



Navigating the Big Leap with Confidence:



A parent's guide to a
Smooth Primary to
Secondary School
Transition for Children
with Additional Needs

by AWWA Community Integration Service



Introduction

AWWA Community Integration Service conducts an annual workshop for clients transitioning to secondary school. The session primarily focuses on navigating challenges, setting expectations, improving time management, and fostering social and peer relationships.

For children in mainstream schools, the move from primary to secondary school is a significant milestone. For parents of children with additional needs, this transition can feel particularly daunting. The familiar, often protective environment of primary school gives way to a larger, more complex world of new faces, unfamiliar buildings, new ways of doing things and expectations.

But with careful planning, collaboration, and the right strategies, this change can be a positive step towards greater independence and confidence for your child.



Why This Transition Feels Different for Your Child

Children with additional needs, whether autism, ADHD, dyslexia, physical disabilities, or anxiety, often thrive on predictable routines. Secondary school presents new challenges:

Multiple Teachers and Classrooms: Moving around a large school and different classes throughout the day.



Think of your first day at a new workplace, trying to find meeting rooms, colleagues, and resources – it's tiring and confusing. For children, especially those who prefer routine, navigating different classrooms and teachers can feel like being lost in a maze.

Increased Academic Demands: Having to take more subjects, and therefore homework for multiple subjects. Having to take new subjects means having to learn new knowledge and skills.



Imagine suddenly being asked to juggle five new projects at work, each with different expectations and deadlines. That's what it can feel like for a student moving from fewer subjects in primary school to a heavier load in secondary school. Having to take new subjects means having to learn new knowledge, skills and additional homework.

Increased Organizational Demands: Managing a timetable, different books, class materials and subjects. Some schools have odd and even week timetables. Schools may also have lockers which requires students to organize, plan and manage the usage.



Imagine keeping two calendars – one for work and one for home – while constantly switching between them. That's how confusing alternating timetables and multiple books can be for students. And in some schools, there are odd/even week timetables and lockers – something new for students to learn to use.

Complex Social Dynamics: Navigating the teenage years, peers, groups, and new social rules. Many teenagers feel pressured to fit in and finding friends who are accepting. Having accommodations or pull out sessions in place can be a double-edged sword where your teen may feel stigmatized and self-conscious.



The teenage years bring shifting friendships, peer groups, and unspoken "rules" about fitting in. Your child may worry about who to sit with at recess, how to join a group conversation, or whether classmates will accept their differences. While accommodations or pull-out sessions provide vital support, they can sometimes make a teen feel singled out or "different."

Sensory Overload



Hallways that echo with footsteps, canteens filled with chatter and clattering plates, classrooms with buzzing lights – what may feel like “normal” school life to us can feel like chaos to a child with sensory sensitivities.

Understanding these pressures is the first step in proactively supporting them.



What You Can Do

Navigating the Big Leap with Confidence Primary → Secondary Transition Guide

Preparation	Practice	Support
• Start the conversation early – open-ended questions • Connect with SENO/ Form Teacher • Create an 'About Me' one-pager • Make it visual – visits, photos, social	• Rehearse routines – morning prep, school journey • Practice organization – packing checklists • Role-play social scenarios – asking for help, canteen • Gamify readiness – fun challenges	• Keep communication open – school & home check-ins • Support socially & emotionally – CCA, friendships • Use tools – traffic-light check-ins, emotion wheels • Celebrate small wins & ensure downtime at home

REMEMBER

Transition is a marathon, not a sprint. Celebrate progress, stay calm, and take small steps – you and your child are ready!

ATTENTION PLEASE!



Your Step-by-Step Transition Plan

Phase 1: Preparation

1. Start the Conversation Early and Openly

- **Talk:** Use open-ended questions to explore hopes and fears towards the transition.
"I remember feeling unsure. How are you feeling about secondary school?"
"What are you most excited about?"
"What's one thing you think might be tricky?"

Use your own experience to open up conversations. Instead of "You must be nervous," try "I remember feeling a bit unsure about big new places. How are you feeling about secondary school?"

- **Connect:** Identify and contact the new school's **SENO/ Form Teacher/ Year Head. Teachers** can prepare a short welcoming video or infographic or slides to introduce the new environment. This will be useful for **ALL** students. Get support from your **Social Worker** who can connect you to resources and support you need.
- **Share:** Create a simple "**About Me**" profile for your child. Include strengths, needs, and what works. Communicate with the primary school SENO about sharing with new secondary school on how your child was supported or access accommodations provided



2. Make it Visual and Familiar

- **Visit:** Attend the school's Open House or request for a separate orientation where you and your child can explore and navigate around the school. (Especially when your child may have accessibility needs)

- **Create visual/ social stories:** Have photos of the new school (gate, hall, canteen) Narrate a typical day.



Your Step-by-Step Transition Plan (Cont'd)

Phase 2: Practice

1. Master the Routines

- **Rehearse** the new morning routine and journey to school. (i.e walking, taking bus/MRT, cycling)
- **Practice** organisational skills: Involve and get your child to familiarize themselves with the new subject's books. **Turn packing into a game** – develop and a checklist of items or phone reminders on what they need to pack in their school bag.
- **Role-play** social scenarios: Practice ordering food at the canteen, asking for help, finding a seat in canteen, finding classrooms or introducing themselves.



Phase 3: Support

1. Keep Communication Channels Open

- **With the School:** Establish a regular scheduled check-in with the SENO for the first term. This helps catch small issues before they become big problems.
- **With Your Child:** Debrief each day but keep it low-pressure. Ask specific but easy questions like: "What was the best thing that happened today?" or "Tell me one interesting thing you learned." Listen more than you talk.

2. Support Socially and Emotionally

Your child's world is expanding, and fitting in becomes more important.

- **Encourage CCA** based on interests to make friends naturally.
- **Talk about friendships**, bullying, and peer pressure. Teach them who to tell. (trusted teacher, SENO, you)
 - Be observant for changes in mood or reluctance to go to school.
- **Ensure home is a calm haven** for downtime. The new day is exhausting!



Your Step-by-Step Transition Plan (Cont'd)

Phase 3: Support (Cont'd)



3. Be Their Calm Anchor

- **Manage Your Anxiety:** Your child will take cues from you. Project calmness and confidence in their ability to cope.
- **Celebrate Small Wins:** Got to class on time? Made it through the week? These are huge achievements. Acknowledge them.
- **Schedule Downtime:** The new school day will be exhausting. Ensure home is a calm, predictable haven with plenty of time to decompress after school.

Conclusion: You've Got This

The transition to secondary school is a marathon, not a sprint. There will be good days and challenging days. Remember, you are the expert on your child. By planning ahead, building a strong partnership with the school, and focusing on your child's emotional well-being, you are laying the foundation for a successful and happy secondary school experience.

Take a deep breath. You and your child are ready for this next great adventure.

