

# Changing up

*Liz Smith provides twelve top tips for successful SEN transitions*

**H**ow can I know if it's right for me? What if I get there and it's not what I was expecting? Will people laugh at me because of who I am or what I do? These questions and hundreds like them worry young people as they think about the transition from school to work or college.

Now take those worries, multiply them tenfold and add some special needs issues too. Then we get an idea of why transitions for students with SEN can be particularly stressful. Will there be someone to meet me from the bus? Who will carry my tray at lunchtime? Will the teachers understand my computer input device? Why do I have to leave this place where I feel safe and understood?

I contacted a number of special schools to ask them about their experiences in helping students prepare for successful transitions. Their answers show just how broad, complex, and fulfilling the area of SEN transitions support can be. This is the "top twelve" from the hints and tips I gained.

## **1: Have at least one member of staff, off-timetable, dedicated to supporting student transitions**

This work is time-consuming in any school. Students with SEN need a higher level of individualised support, with many hours of work for each young person. All but the smallest units need a member of staff specifically for transitions support. It's best if that staff member is "off timetable", so that they can lead the school's transitions work throughout the year and be available to students for individual help. In many successful schools, the transitions manager has one or more assistants too.

*Help the student channel the energy of their ambitions into achieving realistic goals*

## **2: Develop a plan for transitions support and make sure all the staff know about it**

Issues relating to transitions can come up in any lesson and any one-to-one session. Not all of the staff can know all about transitions to the same in-depth level as the transitions manager. But make sure everyone knows about the information, advice and guidance (IAG) resources you have, and where they can go for help when they need it.

## **3: Get the right resources for support with choices in training and careers**

Great resources mean students and staff get expert information relating to careers, training, and transitions. Make sure your resources are independent and impartial; many students with SEN

find it hard to discriminate between fact and marketing hype in advertising-supported products. Look carefully at accessibility too. Products with pictures, videos, low reading age, and built-in voice for reading text are more likely to be used by the students. Encourage the students to do their own independent learning where they can. Most subscription products offer a try-before-you-buy option, so you can use them with your students first to see what works best in your situation.

## **4: Start your transitions work early**

Have training and placement providers visit your school to explain what they offer. Organise days for the students to visit colleges and workplaces, in a group and/or on their own, according to needs and abilities. Take videos and pictures of those places to show the students back at school. Organise "taster" days and part-days for students at their intended destination. By the time it comes to the actual first day in the new setting, the young person should feel familiar with it and everyone should be confident that there will be no surprises.



With encouragement, many local companies will offer placements and other help.

### 5: Make time to understand each student and their motivations

Every student is different, and each has their own history, abilities, and needs. There is no “one size fits all” solution, especially in an SEN context. Be adaptable and creative in helping plan for what’s next. At this age, students are growing and changing fast, so keep alert to their developing needs and ambitions. Stay flexible as to what is best for them as they develop.

### 6: Manage student expectations

Many students with SEN have difficulty in being realistic about what they can expect to achieve. Some find themselves overly focussed on their disability. Don’t let your students get hung up on what they can’t do; help them see what they can do. Some students have unrealistically high expectations. Ambition is a great motivator, but unrealistic ambitions can cause wasted effort and disappointment. Help the student channel the energy of their ambitions into achieving realistic goals – “Modifying expectations and keeping ambition alive”, as one adviser put it.

### 7: Manage parental anxieties

Transitions are stressful times for parents and carers too. Their anxieties are easily passed on to the young people they care for. Reassure parents by keeping them informed and involved. Make sure they know how to contact you. Offer to help parents with form-filling; your experience and help is useful for the paperwork they need to do.

### 8: Check that paperwork reaches its intended destination

Education, health and care (EHC) plans and other paperwork are great in helping with smooth transitions and continuity of care and provision. But they are only useful if they get to their intended recipient. Email in-boxes overflow, spam filters get

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confused, and some internal mail systems rival the Bermuda Triangle for mystery disappearances. When you send important documentation relating to student transitions, make a note in your diary for a week or two from now to check that you got an acknowledgement.

### 9: Your local area is full of helpers; enlist them

Many local companies, sports teams, charity associations, celebrities and others like to help if they know they can make a difference. Make sure you use your powers of persuasion to recruit potential local helpers. If you can win them over, they’ll be a great ongoing resource for visits to your school, helping your sports teams, work experience placements, and fundraising for special equipment.

### 10: Meet up with others working in IAG for SEN in your area

Many areas of the country have regional groups for people who work at providing information, advice, and guidance in SEN settings. These are great for networking and exchanging information and ideas, and supporting each other. Guest speakers bring a lot to these, too. If there’s not a group in your area yet, think about starting one.

### 11: Make friends with the transitions support staff in your destinations

Your transitions contacts at colleges and other destinations are a great source of information, support, and friendly advice. Treat these people like royalty. Invite them to your school to see what you do. Give them tea and

cake. Get their email addresses and direct-line phone numbers. You can help them and they can help you, and by working together you can help your students more effectively.

### 12: Keep in touch with your students at their new destinations

A phone call to your transitions support friends in the student’s destination in the first week of term helps fix any problems as they arise. A call or email at half-term, and then perhaps the start of the second term, can be useful too. And the information you get in return helps you plan better for the next cohort. Plus, it’s great to hear the stories of how the people you worked so hard for are getting on in their new environment.

Small group sizes and lots of one-to-one work means that staff and SEN students get to know each other well. That makes it hard when it comes to letting go. But with the right preparation, support, and resources, that step into what’s next can be a fulfilling and enabling transition in the student’s onward journey. **SEN**

### Further information

Liz Smith is Managing Director of Careersoft, publishers of independent careers information and creators of the online resource First Jed, which is used by SEN and mainstream schools: [www.careersoft.co.uk/SEND](http://www.careersoft.co.uk/SEND)

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