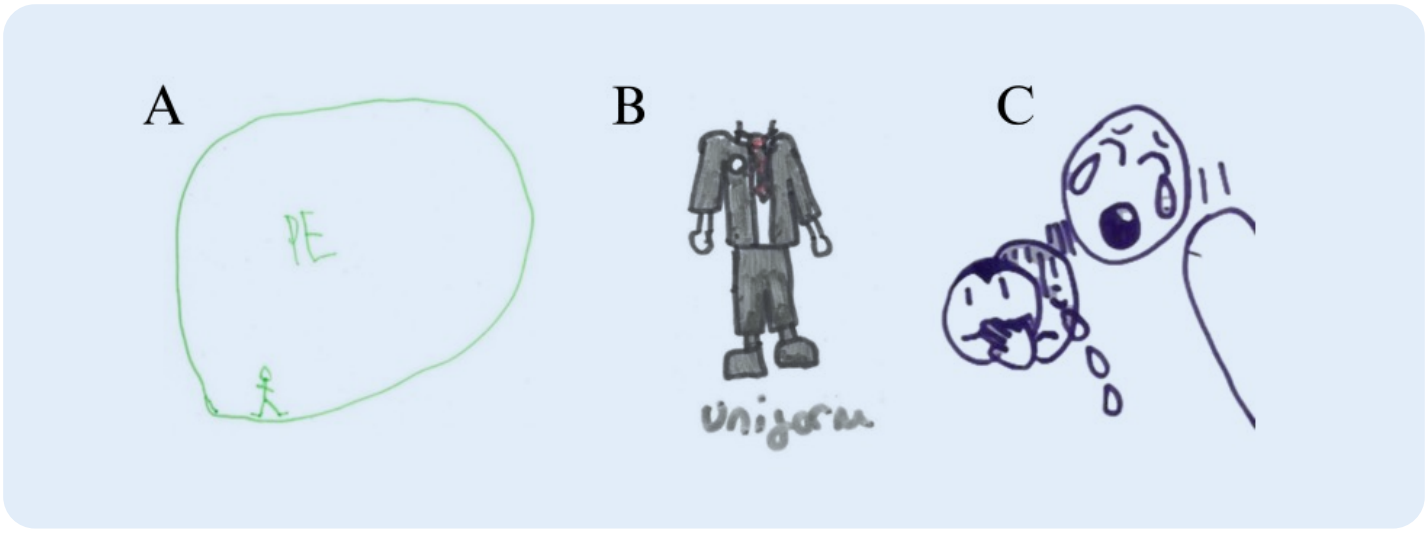
Data collection sessions were conducted five times with children and three times with parents over a two-year period from 2022 to 2024 (Figure 8). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, probing their experiences of transition (e.g., pre-transition concerns, support received from schools, perceptions of children's adjustment to secondary environment).

In each session, children were offered a selection of activities based on their individual profiles, as summarised in Table 4, and could choose which they wanted to do. These activities were designed to support reflection and discussion about their school life [31], and included:

- Draw-write-tell
- Photo elicitation
- Comic strip stories
- Walk and talk
- Card sort
- Statement sort
- Body mapping

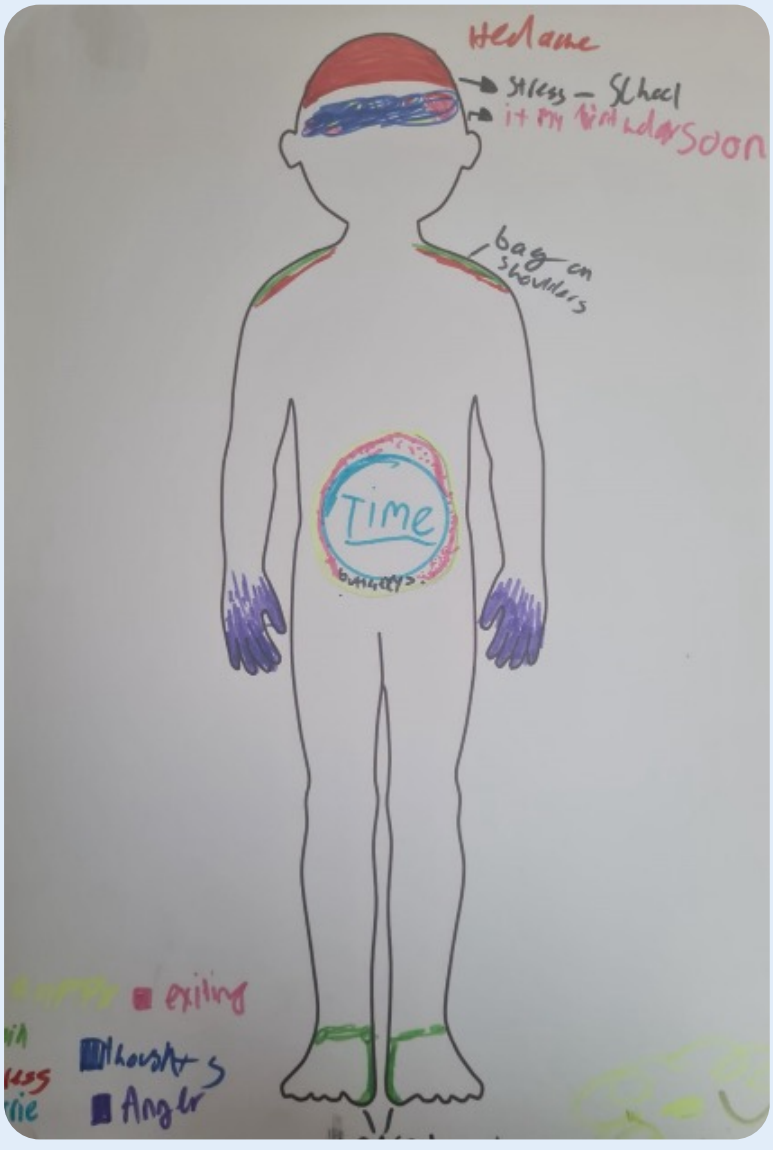
Young people assented to audio recording of conversations that took place during the activities. A selection of artefacts produced by children during the data collection sessions is shown in Figure 9.

*Figure 9: Creative artefacts produced by child participants in WP2*

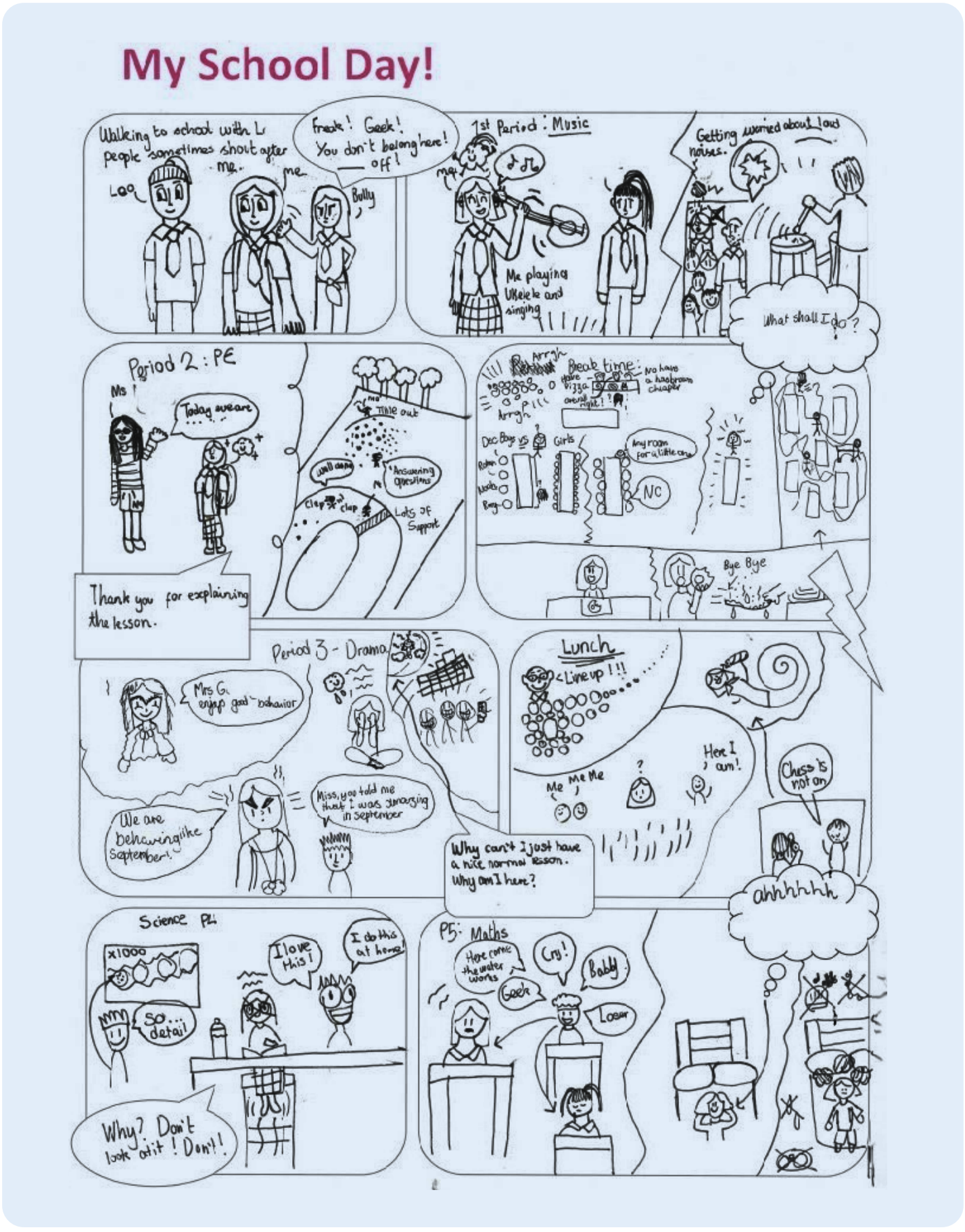



*Draw-write-tell – describing a huge PE field (A), a scratchy uniform (B) and masking true feelings (C)*

*Body mapping – how my body feels at school*



*Comic strip stories – a day in Year 7*



## Results

### Child perspectives

The 13 young people talked about a wide variety of school experiences over the two years of this study. There were examples of trajectories towards extended school non-attendance and significant mental health challenges by the end of Year 8, alongside cases where the transition to secondary school was experienced positively in terms of academic and social development.

Some common features across the cohort included:

- **Year 7 honeymoon** – young people often spoke positively about their new school at the start of Year 7. However, by the end of Year 7 and into Year 8, some became increasingly disengaged both emotionally and academically. This often seemed to be related to a withdrawal of support that had been in place during the immediate transition period.
- **Peaks and troughs** – all of the young people experienced periods at primary and/or secondary school that were very challenging. For most, this was offset by periods when they were enjoying school more (e.g., during the Year 7 honeymoon). Difficult periods were very often marked by perceived interpersonal conflict with peers or teachers.
- **Emotional burden** – recent research has identified that neurodivergent pupils are more deeply impacted by "commonly upsetting events" at school than their neurotypical peers. The interaction between increased exposure to these events and an intense response to them creates a pathway to mental health problems for these young people [32]. In our study, young people often experienced a high emotional burden over the transition to secondary school as they navigated a more demanding environment.
- **Extended transition** – getting used to the new school environment was still in process during Year 8 for many participants.

Here we identify sources of emotional burden in the school environment during the transition to secondary. We use young people's words to illustrate their experiences of commonly upsetting events and the impact on their developing self-esteem, belonging and wellbeing at school. Quotes are identified by participant number and year of interview (e.g., P4, Y6 = Participant 4 interviewed during Year 6).

### *Time pressure*

Young people described high anxiety related to time. Some were aware that they needed longer to process information than their peers, and so constantly felt under pressure to keep up with class work and school-related information more broadly. Timed tasks were a particular source of worry. Mapping out unstructured time, such as breaktimes, and waiting for long periods (e.g., while queueing for lunch) could also be difficult.

> It's like my brain's working at five kilo-bites a second, so it takes me like five seconds to figure out which button to press. [P1, Y7]

> At lunchtimes as well, I get really stressed. Because you have to queue up, and the queues are really big. And I like being at the front of the queue, or at least near the front, so I like getting in first. So I ask the teaching assistant if I can go a bit early with the teaching assistant, because that's what I worry about a lot. A lot of people probably won't really worry about that as much as me. [P5, Y7]

> I would have found textiles okay, if I'd actually been able to finish what I was making. So in Year 7 we were making a bag. And I did not get to finish that bag. Because I didn't have enough time. A bit crushing? Yeah. So I was gonna give it to my mum. But obviously, I couldn't finish it. So I couldn't give it to her. [P11, Y8]

### Unexpected changes

All of the young people struggled to cope with unpredictability to some degree. In the more complex environment of secondary school, unexpected changes happened often. Participants discussed last-minute changes to timetables, seating plans or extracurricular clubs that, although sometimes inevitable, sparked considerable anxiety that often went unnoticed by adults. Classes in which teachers were liable to pick pupils at random to answer questions were also cited as stressful. A key worker or other trusted adult to help young people navigate the school day, including late changes to expectations, could be a meaningful support.

> The Year 7 first set day, it was okay, it was nice, but they misinformed me. They said there's a cold queue and a warm queue [in the canteen], but then when I got into school there was a warm queue and then a takeaway queue, because they didn't want too many people in. So they had redesigned it and not explained any of it. [P9, Y8]

> Yeah I don't like not knowing. [One teacher] usually goes through the lesson plan. She doesn't go through it all, but she's a bit like "today we are…", so that gives me a bit of a happy cloud. It's like a cloud that's all stars and stuff. And then she's always really kind to me. So then that makes me happy. [P13, Y7]

> I was put in seclusion last week, because I shut down. I was so confused, because I wasn't told where I was actually going to sit because the seating plan had changed, and there was someone else's book in my seat. So, I was really confused to where I was going to be sitting in the seating plan in there. And then I was brought out, and then called to go to seclusion. I mean, seclusion was fine. It was quiet. I got to draw the whole time. [P10, Y8]

### Peer interactions and friendships

Navigating the more complex social context of secondary school was difficult for many participants; friendships were a particularly important concern for girls in this study. Two-way communication misunderstandings with neurotypical peers were described and often mulled over long after the event. Young people often felt that they were either not noticed or actively disliked by their peer group; there were several accounts of having been bullied or excluded among the cohort. The cumulative effect of difficult interactions with peers on participants' self-esteem could be significant, and they often interpreted interactional difficulties to be their own fault. In contrast, those who had access to "inclusion bases" within the school environment reported that friendships with autistic peers were meaningful and important.

> I just sort of wasn't really bothered by making new friends and just accepted that those were the two I was going to have. And [Friend 1] and [Friend 2] sometimes fight, which makes it really difficult because it's like, I don't know who to hang out with anymore. [P6, Y6]

> It's kind of hard to make new friends, especially when you're in the hub and you don't socialise out. I try to make friends but in the end I'm not very social. I kind of end up saying "hi" and then walking away. I don't seem to make many friends really, but I'm happy with the friends I've got at the moment. [P12, Y7]

> There's a boy in my class with autism as well and he's really nice and we're good friends, so he's really nice to me and he understands. I'd love it if everyone could really understand how different it is. [P13, Y7]

### 'Autistic' used as an insult

Developing a positive identity as a neurodivergent person is an important protective factor in adolescent mental health. Some young people in the study discussed autism in neurodiversity-affirming terms, likely drawing on positive messaging received via family, school and/or online forums. However, a positive autistic identity was undermined by the weaponising of "autism" as a pejorative term within the peer group and wider school community.

> It's more like autism is like a joke or an offence to some people, if that makes sense? I know I've got it. I just hate it. [P2, Y8]

> Most of them use it as an insult, like mostly in PE, like "this team's autistic" and stuff like that. [P4, Y8]

> I was in a Personal Development class the other day and we got a really weird topic. We got growing up and my teacher went like, "Why might people find it hard when they're growing up?" And someone yelled "autism" out in the middle of the class and everyone started laughing. But like hardly anyone knows that I have it, only my closest friends. [P13, Y8]

### Teacher understanding of neurodivergence

Young people were also highly aware of teachers' responses to them and often perceived that they were disliked by adults in the school environment. Daily interactions with many more teachers and support staff at secondary school meant that pupils spent a lot of mental energy working out different teacher expectations. Teachers' understanding of autism was perceived to be variable. When individual teachers took a relational approach, this made a tangible difference to how young people felt about school.

> [You know when teachers understand autism] because, they come over to me in class and they make sure that I'm doing okay. And, some of them don't really do that, and just sit at the front of the classroom and tell everyone what to do. [P9, Y8]

> She was the one that most understood my, like, problems and all that. Like, when I was off for a bit, she emailed me saying, "Oh, I hope you're all right, hope you had a nice day." And she was really nice. [P12, Y7]

> There's this thing when he tells me to stop with my tics. So I had this clapping tic once, which I couldn't stop. He told me to stop, right. Which you're not supposed to tell someone to stop, otherwise it'll get worse. So yeah. [P10, Y8]

### The home-school boundary

Getting used to increased homework demands through the early years of secondary school was a challenge for many young people. Sometimes this was linked to the executive function skills needed to remember and complete different tasks. At other times, it was the idea of bringing schoolwork into the home environment which was identified as problematic, because home was seen as a necessary sanctuary in which to recover from the stresses of the school day. Opportunities to decompress in a quiet environment at school were inconsistent; some participants spent break times in the school library or inclusion bases, while others struggled to find safe spaces at school. It was therefore important to young people to keep activities and expectations associated with school separate from the family home.

> So I find homework to be just schoolwork and I'm bored with schoolwork at school. So doing schoolwork at home really stresses me. So I have to do it at school. But that means I have to stay longer at school. [P8, Y7]

> Homework is too complicated. It's because you get a [negative] comment if you don't do your homework and sometimes I forget to check and then I get comments. I think what would make homework better would be if I had a reminder so I know when to do my homework and when it's due. [P7, Y7]

> I don't see the point of it, because weekends are meant to be about like relaxing and unwinding from the stress of going to school all week, but now I've got work to do. And also I don't think homework makes a difference, because Finland doesn't have homework in their education system. [P11, Y7]

### Disruptive behaviour in the classroom

Pupil behaviour that disrupted learning in the classroom was a commonly cited source of stress for the young people. Participants reported increasingly disruptive peer behaviour from Year 7 to Year 8. Seeing peers break rules or disrespect teachers could be experienced as deeply uncomfortable, and many participants spoke about their fear of teachers shouting. The unpredictability of these group dynamics meant that classroom environments did not always feel safe. Some young people reflected on how feeling under threat impacted their own behaviour, such that 'meltdowns' or reactions likely to be perceived by others as defiant were more likely.

> Then sometimes she's really angry. I'm a bit worried that I've done something bad. She gets a bit angry. She like, makes her mouth really small and she like stares at us. [P13, Y7]

> I used to be able not to [get distracted by disruptive behaviour] but now I really do, because I just don't see in the worth in the lesson any more if I can't learn. [P2, Y8]

> I'm sat next to someone who is like, throwing paper balls around class and kind of like, it's really annoying. Then and they keep asking me for the answers to stuff and yeah, I don't really want to give the answers to them, because I don't think it's right. [P11, Y7]

### Reward and punishment behaviour management systems

Many secondary schools implement behaviour management systems predicated on principles of reinforcing positive behaviour and implementing escalating sanctions for repeated misbehaviour. Although many young people in the study had received no, or very few, sanctions in Year 7 and Year 8, these systems could be a source of extreme anxiety. Some young people reported being "terrified" of breaking a rule and receiving a negative comment; others reported that they had received sanctions for behaviours linked to neurodivergence that they felt they had limited control over (e.g., forgetting equipment, uniform infractions linked to sensory sensitivities). By contrast, relational approaches to behavioural issues were noticed and appreciated by the young people.

> [With autism and ADHD] it's like punishment won't do anything, just destroy your self-esteem. [P4, Y6]

> I feel like it's the worst thing ever. Everyone's like, oh it's just a negative. I'm like, you're kidding me? You get a warning and then you get a negative. If you carry on, you get a Stage 3. If you carry on, you get a Stage 4. I don't want any of those. [P13, Y7]

> If I was a teacher, I'd still listen to school rules, but I think I'd be a more nice teacher. So if someone did something, I'd give them a warning before I actually gave my verbal. So they have a second chance. [P7, Y7]

## Sensory stressors at school

Secondary school environments are typically busy, placing heavy demands on sensory processing. The young people in this study talked about sensory stressors including crowded corridors, smelly changing rooms, loud school bells and uncomfortable school uniform. They expended effort working out how to manage or avoid aspects of the school environment that they knew might lead to sensory overwhelm. Physical education, music, and food technology classes were cited as challenging by some young people, with transitions between classes – including changing for P.E. – often causing the most sensory stress.

> Sometimes it can get a bit overwhelming with everyone crowding each other in the hallway, which is why I have the five-minute pass, so that I can get to my lessons without just like having a mental breakdown because everyone's pushing and shoving each other. So if I get to my lesson, I'm already there and I don't have to worry. [P7, Y7]

> I don't like wearing black. With the colour, like sun [absorbs] it more, like makes your skin burn basically under your clothes. [P10, Y6]

> [Teachers] try their hardest to make sure that like people don't spray any perfume in class, because I remember one time that happened during a test and I had to run outside really quickly because I could not breathe at all and it was horrible. [P11, Y8]

## Using coping strategies vs fitting in

Many young people expressed a strong preference not to be marked out as different. This could lead to reluctance in accepting support offered by school staff. For example, while many used a pass to leave classes early and avoid crowded corridors during transitions between classes, others refused this adjustment on the basis that it would make them look "weird". Therefore, young people often oscillated between wanting additional support from teachers to help them cope with school demands and rejecting support in fear of how it would be judged by peers. When support was perceived as infantilising, it was likely to be rejected. Some young people reported that their own regulation strategies (e.g., doodling, fidgeting) were responded to punitively by teachers.

> The last mildly important test we did I was told that I could go sit outside, and they kind of said "You can go sit outside so that your TA can read the questions out to you" and part of me was screaming, "I can read. I do not need somebody to read these out for me." I think it would be that sometimes we want our own space, but sometimes we want someone to help us. I don't really know how to find the difference. [P6, Y8]

> She was shouting at me. I wasn't speaking like loud enough. But I had my earplugs. When I put them in, and then usually I get really quiet in them because I'm usually overwhelmed when I put them in. So she was yelling at me. And then I just got really, really, really stressed and scared and I didn't know what to do." [P13, Y8]

> I don't really like the adults much because like a couple of them force you to stop fidgeting and to make eye contact. [P10, Y7]

## Parent perspectives

At the start of Year 7, parents often reported that their child's transition to secondary had gone better than expected. Parents generally expressed positive perceptions of staff-pupil relationships in the early stages of secondary school. By the end of Year 7 and into Year 8, however, some reported that their child was experiencing more difficulties at school. Parents' descriptions of these difficulties often tallied with young people's accounts (as described in the previous section: sources of emotional burden in school). Parents were also able to provide insights into aspects of the transition process that were less visible to children (e.g., statutory processes). Here we outline key themes from parent interviews that supplement children's insights.

### Home-school communication

Parents talked about the difficulties in receiving and sharing key information about their child with the secondary school setting. While there were examples of effective home-school communication, parents were often unsure about who to contact when issues arose or felt that problems could have been prevented if they had been made aware of emerging issues at school earlier. Parents frequently acknowledged competing pressures on schools, the rising level of SEND need, and staffing changes in mitigation of poor communication. Nonetheless, there was a commonly expressed desire for one consistent point of contact at secondary school, who could engage with parents in collaborative problem solving, or feed back to them when things were going well.

> I've never met the SENCo or heard of them. I don't even know who it is. She hasn't got a form tutor at the moment either, and I don't have any of her class teachers' emails or anything. I've only got the head of year's email. It feels really silly to be emailing the head of year being like, "Oh she didn't sleep last night and she was sick because she's so worried". I could do with someone to just check in about her. [Parent of P13, Y7]

> The only way we got a meeting with anybody at school was because her attendance was so poor that the attendance office was sending those lovely threatening letters of fines and what have you. We then said, "well, you know, help us. We're doing what we can." [Parent of P12, Y8]

### Information sharing between primary and secondary settings

Positive transitions were facilitated when information was shared between the primary and secondary settings in advance of the young person starting in Year 7. This was more likely to happen when an EHCP was in place. In contrast, some parents reported that a "wait and see" approach was adopted, which meant that supports that had been tried and tested at primary were not in place at secondary. This could lead to problems escalating quickly.

> P5 had actually an amazing amount of support for transferring into secondary school. If you think about all the different people that have been involved, from [secondary school] to [primary school] to us, to people from the Council and the SEND transport department. He literally couldn't have had better support. But I do sometimes wonder about the kids who don't have an EHCP but do have anxiety or whatever it is, you know? [Parent of P5, Y7]

> The problem is primary school didn't send anything in support at all. None of the records of all the times where she'd tried to escape or she'd just hit me when she'd been really anxious, none of that. None of that got through so [secondary] had no idea. [Parent of P12, Y7]

### Reactive support

Relatedly, some parents felt that intervention was only considered when children had begun to struggle, for example with attendance, or behaved in ways that impacted teachers or peers. This caused frustration when parents and/or staff at primary school had knowledge of preventative strategies (e.g., decompression breaks, check-ins) that could have been implemented from the start of secondary school. In some cases, the relationship between the family and the secondary school became adversarial as a result of perceived failure to anticipate young people's needs.

> I think I probably would have liked a bit more support [through transition]. Sometimes it's been a bit reactive rather than proactive. [Parent of P10, Y7]

> I feel very deceived. Both the primary school and myself were absolutely delighted with all the support that was going to be available for him at secondary school. [In reality] the recurring theme is that it is reactive and it's only available when he knows he is in a position to request it. As such he's had to find his way an awful lot and he's made a lot of mistakes that if somebody had been there earlier, he wouldn't have. The family, the peer relationships and his self-esteem have been fundamentally damaged by a lack of proactive support. [Parent of P9, Y8]

### Flying under the radar

When children tended to be highly anxious without showing externalising behaviours, parents were particularly concerned about their child's academic and pastoral needs going unnoticed, and therefore unsupported, at secondary school. There was a general perception that support from teaching assistants and SEN teams was prioritised for pupils whose behaviour caused difficulties for other people in the school environment. Parents of highly anxious children reported seeing the signs of school-related distress at home, for example in frequent meltdowns or increased isolation. However, young people expended so much effort "holding it together" at school that teachers were often unaware that they were struggling unless a crisis point was reached, often in the form of extended school non-attendance.

> They don't have enough people that can actually do all the SEN reviews, so it's always those that are screaming the most, whereas those that still have a My Support Plan but are less needy like [P8] seem to fall to the bottom of the pile. [Parent of P8, Y8]

> Although there's a TA in most classes of his, that TA is focused on two children who've got very significant needs. And he hasn't had the prompting and the structuring that he was used to in primary school and I think people have thought he's coping. [Parent of P9, Y7]

### Scaffolding self-advocacy

Parents were often concerned with supporting their child to develop the skills and confidence to self-advocate at secondary school. Some perceived that their children missed out on support that would make an appreciable difference to their wellbeing or academic progress because they lacked confidence or knowledge about who, how, and when to ask for help. Where young people were developing self-advocacy techniques by Year 8, parents felt that they were better able to tolerate the school environment.

> I think part of it is that she needs to be able to access that help a bit better and find a way to communicate that she needs help. But I think she's not then able to say those things. [Parent of P6, Y8]

> P8's confidence has grown quite significantly from a child that was trying to refuse school after the first national lockdown to now he is a completely different person. The fact that he's able to self-advocate a bit more leads to the confidence and independence. These are all really important life skills to go into work as a grown-up. [Parent of P8, Y8]

### The impact of masking

Many parents described the toll that the school day took on children's behaviour at home. Parents reported frequent episodes of shouting, crying, or young people needing to spend hours alone in their bedroom to decompress after school. There was a common perception that school staff were unaware of these emotional impacts, because young people worked hard to manage expectations and demands during the school day. Some parents described feeling conflicted about how to balance the mental health risks of masking with the potential for bullying if young people failed to fit in with peer group norms.

> His emotional regulation is obviously the biggest one. He masks. He hides himself in school and there have been regular instances where I have picked him and his brother up from school and he's burst into tears in the car or he's immediately releasing a scream. [Parent of P8, Y7]

> I think she's very sensitive. And I think kids are nasty at that age. I think she's an easy target because she cries. Which is sad because I don't want to say to her, "You mustn't cry," because nowadays you can't really say that to people. You must be talking about your feelings and be open. But I almost want to say to her, "Don't cry", you know because they'll do it more and more. [Parent of P13, Y7]

### Extended transition

There was a common perception among parents that the jump in expected independence between primary and secondary school was sudden and, in some cases, too much too soon for young people. For example, autistic pupils could benefit from more explicit training in the type of study skills and classroom behaviours that are expected in secondary settings. Scaffolded transition supports that were in place at the start of Year 7 were often reduced by Year 8. If done in consultation with families and in alignment with young people's readiness, this gradual move to greater independence could work well. However, when supports were removed suddenly and without consultation, this could cause further distress for young people and risk disengagement from school. Many young people were still acclimatising to the new school environment by the end of Year 8, indicating that transition is an extended process for neurodivergent pupils.

> You get reports that say, "Wish they'd contribute more". And it's not quite so straightforward for a kid with additional needs. You need to seek that interaction, ask them. You can't just wait for them to put their hand up. So they're clearly thinking about that. [Parent of P4, Y7]

> He was told he couldn't go into [autism unit] first things in the morning any more. That happened a few months ago and he found it very upsetting. He used to go in about 8.15, part of his morning routine, part of settling into the school day. But several months ago they said "You can't come in any more". I think this is because of high SEND intake in Year 7. Nobody communicated anything with me. [Parent of P8, Y8]

## Summary of Work Package 2

In this two-year longitudinal, qualitative study, we used flexible, creative methods to support a small cohort of autistic and multiply neurodivergent young people to share their experiences of the primary-to-secondary transition and first two years of mainstream secondary education. Young people's accounts were supplemented by interviews with their parents. In total, 100 data collection sessions took place over the two years of the study: 63 with young people and 37 with parents.

Individual trajectories during this sensitive developmental period varied widely. For some young people, the transition to secondary school was a positive change, supported by cross-agency collaboration and relational support from school staff. For others the move to a larger, more complex school environment was extremely challenging and there were examples of young people who were disengaging from school by the end of Year 8. In some cases, attendance at school was decreasing and significant mental health challenges emerging.

Across these diverse trajectories, there were some unifying factors. Transition was an extended process for neurodivergent pupils, often lasting well beyond Year 7. A short honeymoon period in the early months of Year 7 was common, underpinned by the novelty of a new school and the structured support provided for new students. Difficulties tended to emerge towards the end of Year 7 and into Year 8; these were consistent with the idea of increased "emotional burden" carried by neurodivergent students in mainstream school environments, as frequent experiences of commonly upsetting events interacted with intense emotional responses to these events [32].

This pattern was prominent in the young people's accounts of the early years of mainstream secondary education. They talked about social, processual and physical sources of anxiety at school that were not always visible to the adults around them. This included: time pressure, unexpected changes, difficult peer interactions and friendships, variable teacher understanding of neurodivergence, blurring of the home-school boundary, disruptive behaviour in the classroom, reward-and-punishment behaviour management systems, the weaponising of "autistic" as an insult, sensory stressors and the need to weigh up whether the use of coping strategies would mark them out as "too different". In isolation, none of these factors might be especially problematic, but in combination and repeated over time they could lead to serious negative outcomes, including deteriorating mental health and disengagement from school.

Parents supplemented young people's accounts, giving insights into the broader transition process and the impact of young people's experiences at school on their home life. They highlighted the importance of effective and collaborative home-school communication and information sharing between primary and secondary school. When their child was struggling, parents expressed concerns that they "flew under the radar" because they were quiet or seemed to be coping on the surface during the school day. However, the emotional impact was felt at home, where young people often showed distressed behaviours and high levels of anxiety that impacted their sleep and family relationships. Parents often perceived that support for neurodivergent pupils only became available when the pupil began visibly struggling. They felt that preventative, inclusive strategies would help to avoid young people reaching crisis point and therefore encouraged their children to develop self-advocacy skills.

Overall, this in-depth longitudinal study signals the importance of anticipatory, collaborative, cross-agency planning for secondary transition for neurodivergent pupils. Many of the difficulties that autistic young people face at school remain invisible to school staff, partly due to 'double empathy' barriers [33], i.e., the difficulty that people with widely differing dispositions and experiences of the world have in understanding each other's perspectives. Some triggers for anxiety at school for these young people may seem innocuous to others. To support autistic pupils to stay at school, reach their academic potential and develop a positive self-concept, above all a relational approach is needed; one that prioritises understanding individual experiences and working with young people and their families to co-design support strategies.

# Work Package 3: Co-produced resources and training

The final work package had two connected aims: the co-production of free and accessible resources, and provision of training for education professionals including SENCOs and teachers. In doing so, it sought to generate direct impact from the empirical studies and to increase understanding of the challenges of transition - and potential strategies to enable success - among the general public and professionals.

With respect to the first aim, a range of resources was developed and made publicly available. These included three animations, drawing on the expertise of the young people from Work package 2, which illustrate the experience of transition and what helps most, as well as structured and evidence-informed activities to facilitate adult-led preparation for transition. All of the resources were drawn together in an accessible toolkit that was shared by the local authority.

## Animations

Our project foregrounded participatory research practices throughout. This was particularly relevant for the development of the three animations, which sought to position the multiply neurodivergent young people as experts regarding their experiences of school transition. All pupils involved in the project were invited to participate in two in-person workshops that structured the co-production, followed by a 'premiere' of the animations. The animations focused on three elements:

- How Are You Feeling? School Transition Experiences for Pupils with SEND
- What Helps With Transition? School Transition Experiences for Pupils with SEND
- What Is Year 7 Like? School Transition Experiences for Pupils with SEND

At the initial stage, pupils' interview data from the first two phases of Work package 2 were transcribed, anonymised, and broadly collated to generate three possible areas for discussion at workshops. These were structured around how pupils might be feeling as they leave Year 6 and begin to prepare for Year 7; reflecting on what pupils felt was helpful having made the transition; and finally providing a sense of what the secondary school experience is like.

The anonymised data were printed out onto A3-sized paper and multiple copies distributed at the workshops where pupils discussed in small groups what they felt was important to include in the animations and how best they could be animated. From this, key quotations were identified and a more refined structure for the animations was developed. Pupils also met with the animator – Jason Kerley – who showcased some of his previous work to give a flavour of what was possible. Different character styles, colour palettes, patterns and fonts were presented, discussed, and voted on to ensure that the young people were leading on decisions.


*Figure 10: Scenes and materials from the animation coproduction workshop*

Following this workshop and the collaborative decisions taken, scripts – based entirely on the young people's words – were developed to generate audio for the animations. To protect anonymity, the final audio scripts were recorded by Year 6 pupils from a different primary school in York which was not involved in the study.

Once drafts of the three animations had been prepared by the animator, they were shared with the pupils at a second in-person workshop where they were able to feedback on what they liked and what aspects they would like to see represented differently. Ultimately, the co-production process resulted in these three animations:

The pupils, along with their families, were invited for a final time to the University for a premiere screening of the animations. The project team were able to explain about the co-production process and together we watched the final products.

*Figure 11: Links and still for the three co-produced STEPS animations*


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf2lH9AMidA


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heZUWi2y1YM


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz-N97UFZQc&t=13s

*Figure 12: Premiere screening of the STEPS animations for young people and families in York St John University's Creative Centre*


*Figure 13: STEPS transition toolkit*

https://padlet.com/jvincent310/steps-school-transition-toolkit-esoec2ryf5ryxez4

## Training materials

The animations, alongside other materials that were used across the project, were brought together in a free training toolkit, which was made publicly available to families and schools via Padlet. This included some explanation about the project, the three animations, additional transition information from the team, and transition activities that were those used among the pupils as part of Work package 1. These included:

- Transition card sorts
- Body mapping exercises
- My School Day comic
- Movement emotions activity
- Statement discussion scaffolds

At the time of writing, the toolkit has had over 2,474 visitors and 3,879 views. This indicates that the resources have been shared widely across the UK and beyond.

## Pilot training

The final element of  Work package 3 was the training of educational professionals. To date, the project team have conducted two 2-hour in-person pilot training workshops with professionals from schools across North Yorkshire.

The first workshop included SENCOs, teachers, senior managers, educational psychologists, safeguarding leads, and educational advisors from SENDIASS and the local authority. Delegates had an opportunity to hear more about the project's empirical findings as well as the potential solutions derived from data and our experience as a research team.

The second workshop focused more on parents and carers not connected to the project. This offered a vital opportunity for them to understand more about transition challenges but also draw on the practical activities to scaffold discussions with their own children.

In total, 53 delegates representing 28 schools or organisations enrolled on the pilot training workshops. After both sessions, a short survey was conducted to understand the initial impact of the workshop materials. All 22 respondents rated the workshop as [very/] useful and shared aspects that they found particularly valuable, including:

> *Ideas of how to collect pupil voice, tips and toolkits.*

> *Listening to real-life responses from children. The videos to share with staff.*

> *Time to reflect and discuss transition to secondary and reflect back on our processes.*

> *Hearing other people's experiences, the resources, the tips for supporting transitions.*

> *Some really interesting ideas and hearing the research that has been done on transitions was very useful.*

To ensure the sustainability of the project and its outcomes, the project team is currently working with partners at City of York Council to embed STEPS training within their SEND CPD offer for schools.

# Conclusion and recommendations

The transition from primary to secondary school is a critical developmental period for children, bringing substantial change, opportunity and challenge. National data indicate that the early years of secondary school represent a peak point for disengagement from school and extended school non-attendance. Children with SEND are likely to require additional support through this period.

The STEPS project triangulated insights from young people and parents over three work packages, using longitudinal designs, creative, accessible methods and coproduction to compile a rich picture of transition experiences and trajectories for pupils with SEND, with a particular focus on neurodivergent young people. Findings from Work packages 1 and 2 converge to show that the transition to secondary school is not universally difficult for pupils with SEND. In both studies, there were examples of young people thriving in the mainstream secondary school environment, with personalised and consistent support from schools. Often the reality of secondary school was more positive than parents anticipated in the pre-transition period.

Nevertheless, for a significant minority of neurodivergent pupils the transition to secondary school was very challenging and could contribute to mental health deterioration and school attendance difficulties. Across both empirical studies, children with internalising profiles, characterised by anxiety, perfectionistic tendencies and/or demand avoidance, were particularly liable to struggle within the more complex secondary school context. Young people identified a range of sources of anxiety in the school environment, including: time pressure, sensory stressors, negative peer interactions, punitive behaviour management systems, and variable understanding of neurodivergence among school staff. This picture resonates with the idea of a cumulative, increased “emotional burden” of schools for neurodivergent pupils [32]. Parents were concerned that their children flew under the radar when their behaviour was not disruptive to others, meaning that the extent of their struggle to cope went unnoticed at school. A brief ‘Year 7 honeymoon’ in the immediate aftermath of transition was often followed by an increase in emotional and academic difficulties through Years 7 and 8, illustrating how primary-to-secondary transition is an extended process for pupils with SEND.

The evidence from the STEPS project points to clear, actionable priorities for practitioners and policymakers. These are presented below as 10 practical recommendations, drawing on convergent evidence from the parental survey, longitudinal qualitative study, and co-produced outputs. There are various examples of excellent transition practice in UK schools; however, accumulating evidence indicates that this is not consistently in place across settings and regions. Collectively, these recommendations aim to reduce the likelihood of negative trajectories over the transition to secondary school for pupils with SEND by adopting a preventative approach.

### 1 Strengthen primary-to-secondary information sharing:

Schools should develop structured handover documents, including detailed information about SEND pupils' needs, strengths, and effective support strategies. Local authorities should establish accountability mechanisms to ensure these are followed consistently.

### 2 Extend and personalise transition preparation and support:

Secondary schools should offer multiple familiarisation opportunities tailored to pupils' individual needs, including early visits, meetings with key staff, and visual resources such as school maps, visual timetables or video messages from staff. Schools should treat Year 8 as still within the transition period, rather than a time when support can safely be withdrawn.

### 3 Assign every pupil with SEND a named, consistent key contact at secondary school:

Each pupil with SEND should have one identified trusted adult at their secondary school before they arrive who knows their profile, can liaise with parents, and is accessible to the young person throughout Year 7 and ideally beyond (e.g., a SENCo, form tutor, or teaching assistant). Pupils should be given explicit guidance on how and when this person can be contacted.

### 4 Prioritise anticipatory support and preventative approaches:

Coping and support strategies identified at primary school should be available by default from the start of Year 7, rather than offered reactively once a pupil begins to visibly struggle. Avoiding a 'wait and see' approach to support provision is likely to reduce school distress and disengagement in the early years of secondary school.

### 5 Facilitate conversations about feelings:

Accessible approaches that support pupils to identify transition-related worries and share concerns with a trusted adult is an effective preventative strategy. The STEPS toolkit contains resources (e.g., body mapping, comic strip conversations) that can help identify concerns that neurodivergent young people may struggle to articulate verbally.

### 6 Work collaboratively with parents to address problems:

Parents and school staff bring different, complementary expertise in how best to support neurodivergent young people. Regular, positive communication means that this knowledge can be harnessed to ensure support is effectively tailored and problems are addressed as they arise.

## 7 Engage in high-quality, ongoing neurodiversity training for secondary school staff:

All staff (not only SENCos) should receive evidence-based training on neurodivergent experiences, masking, demand avoidance, sensory processing, and the 'double empathy' problem [33], drawing on first-person perspectives of neurodivergent young people. Training should be updated regularly and incorporated into initial teacher education.

## 8 Review behaviour management systems for neurodivergent pupils:

Schools should review whether their reward/behaviour management systems account for neurodivergent profiles, and explore relational, trauma-informed alternatives, especially for behaviours directly linked to neurodivergence (e.g., uniform adjustments for sensory needs, forgetting equipment due to executive function difficulties).

## 9 Actively foster positive neurodivergent identities through peer education:

Schools should engage in peer education and neurodiversity-affirming curricula to address the stigma generated by bullying and the use of 'autistic' as an insult. Peer mentoring for neurodivergent students may also offer a useful preventative strategy.

## 10 Scale up access to co-produced, evidence-based transition resources:

The STEPS toolkit and animations, co-produced with neurodivergent pupils, offer accessible, freely available resources for families, schools, and professionals. Policymakers and local authorities should actively promote and embed these materials and the evidence within SEND CPD and transition guidance. The training model piloted in North Yorkshire should be evaluated and scaled up for national delivery.

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