

TRANSITION TO SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER FROM THEIR PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Miriam Slaná, Katarína Molnárová Letovancová, Barbora Kolková

Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Health Care and Social Work, Department of Social Work

INTRODUCTION

Transition to school is a new experience for children and their families as well as a challenge that involves several socio-emotional and behavioural areas. It is not a one-off activity but a long-term process. Autism is a specific disorder accompanied by particular patterns of behaviour, affecting the quality of communication, social interactions, or inclusion. Research undertaken on children with ASD transition to school refer to a greater risk of poor school outcomes including emotional and behavioural problems that may result in peer rejection or school exclusion. School transition of children with autism requires the creation of specific conditions with structured environment as well as structured time schedule and activities. Parents play a key role in the transition process.

Slovak context – the key factors:

- Weak support structure
- Lack of Learning Support Assistants
- Insufficient training and preparation of teachers of mainstream schools to work with children with disability
- Engagement of parents in the process of transition is equally important as involvement of specialists.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study was to explore **the parents' experience with process of their child with ASD transition to school**

RESEARCH METODOLOGY

This study utilized the qualitative method of interviewing for collecting data. Parents were asked to describe their experiences during transitions as well as share their sources of help. The transcripts of interviews were subjected to content analysis. In the first step, the entire text was subjected to sequential analysis and primary coding. The discussion texts were then further analysed by creating categories, which in the third step were matched with relationships to obtain a conceptual representation of the data pertaining to the parenting experience.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research sample consisted of 17 parents of children with ASD. The participants were chosen by an intentional sampling.

Participant	Gender	The Age of the Child	The Age at which the Child was Diagnosed	Typ of School	Attempt of Inclusion
1	Girl	10	Autism at 5y	Elementary School – Special Elementary School	**
2	Boy	8	Autism at 4y ADHD	Elementary School – Special Class in Elementary School	*
3	Boy	10	Autism 6y Epilepsy	Elementary School – Elementary School for Children with Autism	*
4	Boy	7	Autism 4y ADHD	Kindergarten + assistant / Elementary School	
5	Boy	9	Autism 4y Learning Disorders	Special Kindergarten / Elementary School	
6	Boy	9	Autism 3y	Elementary School – Special Elementary School	*
7	Boy	10	Autism 4y	Kindergarten / Elementary School + Learning Support Assistants	
8	Boy	7	Autism 4,5y	Special Kindergarten / Elementary School + Learning Support Assistants	
9	Girl	7	Autism 5y	Kindergarten – Elementary School + Learning Support Assistants	
10	Boy	11	Autism 5y	Elementary School – Special Elementary School	*
11	Boy	8	Autism 4y	Kindergarten + assistant / Elementary School + Learning Support Assistants	
12	Girl	7	Autism 6y ADHD	Special kindergarten / Elementary School + Learning Support Assistants	
13	Boy	7	Autism 3y ADHD	Elementary School	
14	Boy	6	Autism 4y Epilepsy	Special kindergarten / Elementary School	
15	Boy	8	Autism 7y	Elementary School	
16	Boy	6	Autism 5y	Elementary School + Learning Support Assistants	
17	Girl	7	Autism 4y	MŠ špeciálna / Elementary School + Learning Support Assistants	

*pokus o inklúziu – dieťa bolo najskôr prijaté do bežnej materskej školy/ školy ale neskôr muselo byť preložené do špeciálnej školy/ triedy/ školy pre deti s AU.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Although parents rated the transition process as stressful, they also identified positive sources of support that reduced this stress.



PARENTAL STRESS

Lack of systemic Problems Solution
Higher level of Anxiety and Concerns
School Accessibility
Stigma at School

FACTORS PROMOTING TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Positive Attitude of School Management towards Inclusion
Competences and Preparedness of Teachers and Learning Support Assistants
Accepting School Environment
Teamwork



CATEGORIES

PARENTAL STRESS

Parents **lack serious and reliable information** as well as guidelines concerning the suitable school with regard to their child's needs. They mostly search for the information on their own and often feel insecure and unsure whether their choice is the right one. Most parents experienced **a higher level of anxiety and concerns** in the transition period comparing to a previous time. Mothers reported that it had been **not possible to return back to work**, because they were required to come to school if needed. Transition process was such a stressful situation that it had **impact on partnership and family atmosphere**. The choice of school is considerably limited by the **school's accessibility** - not only in terms of physical but also in terms of technical equipment and professional competencies of staff in mainstream schools. Most of parents had to visit several schools to find one. Likewise, some of them states that they were confronted with the child's rejection at school. While parents would prefer local schools close to their home, in some cases they have to drive their child to school in neighbouring town, even longer distance. Parents also reported **stigma at school**.

FACTORS PROMOTING TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Positive attitude of school management towards inclusion - The school headmaster's willingness to accept the child was a key factor in decision making process. Schools run by headmasters with positive attitude towards inclusion, quite naturally influence the entire staff as well as whole cooperation. These schools are then open to cooperate with counselling centres and kindergartens that children attended. **Competence and preparedness of teachers and learning support assistants** - Another important factor that parents consider necessary for a successful transition are the teachers and learning support assistants themselves, who have experience and are professionally prepared (trainings) to work with children with disabilities. They have a major impact on how the children adapt to the environment and how will they be received by the peers due to their direct and daily contact with the children. **Accepting school environment** - All parents appreciate the building of an open peer - relationship between children with autism and their classmates. Parents indicated characteristics that are important for **teamwork**:

- The shared goals and agreed methods to fulfil the goals
- Regular and detailed communication with stakeholders
- Stable team

The multidisciplinary team, which remained unchanged throughout the process, or with only minor changes in members, strengthened the success of the transition process.

- Well-organized transition planning

Comprehensive and individualised transition plan specifically tailored to suit child's needs. It should begin far before child is entering the educational process.

CONCLUSION

The research showed that the process of transition of a child with autism into the school environment is directly influenced by causal conditions (sources of support) and intervening conditions (parental survival). The success of the transit process is a consequence of the sources of support, parental survival and planning, influenced by the experienced stressful situations of parents and children with autism throughout the transition process. The deliberate interventions of a multidisciplinary team and the timely planning of the transition together create a coherent system of services that can minimize the stress of the child and the parent resulting from the change.

AFILIATION

This paper is the output of project VEGA 1/0186/22 – „Identification of factors supporting the process of transition of children with disabilities into the education system from their parents' perspective “