

# **TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN**

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Life transitions are scary for everyone at every stage, but as parents of kids with ASD we experience special anxiety around our kids' transitions as they bring unique challenges. I wanted to share my family's experience with our son Ethan's transition to kindergarten at the beginning of this school year.

## Our Story

Ethan was diagnosed with ASD at age 2.5. His telltale repetitive behaviors and aversion to peers was spotted by an alert pre-school teacher during Ethan's first year of preschool. My husband Bruce and I sprung into action and sought out early intervention services with BIA. I credit Ethan's readiness to transition to mainstream kindergarten to all the hard work by BIA, our extended family, and caregivers from age 2.5 on. It truly does "take a village" and a lot of hard work teaching your child how to learn, how to focus, and how to interact with his or her world. A highly customized approach of early intervention services in the home, where parents and other family members and caregivers receive extensive training on how to communicate effectively with their child and how to mold behaviors, as well as a truly individualized program that is custom tailored on a week-to-week basis to each child's challenges and abilities, provides the best foundation for a successful entrance into a mainstream educational environment.

Our BIA director consulted with us through the transition to kindergarten. After school started, by mid-October BIA was phased out and we transitioned to fully relying on the IEP team of the Orinda School District. The team, which includes an inclusion specialist, behaviorist, speech therapist and occupational therapist, is excellent. While it was nerve-racking to let BIA go, we knew Ethan and our family was ready. On BIA's last visit to observe Ethan in his kindergarten classroom a month after school started, our BIA director noted Ethan is "comfortable, proud and enjoying himself".

In hindsight, I think one of the best things we did to prepare Ethan for kindergarten was to wait until he was 6 (he has a July birthday). Ethan did a year of developmental kindergarten at his preschool when he was 5. The extra year of time to close the gap with peers in academic and gross and fine motor skills made a big difference. Ethan's kindergarten teacher said to us at his spring conference that waiting until he was 6 to have him start kindergarten was the best gift we could have given him.

Here is a checklist of things to do to provide for a smooth transition to kindergarten and to keep things on track.

## Checklist:

1. Read books about going to kindergarten in the months leading up to start of school.
2. Make a photo album with pictures of locations and people around the campus (lunchroom, playground, teacher, and staff).
3. Visit the classroom with your child and meet his/her teacher a few days before school starts.
4. Make sure your child knows the schedule and the school day routine.

5. If your child will have an aide, communicate with them frequently so you know how your child is doing and what adjustments may be needed from week to week, month to month.
6. Make sure your child has breaks as needed throughout the day (time to chill and recharge for a few minutes in a private area of the classroom such as book corner).
7. Work in the classroom as much as you can. Get the other kids in the class to know you.
8. Educate/sensitize classmates about differences.
9. Schedule lots of play dates with peers. Provide the appropriate amount of structure.
10. Have the aide write notes (ideally daily) so you have concrete examples of things and feel you can see into the classroom.
11. Meet with behaviorist, aide and teacher (team meeting) from time to time.
12. Tell your child how proud you are regularly (of even the smallest things).
13. Keep your child busy in the afternoons with a variety of activities.

Ethan's biggest challenges are social skills with peers, fine motor skills and maintaining focus especially during stations work. Here are the ways we address each challenge.

#### Social Skills

One of Ethan's biggest challenges is sustaining appropriate peer interactions, and BIA advised us at the start of kindergarten that it would be important to structure social interactions for Ethan (BIA had worked with us for the last few years structuring social interaction in the preschool setting and in structured play dates at our house). We accomplish this mainly through lots of play dates that are structured and facilitated by Ethan's aide. We were fortunate in that Ethan's aide from preschool, who had been trained by BIA, could continue into kindergarten with him. Each week Ethan has two play dates with peers from his class. We find the children that have come to play dates are then more open to playing with Ethan at school. Ethan has come a long way this year in social skills development. Recently his aide wrote in her notes to us that she heard Ethan invite some new friends to join him in a bike race at recess.

Ethan's elementary school also has an afterschool club that provides after school care. Ethan really wanted to be able to attend the club, since his older sister had. We were concerned though because it is a highly unstructured setting with a myriad of activities to choose from and kids from all grades. Basically it's the most challenging environment for a kid with ASD. But we thought it would be helpful for Ethan to learn how to negotiate such a setting. We hired a former tutor of Ethan's, someone highly trained to work with kids with ASD, to accompany him to the after school club for 4 hours per week. She is there to help him engage with the materials and to seek out kids to play with. She facilitates interactions with other kids and helps get games started. Of course, we cleared this with the school and notified the IEP team before she showed up with Ethan.

#### Fine Motor Skills

Ethan receives extra teaching time twice a week where his aide works on writing letters and numbers. While Ethan knows all his letters and numbers, writing some of them is still a challenge given his fine motor skills were significantly delayed. Ethan also gets extra work on fine motor at Pediatric Motor

Playground in Lafayette. We work with him on writing on weekends at home. It is his least favorite task, so we usually need to build in small rewards for him to complete the work.

### Maintaining Focus

Ethan's school day is designed for him to have multiple short (3 minute) breaks at various points. These breaks allow him to chill for a bit and have an object to stim with discretely (such as a rubber snake). He is recharged by these breaks and better able to maintain a positive attitude. The occupational therapist has suggested other techniques for waking Ethan up including sitting on a nubby rubber cushion and occasionally having him do small exercises in his chair.

### Parent Time in the Classroom

I volunteer twice a month in the library when my son's class has library. My husband Bruce and I also each help in the classroom twice a month with stations work. Ethan was so pleased to have each of us in the classroom and works extra hard when one of us is there. We praise him extensively and he is very motivated by that.

### Stimming Behaviors

One of our biggest worries, frankly, was how Ethan's stimming behaviors (hand flapping, dangling objects in front of his eyes) would be perceived by peers. As kids get into elementary school, they are not as forgiving of odd behavior or things that seem different. By age 6, Ethan was able to self regulate his stimming behaviors to a large degree – so he is able to not stim for a length of time as long as he knows he will get a break where he can have time to discretely stim. I talked very openly with Ethan prior to the start of kindergarten. I told him that stimming is something other kids don't do or understand so it's better to leave it for private moments. Also, when he comes home from school, we were more lax about allowing extended stim time, especially the first few months of school.

### Talking About Differences

The inclusion specialist came into Ethan's classroom a few times to read a story about differences. I've heard some families advocate sending a letter to the parents of all the kids in your child's class explaining how your child is different. We didn't do this. We were concerned about drawing too much attention to Ethan. You can't control what other parents are going to say to their kids and sometimes information can be used in a hurtful way even though you have the best intentions. Those kinds of decisions are so specific to each family. We still haven't talked about the ASD diagnosis with Ethan, but we plan to at some point before middle school.

### Keeping Busy After School

We keep Ethan pretty scheduled after school to keep him productive. His activities help him with his fine motor skills and social skills. Ethan takes piano and music lessons from a music therapist in Piedmont who teaches children with special needs (Susan Rancer: <http://www.susanrancer.com>). Ethan loves music and is able to focus well when he is listening to or making music. He goes to Pediatric Motor Playground in Lafayette twice a week where he gets O.T. and lots of fine motor work with worksheets and writing. Ethan also attends BIA's Village Clubhouse when it is in session to continue learning games and how to interact appropriately with peers in a group setting.

One of the greatest joys from kindergarten has been that Ethan has made his first best friend. They love playing on the playground and Max comes over for frequent play dates.

Kindergarten has gone so much more smoothly than we dreamed even a year ago. Not that every day is a walk in the park, but there have been no major issues or behavior problems. Each child with ASD is unique and the goal of BIA is to help each child they work with achieve their maximum potential, whatever that looks like. When Ethan started working with BIA as a 2.5-year old, mainstream kindergarten was almost impossible to imagine and yet the dream became a reality. One of my biggest lessons as a Mom over the past four years has been learning not to underestimate our child or not dream big enough for him. I see a bright future ahead. Thank you BIA!