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SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

By Dr Beth Saggars (QUT) and
Dr Wendi Beamish (Griffith University)

With one in every 100 children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it is highly likely that you may have a child with this diagnosis in your group from year to year.



Children on the spectrum experience difficulties with socialising with others, communicating their needs, and often display behaviours of concern. These difficulties make it challenging for them to actively engage with other children and adults in the home, at childcare, and within the community.

Two core practices can be implemented to create more supportive learning environments, and encourage positive and effective participation in everyday activities. They involve (a) making available visual supports and (b) explicitly planning and guiding transitions from one activity to another. These practices benefit not only children with ASD, but all young learners in your care.

A young child with ASD understands and responds better when information is supplemented with visual support. Presenting information visually is effective because it is:

- Long lasting, allowing for longer processing time.
- Easier for the child to filter out irrelevant information.
- Readily created by staff.
- Adjustable to suit individual needs.

A picture or photo can be used to provide extra information about classroom arrangements (activities, tasks, and time frames). This can also guide the child to the activities they need to participate in, or guide them with their next move. In this way, the visual support increases the child's attention to the most relevant aspects of the task.

Young children with ASD typically experience difficulty in shifting attention from one task to another, and struggle to accept change in daily routines. In turn, they have a greater need for predictability, and can become anxious when they do not understand what is happening next.

Transitions are a key activity in every childcare program (25 per cent of any day can be spent transitioning between activities). These transition times need to be pre-planned for children with ASD, with direct guidance being provided during the actual transition. Examples of this are:

- Using a visual support and verbal prompts to warn of upcoming changes.
- Giving one and five minute reminders of finishing time.
- Creating explicit transition rituals (music, specific chime, or auditory cues).
- Providing a time limit for the transition by employing a timer or visual countdown app,
- Having a peer assist or accompany the child through transition.

Doing things a little differently to better support children with ASD may make a big difference in your day, and will definitely help theirs.

