

TRANSITION TO MAINSTREAM SECONDARY SCHOOL

Supporting Autistic Young People



A Guide for Parents/Carers

by Jess Garner Founder/Director of GROVE

GROVE'S FOUNDER/DIRECTOR:



- ~ Late identified **Autistic, ADHD'er**
- ~ Former mainstream secondary **teacher** / middle leader of 17 years
- ~ **Parent** to Autistic, ADHD, PDA children unsupported in mainstream education
- ~ BA Hons English ~ PGCE English/Drama & QTS ~ **MA Autism** (note: 2022-2025)
- ~ Level 3 Supporting Children, Teenagers & Young Adults with **PDA** ~ Level 4 ADHD
- ~ Trauma Informed Practice trained
- ~ Designated Safeguarding Lead ~ Safer Recruitment trained ~ Enhanced DBS with barring list

"I hope you find this document useful! It should help you consider the transition up to the first week of term - for support with reasonable adjustments beyond that stage, please see page 18."

It's also wise to have a look at the professional's guide as it will compliment much of the information here.

I truly hope that your young person's transition is as smooth as it can be."

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Jess
(she/her)

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PART 1: COLLABORATING WITH THE PROFESSIONALS

A REMINDER OF THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

PRIMARY TO SECONDARY TRANSITION SHOULD:

- BE COMPREHENSIVELY PLANNED
- CENTRE & INVOLVE THE YOUNG PERSON
- DRAW UPON UP TO DATE, AFFIRMING, AUTISTIC-LED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AUTISM
- DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS
- ANTICIPATE BARRIERS
- EXTEND TO THE WHOLE-SCHOOL

I recommend that you read that guide and consider what approaches you feel that the school (both secondary and primary) should be taking to support your young person. This guide goes into more depth than the summary on the next few pages.

Being realistic, sadly it may not be possible to get them to do everything so perhaps catagorising into 'must', 'ideally' and 'wish' might be worthwhile.

Here is a direct link to the other guide (please do download it and also feel free to email it to both your primary and secondary schools):

TRANSITION TO MAINSTREAM SECONDARY SCHOOL - Supporting Autistic Young People - A Guide for Education Professionals

SUMMARY: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

BE COMPREHENSIVELY PLANNED

- Ask the school to share their transition plan early and in full.
- Request that the plan remains flexible to accommodate your child's evolving needs.
- Ensure you have a clear point of contact at the new school, including availability during the summer holiday.
- Inquire about opportunities for your child to visit the school multiple times before the start date.

CENTRE AND INVOLVE THE YOUNG PERSON

- Ensure your child is actively involved in all planning stages, using communication methods that suit them.
- Advocate for your child's preferences in language, sensory needs and communication styles to be respected and upheld.
- Request that staff honor your child's experiences without requiring professional reports to validate their needs.
- Encourage the school to consider your child's full, intersectional identity.
- Encourage the school to consider co-occurring neurodivergence and medical conditions if applicable.
- Ask about staff training on current, neuro-affirming understandings of autism - find out the source of the training so you can see the approach and if it was led Autistic individuals.

DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS

- Request a small, consistent team of staff members to support your child, rather than relying on a single individual.
- Ask about opportunities for your child to connect with other Autistic students, either currently at the school or also transitioning.
- Ensure that you, your child and key professionals are all involved in the transition planning process.

ANTICIPATE BARRIERS

- Ensure that successful strategies from primary school are documented and shared with the secondary school.
- Collaborate with the school to create a detailed student profile that includes:
 - Learning preferences
 - Strengths
 - Interests (with your child's consent)
 - Communication methods
 - Sensory needs
 - Executive functioning supports
 - Social interaction preferences
 - Triggers and signs of distress
 - Effective regulation strategies
- Request a sensory audit of the school environment and uniform - this must involve your child.
- Advocate for proactive implementation of reasonable adjustments, avoiding a 'wait and see' approach.

EXTEND TO THE WHOLE-SCHOOL

- Confirm that all staff members, including new starters, are informed about your child's needs and accommodations before any interactions.
- Request that staff have opportunities to discuss your child's profile with the SENCo and, if appropriate, with you and your child.
- Ensure that your child is not placed in situations where uninformed staff might inadvertently cause distress (e.g. challenging them on their uniform adaptations).

A SUMMARY OF PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FROM THE PROFESSIONAL'S GUIDE

- Ask for information to be provided in formats that suit your child's needs and preferences (e.g., visual aids, videos, written materials).
- Request that any changes to schedules or routines are communicated promptly to you and your child.
- Ensure that staff visiting your child's primary school have time to meet your child and speak with key staff.
- Advocate for flexible meeting options (e.g., online or in-person) to accommodate your family's needs.
- Request at least two designated points of contact who is available during the summer term and, if possible, over the holidays.
- Discuss the use of social stories, ensuring they are supportive and not aimed at enforcing neurotypical behaviours.
- Ask for explanations of commonly used school language and acronyms to be provided.
- If necessary, request a crisis plan and associated risk assessment to support your child in potential meltdowns or shutdowns.
- Ensure your child has access to a safe space within the school, with a clear plan for how they can access it.
- Discuss flexible toilet access policies that consider sensory sensitivities and interoception differences.
- Explore the possibility of a phased start to the school year, if beneficial for your child.
- Establish clear communication channels for your child to express concerns during lessons and breaks.
- Address potential bullying concerns by clarifying reporting procedures and support mechanisms.
- Request that planners, timetables, and other organisational tools are provided before the school year begins.
- Ensure that behaviour expectations are clearly explained, with consideration for necessary adjustments.
- Provide photos and names of staff members and discuss alternatives if your child has difficulty recognising faces.
- Ask for video introductions from key staff to help your child become familiar with them.
- Request maps, photos or videos of the school environment.
- Arrange multiple school visits, tailored to your child's comfort level, including times when the school is less crowded.
- Obtain a detailed schedule for at least the first week, including any special events or changes such as assemblies, extended time with their tutor, meetings with staff etc.
- Suggest organising a summer meet-up for Autistic students to build connections and share strategies.
- Propose a similar gathering for parents/carers to connect and share experiences.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

Different staff take on the role of leading / supporting transition - sometimes it might be the Head of Year 7, Head of Key Stage 3, a particular member of Senior Leadership (referred to as 'SLT' from now on), there may even be someone with the job title of 'Transition Lead' or such like.

TOP TIP: Find out who is leading.

Whoever is leading, the SENCO should be involved in your young person's transition so it'll be essential to know who they are and what their contact details are. Depending on the size of the school there may also be an Assistant SENCO and possibly even a Head of Department for their team. Get all of their contact details. Many secondary schools publish email addresses on their website but if not, just call or email Reception and ask.

TOP TIP: Ask if any staff involved in transition are leaving at the end of term and what plans are in place for managing this with regard your child.

I recommend cc'ing the transition lead, Head of Year and the SENCO into all communication during the transition phase.

You may also find out quite early on who your child's tutor is going to be - the tutor can be a really good person to support your child as they will see them every day and have the responsibility of overseeing their pastoral experience at school (guided by the Head of Year). If you do know who they are then it's worth cc'ing them in too.

TOP TIP: Don't assume your primary school has shared everything - for various reasons this might not happen so it's worth considering taking on this responsibility yourself.

THINGS TO FIND OUT

I suggest making a central record of a few key things, all of which should be on their website or can be requested if not:

- Their mission statement, ethos, values, vision - whatever they phrase it.
- Their transition documents / policies.
- Their SEND policy:
 - They should have a section specifically about Autistic young people. This will tell you a huge amount about their current knowledge, current lens (e.g. deficit-based or affirming) and current approaches.
 - Check for 'interventions' or 'support' they currently put in place for Autistic young people - if there is any form of 'social skills / social cognition' approach this is very likely to not be neuro-affirming. If you are not sure then feel free to ask in GROVE's Facebook group or another Autistic-led group.
- Their behaviour policy.
- Any other policies you feel are relevant.
- Governors details.
- If they are part of a Trust / MAT then the leadership team, Trust vision and policies too.

TOP TIP: Keep everything in one folder or tab group for easy access.

Looking at all of this will give you an insight into what their current approaches are.

It will also give you a basis to anticipate reluctance and objection and be able to consider your counter-argument making use of school policy to strengthen your argument (e.g. 'Your ethos includes... but your current policy on... actually creates barriers to that in this way...').

It is also worth being familiar with these:

- <https://www.ipsea.org.uk/what-are-special-educational-needs>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>
- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/behaviour-in-schools--2>

ONE PAGE PROFILE TEMPLATES

Sometimes called a 'pupil passport'.

If you have a good version from primary school already I recommend asking for a digital copy so that you have that on file and can share that. Ask to be cc'd into emails regarding your child so you know what has been sent - they may not agree to do this, in which case send it yourself anyway.

Sometimes, it might be necessary to update it or even create one from scratch.

I've included some templates but you / your young person can reformat however you like - it's unlikely that the secondary school will use it long term as they likely have a standardised template but your version gets the information that you need communicating to them as early as possible.

They cannot plan for your child unless they know as much about them as possible.

LINK TO TEMPLATES

You can also find lots of templates on CANVA that your young person could adapt for themselves adding pictures and the colours they like and an internet search with 'pupil passport' or 'one page profile' will show some other templates too.

PART 2: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR HOME

LIST OF PRACTICAL IDEAS TO SUPPORT YOUR YOUNG PERSON AT HOME

Remember: What is supportive for one young person will be overwhelming and anxiety provoking for another. Also, the following approaches are rooted in full belief of the young person's experience and honouring their Autistic ways of being.

FOSTER POSITIVE AUTISTIC IDENTITY

- Support your young person to know themselves and their needs as an Autistic person, to value themselves as an Autistic person and find spaces where they can be their authentic selves - this is often, but not always, easiest with other Autistic people. You may need to update your own knowledge to help (see the resources later on!).
- Support your young person to understand self-advocacy and believe they are worthy of this:
 - In brief, this could be through use of communication cards, practising interactions, anticipating potential responses from staff and other young people, for instance;
 - I think it is important to realise that self-advocacy is often not interpreted positively in school - it can, sadly, be interpreted as 'poor behaviour', 'defiance', 'refusal', 'rudeness' etc. This will be a really important area to work with the school on so you can agree reasonable adjustments, foster an understanding of your young person's emerging skills in this area and of their communication preferences and style (particularly when dysregulated).

FIND WAY OF EXPRESSING CONCERNS, WORRY AND ASKING QUESTIONS

- At home: Consider having multiple ways and times that your young person can express their concerns, worries and ask questions - this won't always be 'in the moment' - it may come to them at a later time so having access to a method for recording these things at any time is a good idea:
 - A notebook? Shared electronic doc? Voice notes? Setting aside certain times together each week to check in / check through?

VALIDATE FEELINGS

- Encourage them to feel the feels! Be aware of alexythimia.
- It may not be helpful to say things like 'it'll be fine' - rather, acknowledge their feelings and empathise.
- When you're not sure about the answer to something consider:
 - Keeping a record for yourself so that you don't forget things they need to know.
 - Agree on a time to update them on how you're progressing with finding answers to their questions.

CO-REGULATION AND CONNECTION

- Your young person may need increased co-regulation and connection with you because this transition is likely to affect their general regulation states, mood, energy levels and sleep patterns:
 - For instance, if your young person has not co-slept for a long time but suddenly needs that again then this is a sign they need to increase their feelings of safety - wherever possible, please support this need.
- Allowing time for your young person to engage in their interests and if they want you to - joining in - can be really valuable.

WAYS TO PREPARE

- **UNIFORM**
 - What reasonable adjustments will be needed?
 - Ask in groups / forums for recommendations related to specific sensory needs;
 - Get things early to avoid stock running out;
 - Would it help to wear shoes in and/or clothes so they soften?
 - Would it help to wash them in your normal way?
 - Remove scratchy labels;
 - Ensure any naming labels don't cause that issue;
 - Don't forget to do all this with PE kit too;
 - Your young person may benefit from practising getting changed for PE.
- **TIMETABLE**
 - In addition to previous suggestions:
 - Photograph it;
 - Laminate at least 2 copies (or pop them in plastic wallets);
 - Consider colour-coding or creating a picture-based version;
 - Consider marking rooms with the same colours on the map (but keep a clean copy - timetables do change!);
 - Consider whether it needs to be up on a wall at home too.
 - Timetables are usually very basic, just showing the subject, teacher, time and location. You might need to expand this for your young person (or ask the school to).

CONT'.

- **EQUIPMENT**

- Check through the required equipment together;
- Create a written or picture-based check-list - this may need to be different for certain days.

- **SENSORY SUPPORTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS**

- If it is financially viable, are you able to have duplicates of sensory supports such as ear plugs so that they are always accessible at school? This could be left with the tutor for example.
- Make sure you have discussed reasonable adjustments with the school.
- Having their sensory supports, safe foods and readily available at home will help too.

- **ROUTINES**

- Would practising the route to and from school be helpful? Consider doing this at different times of day. If it isn't possible to do it because of using a bus or taxi then discussion, visuals, other buses / taxis may still be helpful.
- Would practising the morning routine be helpful?
- Would planning an initial after school routine be helpful? Does your young person feel that they need food / rest / downtime immediately or would they prefer to sort homework and prep' for the next day beforehand?
- If your young person will be responsible for a key to get into the house then what do they do if they forget or lose this?
- Do they need help coming up with a plan for unstructured time? That might include practising how to order lunch, for example.

- **HOMEWORK**

- The school may use an app and/or planner for this. Having an extra home-based system will likely be useful because you can support with tracking what needs to be done and by when:
- For some young people this will need to be visible every day (perhaps a white board?), for others that will increase stress so it might need to be something you manage at least to begin with.
- Having a folder to transport homework is really useful.
- A tray or organiser at home could be used to keep track of paperwork too (this extends beyond homework of course).
- Find out if the school has homework support such as clubs etc.
- Find out what the homework policy is in terms of days / amount but bear in mind that sometimes staff don't stick to this.

CONT'.

- **LISTS / VISUALS**

- Would your young person benefit from lists / visual reminders for times/routines/equipment? Where might these be best place to be seen and checked? How can you support that?

WAYS OF TRACKING ENERGY AND UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT

- Needs and capacity fluctuate. Be mindful of signs of burnout and bear in mind the school may never have heard of Autistic burnout. Here are some resources (plus see the recommended resources later in this guide):
 - Autism Understood website, Viv Dawes, Autistic Realms, Autism Level Up

REDUCE DEMANDS, INCREASE REST

- Consider carefully how you can reduce demands placed upon your young person during this time.
- They may not be able to independently do things they could before such as getting their own breakfast, getting dressed, self-care etc.
- They may not be able to things they normally enjoy - try, wherever possible, to respect their need to rest:
 - Rest looks different for everyone - for some it may be gaming, for some sleep, for others going for a long walk on the beach. Your version of rest may be different to your young person's version.

WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION STYLES

- Your young person may want to learn about different social and communication styles. Try to do this in a neuro-affirming way that does not prioritise neurotypical social communication styles and therefore encourage masking:
 - See the recommended resources lists later in the guide.
 - Note: There is nuance needed when considering masking - for some people it is necessary to mask to be safe and for some Autistic people masking it not possible. See the recommended resources for further exploration of this.

RENDER EVERYTHING PROBLEMATIC WITH 'WHAT IF...' THINKING

- 'What if...' can be a really useful perspective to take as it can enable you to anticipate alternatives, problems, reduce uncertainty etc.
- E.g. 'What if the bus is late... they lose their time table / bus pass / PE kit etc... they forget their homework... a member of staff isn't aware of their needs and challenges them in the corridor... etc.

THOUGHTS FROM PARENTS/CARERS WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH IT

“I have worked professionally with children and young people transitioning into different placements, and I am now experiencing the transition process with my twins. One is going to a special school, and the other to a mainstream one. They used to go to the same school; however, my son's placement broke down terribly, so they have already experienced the separation and he has gone through starting at another school, however each new start comes with new challenges.

We started the process gently when looking for secondary schools, so our conversation is that when one starts something, there is an end. The significance of moving to a primary school is enormous.

We gather images and thoughts behind moving and what emotions that may bring up. I have a roll of plain paper on the table, and we wrote ‘Successful Transitions’ in the middle of the paper. I like them to lead with a few pointers from me, so it's all their work. We plan to start by writing the names of the schools they will attend and the start date. A timeline is in progress, including when they first started primary school, what that felt like, and the challenges they encountered.

We have printed maps of how we are going to get to school, including transition dates. We also have a notebook where they can write questions they want to ask or make notes if they answer them so they can refer back to them and include them in our collective paper. I gather art magazines with images that may rouse discussion about moving on. I try to make it a live document so they can come back to it when they think of something, and we can come together later and think about it some more. I don't limit it to just the twins, I try to incorporate times when I or another adult have had to move so we all share our experiences. I aim to make it as visual and less anxiety-provoking as possible. I have gone at their pace, not rushed it.

Some things we will cover are writing a list of worries, practical ones like journeys to school, which are being practiced now, where the toilets are, and the staff supporting them. Most of these will be things we can gather on the planned transition days. Strategies of sensory overwhelm, identifying busy times and what to do, like having a metaphoric toolkit, what can we do if we know this will happen. Also, we cannot always plan for changes, and schools are unpredictable sometimes, where things can suddenly change, and I use a firework analogy. Some fireworks are good, bright, and colourful, while others are too noisy and unpleasant, so we pull out what we need from our toolkit, like finding a safe adult to let them know, a quiet place, having a fidget toy, or a walk break.”

Ellie

THOUGHTS FROM PARENTS/CARERS WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH IT

“Taking pictures of the staff in the classrooms to avoid uncertainty with information about each staff member. Maybe include the staffs interests.

Pictures of a safe place to retreat to when feeling overwhelmed.

Making a personality profile for staff to read which talks about communication and interaction preferences. This could be something the young person could work on themselves. I'll include ours (with Joe's permission) - see it [here](#).”

Jenny

“Our daughter's school ran a really good transition for all pupils.

In June they had two days at an adventure camp with their new classmates and then had two days in the school learning to navigate the school and doing fun things.

This meant the children could make new friends and relationships and possibly stay in contact with new friends over the summer taking away some of the fear of starting the new school.

They also ran extra morning transitions for any Sen pupils.”

Anon

“We used a piece of paper on the wall that any time our child thought of something they wanted to know they could write it down so we remembered to ask it at one of the visits before we went.

We also thought about what we could control and what we couldn't.

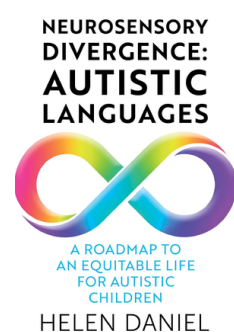
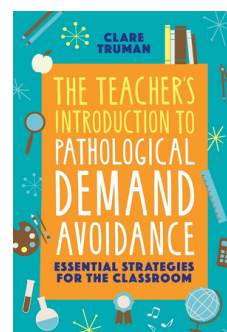
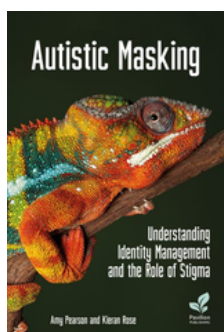
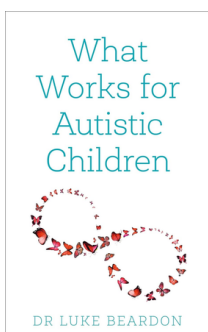
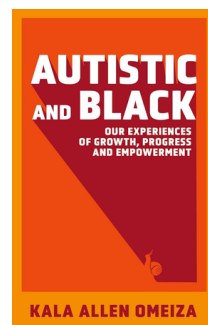
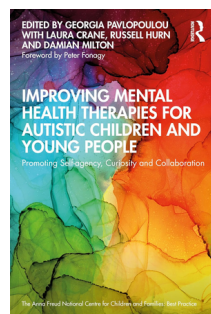
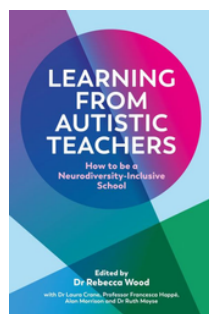
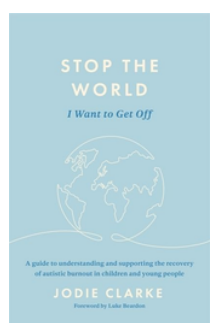
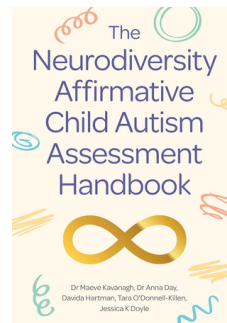
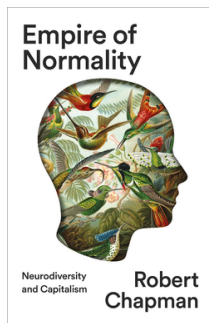
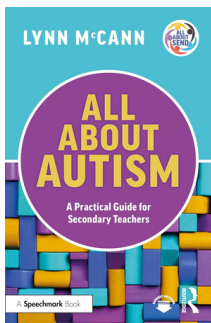
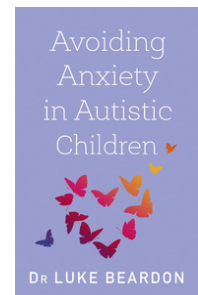
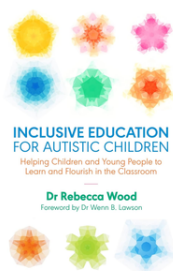
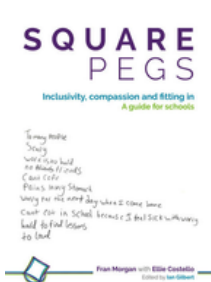
We also asked the school for sort of a social story but it's wasn't that useful.... But we could look through it during the summer holidays when they were anxious and asking questions.

We got uniform early so they could get used to the feel/seeing it as it's so different to primary uniform (and it meant we could wash it to make it soft).”

Emma

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES: DUPLICATE OF PROFESSIONAL'S GUIDE

- <https://www.grOve.org/neuro-affirming-language-neurodiversity-lite/>
- <https://www.grOve.org/blog-neuro-affirming/>
- <https://reframingautism.org.au/service/autism-essentials/>
- <https://therapistndc.org/therapy/social-skills-training/>
- <https://autisticrealms.com/category/education/>
- <https://ausometraining.com/product/autism-course-for-teachers/>
- <https://therapistndc.org/education/free-neurodiversity-printables/>
- <https://www.autismlevelup.com/>
- <https://icannetwork.education/neurodivergent-students-guide-to-starting-high-school/>
- <https://autisticgirlsnetwork.org/some-tips-for-a-good-transition-from-primary-to-secondary-school-for-autistic-pupils>
- <https://padlet.com/spectrumgaming/barriers-to-education-1bnrx2lf6iwfck52>
- <https://stimpunks.org/pathways/education>
- <https://autismunderstood.co.uk/>
- <https://www.grOve.org/autistic-young-people-friendships/>



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES: FOR PARENTS/CARERS

All of the resources recommended for professionals are also useful for parents/carers, however I'd like to add to that with these too:

- <https://www.spectrumgaming.net/autism-acceptance>
- <https://yellowladybugs.myshopify.com/>
- <https://ausometraining.com/products-autism/>
- <https://theautisticadvocate.com/recommended-autism-positive-books/>
- <https://theautisticadvocate.com/autism-course-online/>
- <https://neuroclastic.com/autism/what-is-autism/>



There are, thankfully, numerous Autistic, neuro-affirming sources for information now. This blog may be helpful in working out what is neuro-affirming: <https://www.grOve.org/neuro-affirming-language-neurodiversity-lite/>

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES: FOR YOUNG PEOPLE THEMSELVES

- Consider joining one of GROVE's groups or having the support of an Autistic Mentor.
- <https://autismunderstood.co.uk/>
 - There is a section on education, the whole website is brilliant though as is everthing Spectrum Gaming do!
- <https://icannetwork.education/neurodivergent-students-guide-to-starting-high-school/>
- <https://www.authenticallyemily.uk/blog/autism-and-adhd-book-guide-for-children-and-young-people>
 - Please note I haven't read all of these so can't wholeheartedly recommend them all.
- <https://neuroclastic.com/autism/what-is-autism/>
 - 'My Brain is Autistic'
- <https://notanautismmom.com/2022/04/11/books-for-autistic-adolescents-teens-and-tweens/>
 - Please note I haven't read all of these so can't wholeheartedly recommend them all.



SUPPORT WITH REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS:

GROVE invites you to attend a **tailored** webinar:

Reasonable Adjustments for Autistic Young People in Mainstream Secondary Schools

Realistic, Compassionate Approaches

Even when a transition is planned well, mainstream secondary school can still be a **tough environment for Autistic young people**. Many families find themselves in an ongoing battle trying to secure the reasonable adjustments their child is legally entitled to, often in systems that don't fully understand or accommodate neurodivergence. We'd like to help you with that.

Our upcoming webinar is designed to support you with the **tools, knowledge and language to advocate effectively for their young person**. You'll learn what reasonable adjustments can really look like in practice - small but powerful changes that can make a real difference to your child's wellbeing, safety and opportunities at school. You'll be learning from someone who brings **lived experience, professional insight and academic understanding** - an Autistic teacher, parent of Autistic children and soon-to-be MA graduate in progressive autism studies. These sessions:

- **Are grounded in the latest research and neuro-affirming practice**
- **Focus on realistic strategies that can work even within imperfect systems**
- **Give space for questions, reflection and real-life context**

We can't promise it will all be easy but we can help you feel less alone, more informed and more equipped to advocate for your young person.



PARENTS / CARERS

**Reasonable
Adjustments for
Autistic Young People
in Mainstream
Secondary Schools**



Tuesday 24th June, 7.30-9pm

Recorded with access for 30 days

**Additional very small Q&A session also available
1 week later.**

LEARN MORE



ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR YOUR YOUNG PERSON

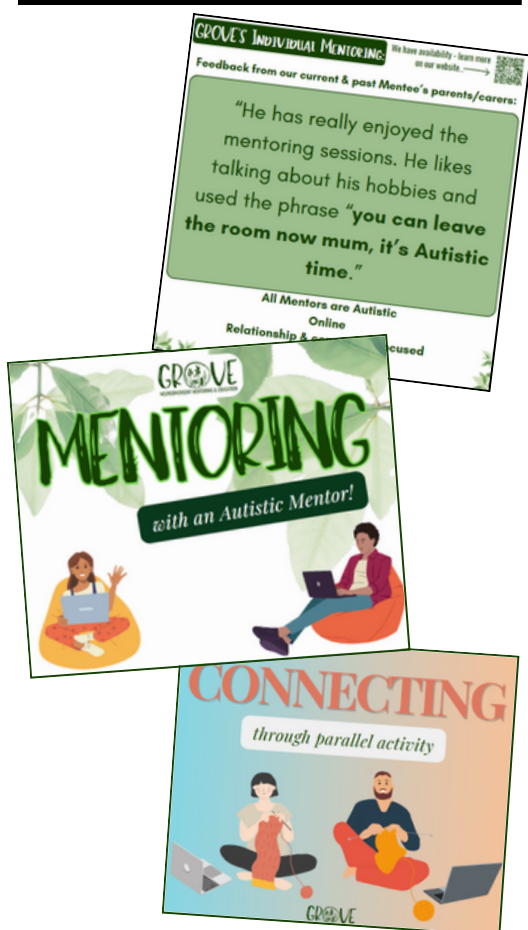
GROVE is a safe, online **community** for Autistic young people in the UK to **connect** through shared interests & experiences.

We support young people's personal **growth** by fostering a positive & authentic Autistic identity through neuro-affirming individual & group mentoring.

Note: Initially our services are for Autistic young people and we intend to expand this over time.

WHAT DO WE DO?

Individual Mentoring



Groups



&

Online

Fully Autistic staffed

View our 'Neuro-affirming Foundations'

Learn more





Wishing your young person all the best with this transition!



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