

Supporting Children on the Autism Spectrum Through Periods of Significant Change

School closures—planned or unexpected—can be confusing and stressful for children. Children may worry about routines, safety, friendships, and what comes next. The goal of staff is to help them feel informed, supported, and build skills to remain regulated while processing the change.

First, understand why change can be especially challenging for individuals on the autism spectrum.

Many autistic students rely on predictability to stay regulated. Change can cause:

- Increased anxiety when routines are disrupted
- Fear that something is “wrong.”
- New or increased difficulty with flexibility and transitions
- Overwhelm from new sensory or social expectations
- Frustration not understanding the why behind a change
- Distress about an unclear or unpredictable future

Executive Functioning Supports: Help students understand, prepare for, and navigate what’s coming.

Strategies:

- Use **visual schedules**, calendars, or countdowns to signal when change is approaching.
- Keep explanations **brief and concrete**.
- Highlight what **will stay the same or be similar**.
- Identify what choices have already been made and where they may be choice for the child in the future.
- Create a plan together for how to address questions as they come up: A ‘Parking Lot,’ a ‘Questions Box,’ a weekly letter from an individual or class to an Administrator

“Here’s what will be different... and here’s what will stay the same.”

“The closing is not a choice, but we *can* choose what your morning routine looks like at home.”

“If you feel unsure, you can come to me and we’ll look at the plan together.”

Sensory Processing Supports: Changes often come with new sensory demands (new room, new people, new materials).

Strategies:

- Talk through how sensory experiences might change at home or in a new learning space. Reinforce and remind the student that they have adjusted to new environments in the past!
- Practice or **role-play** the new environment ahead of time—videos, pictures, or walkthroughs.
- Allow the student to bring a **comfort item** or familiar sensory tool during the change.

Emotional Regulation Supports: Help students name, understand, and manage feelings around the change.

Strategies:

- Validate their feelings: “It makes sense this feels different or uncomfortable.”
- Use **emotion scales**, Zones of Regulation visuals, or choice boards to identify feelings.
- Teach and practice **calming strategies** (breathing, stretching, grounding).
- Create **social narratives** (“What happens when our schedule changes”) to normalize experiences.

“It’s okay to feel sad or worried about changing schools. Lots of kids feel that way.”

“Let’s take a slow breath together before we talk more.”

“If your feelings get big, you can tell me and we’ll take a pause.”

Social Communication Supports: Help students understand what to expect socially and how to communicate their needs.

Strategies:

- Provide **scripts or sample language** for asking questions or expressing uncertainty.
- Model what they might hear from peers or teachers during the transition.
- Teach and reinforce **advocacy skills**: “Can I have a break?” “Can you show me again?”
- Prepare them for possible social changes: new partners, new adults, new groupings.
- Encourage them to **repeat back** the plan so they feel secure and understand expectations.

“If you’re confused, you can say, ‘Can you explain what will happen tomorrow?’”

“If you miss your friends, you can say, ‘Can we set up a time to talk to them?’”

“If you want to check in with your teacher, we can say, ‘When can I see you again?’”

Remember:

- Change can be stressful—but predictable preparation reduces anxiety.
- Break changes into manageable, concrete, visual steps.
- Support students across all domains: executive function, sensory, emotional, social.
- Collaboration and consistency among staff helps the student feel secure.
- Students thrive when they know what to expect, have tools, and feel supported.