

Transition of children with Autism from early intervention setting to Primary School

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Background

A one year pilot study to evaluate transition outcomes following early intervention at the Autism Specific Early learning and Care Centres (ASELCCs) across Australia.

Importance of a positive transition to schooling in children with ASD

The transition to primary schooling is recognised by the Department of Education and Training as “*one of the most significant transition points in a person's life*” (DET website). An increasing body of evidence supports the notion that children who have a positive start to school are likely to engage well and experience academic and social success. There have been considerable efforts to improve the quality of transition to school, with the development of specific programs and training/information services.

The importance of a positive transition to school is amplified in children with a disability, but may also present extra challenges for the child, their family, and teachers. This is recognised through the DET *Transition to School for Young Children with Special Learning Needs* guidelines – however these guidelines are not specific to children with ASD, who are likely to have particular requirements. While an increasing number of children with ASD are included in mainstream public school classrooms, the majority still receive their pre-schooling in special education environments¹. Because the differences between specialised preschools and public schools are great and because children with ASD present with a unique cluster of difficulties, including difficulty adapting to new environments, the transition between such educational settings represents an important challenge for children with ASD, their families and the schools.

There is a paucity of empirical studies that examine the transition to school for children with ASD, and existing research on primary school transition has tended to adopt cross-sectional survey based methodology², rather than longitudinal designs with specific measurement of children's socio-emotional, adaptive, and cognitive/academic progress.

Thus, there is a need for further research of this type aimed at developing evidence based strategies to enhance the school transition process in ASD. The ASELCC cohorts offer a unique opportunity to evaluate the transition outcomes following early intervention and the determinants of such outcomes, since data is already available on the individual child profile, family characteristics as well as intervention variables. The CFOS is a great initiative that could be built on to provide longitudinal data in the Australian context which is sorely missing at present. There is also a great opportunity through the CRC Autism to expand the CFOS initiative to include transition outcome if DSS would be able to support this both strategically and financially. The process of transition is illustrated in Appendix 1.

Project aims

- To evaluate transition to school outcomes in a cohort of children with Autism who have received approximately 12 months of intensive intervention through ASELCCs prior to school entry.
- To determine the individual child characteristics as well as family and intervention variables that are associated with successful transition to school in children with ASD
- Develop evidence based guidelines for practice based on existing guidelines available in the literature and an environmental scan of Australian educational authorities' guidelines, peer reviewed and grey literature (to be tested in subsequent studies).

Significance

There is an important opportunity through the ASELCCs across Australia to follow up the current cohort of well profiled children who have received early intervention prior to transition to the school environment. Children typically receive the intervention in the 12 months preceding enrolment at primary school and children in these programs undergo comprehensive multi-model assessment at entry to and exit from the ASELCC that is uniform across the centres allowing pooling of data through the ASELCC national data base. Thus, this cohort provides a suitable group to be followed up into their school years to build evidence base as to long term outcomes. It is anticipated that children will transition from ASELCCs to the full range of available Kindergarten contexts (i.e., mainstream school; mainstream school + satellite/support class; autism specific special school; generic special school) and comparison of the process and success of transition in each of these contexts, controlling for the severity and other individual characteristics of the child will also be of interest. The longitudinal profile involving the course and outcome in the primary school years would also allow determination of the predictors of such outcome, which would value add to the determination of the different subgroups within autism under the subtyping project