

Kindergarten Cold Feet

Four and a half year old **Allan** is a little boy who was diagnosed on the autism spectrum at two years of age. His family support worker **Claire Weins** has been involved with the family since shortly thereafter, and has been an important resource to **Mr. and Mrs. Guggenheim**, Allan's parents. Based on her advice, at the age of three Allan began attending a small nursery school program in his town where he has participated with his peers on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. Several therapists and his child development worker visit Allan there to deliver clinical services and to guide the early childhood teachers on site. **Ms Kelly**, the nursery school director, had many questions and concerns when Allan first began in the nursery school but she has learned so much from Allan's parents, therapists, and his child development worker and now feels more confident about meeting Allan's needs. The nursery school receives an Inclusion Support grant from the Government of Manitoba which has allowed them to hire another staff person, **Lyla**, who helps to facilitate Allan's inclusion and the goals identified by clinicians and his parents. It took a number of months for Allan to adjust to the social setting and routines of the nursery school. However, everyone is off to a great start after spring break and Allan seems to enjoy his time at nursery school. It also provides an important respite service to his mom, Mrs. Guggenheim, who is in her final term of pregnancy and is often very tired.

May (Before September one year prior to school start) > Introduce Protocol

Near the end of Allan's first year in nursery school, Claire Weins makes a regularly scheduled visit to his home. At the end of the visit, Claire informs the Guggenheims that planning for the transition to Kindergarten happens well in advance and they can expect to begin preliminary steps in the fall. Claire wants to make sure the Guggenheims are not caught off guard, but are prepared for this conversation when Allan begins his second year of nursery school.

Late September (one year prior to school start) > Initiate Protocol

Today, Claire Weins calls Mrs. Guggenheim at home to talk about plans for Kindergarten, which Allan will be eligible to attend next fall, less than one year from now, and to inquire about the new baby. Mrs. Guggenheim is uncertain about Allan's readiness for Kindergarten. It was a difficult adjustment for him and their family when he began at nursery school last year and she dreads the impending change. However, she does agree that she and her husband will meet with Claire to discuss their options and which steps will be most helpful.

October > Team Formation

On a day while Allan is at nursery school, the Guggenheims attend their first transition planning meeting at Claire's office in town, bringing the baby along. Claire has printed off the *Protocol for Early Childhood Transition to School for Children with Additional Support Needs* for the Guggenheims, including recommended steps and timelines, which she reviews with them. Over a cup of tea, they explore the role

of team leader. Mrs. Guggenheim is not sure she has the time to take on this role as Allan and the baby take so much of her energy each day. Mr. Guggenheim agrees that he is willing to share the leadership role with Claire, who they trust completely. They talk about who else needs to be involved on the transition team, and identify the key people in Allan's support network who should be included in their next meeting:

- **Ms Kelly**, the nursery school director
- **Debra**, Allan's child development worker
- **Maureen**, Allan's speech and language pathologist
- his occupational therapist **Andrew**
- his grandfather, **Mr. Guggenheim Senior** (Grandpa), to whom Allan is very attached, and who drives him into town for nursery school
- Their local school division has a Student Services Administrator, **Jackie Border**, who Claire knows and she suggests they invite her to this meeting too.

Allan has been seen several times by a child psychologist in the city, **Dr. Marchuk**, but the Guggenheims agree it's not likely that he will attend a meeting at this time.

Claire asks Allan's parents if they would like her help to complete the questionnaire which will paint a picture of Allan for the school and they are happy to accept. Claire suggests that the two clinicians, child development worker, and nursery school director can be invited to add to the profile when they come to the next meeting and Mr. Guggenheim will call Dr. Marchuk to ask for his input too. They set another meeting date in about a month's time.

Early December > Information Gathering, Information Sharing

At the next meeting, there is lots of important sharing and the participants use most of the time to tell about all the things that Allan can do. Claire has photocopied the questionnaire partially completed by the **Guggenheims**. They have noted their child's interest in numbers and space and his vast vocabulary that includes space and math words like *tesseract*, *dwarf planets* and *googol*. They are so pleased to discuss his attachment to his family members, especially his younger sibling and his grandfather. There was a time when Allan rarely interacted with his family, but he has made big strides in the past 24 months. He is a healthy boy, and sleeps through the night now, even with the baby waking for night feedings. He asks each morning if it's a nursery school day, and watches for his grandfather's car coming up the drive-way to pick him up. His grandfather adds that Allan often sings songs he has learned at nursery school on the way home.

Ms Kelly shares information about Allan's relationship with his nursery school peers noting he plays alongside other children happily and he now knows most of the children's names. He does, however, continue to need social skills support while participating in small groups and the early childhood teachers do a lot of play modelling. They continue to work on active listening, turn taking, and showing respect for the opinions of other children. These will assist him to develop his skills in collaboration with others. His attention span is especially short for activities with a social component but he often shows great focus on tasks that he initiates. Based on guidance from his therapists, Ms Kelly and Lyla have been working on generalization of current skills used in one-on-one situations to his everyday participation in the program, such as cutting with scissors, which he has nearly mastered.

Andrew discusses his Occupational Therapy, noting that Allan does demonstrate Sensory Integration Dysfunction, especially related to tactile input (touch), and that his fine motor skills remain significantly delayed. Sensory integration activities encouraging Allan to tolerate light touch and drawing exercises using a wider pencil have led to significant improvements in these areas.

Maureen shares information from his most recent speech and language assessment which is based on her therapy work with him at the nursery school. She concurs with Ms Kelly that Allan continues to show social communication challenges and weak problem-solving skills. While he is quite verbal, he does not always understand what the other children tell him and is uncertain about how to enter into play with his peers.

Debra discusses the child development services she is providing to Allan's family. Based on the family's prioritized goals, they have been targeting socialization skills so that Allan can better play and build friendships with his peers. The family has had success using suggested play-based activities such as simple games with rules during their daily routines, leading to more interactions with his peers.

Mr. Guggenheim has brought along copies of Allan's last Psychological Assessment, which **Dr. Marchuk** forwarded on request. The letter from the doctor reconfirms Allan's diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. Dr. Marchuk noted Allan's difficulties with anxiety and emotional regulation. There were several strategies for self-regulation included which the Guggenheims and Ms Kelly have been trying, such as providing transition cues well in advance and creating social stories about new situations, such as the birth of his baby sister. The report also indicated that Allan's expressive language skills are significantly affected but the Guggenheims are pleased to share that recently, Allan has begun telling his family that he loves them.

Together, the team members summarize Allan's strengths and needs:

Strengths:

- Receptive language
- Intellectual curiosity
- Math and number skills
- Strong bond with family, especially with his baby sister and his grandfather

Areas of Need:

- Expressive language
- Self regulation skills
- Problem solving skills
- Fine motor skills
- Social skills with peers

Jackie Border thanks the group for including her in the meeting so she can learn about Allan and understand how to support his transition to the school setting. She listens attentively as each team member shares their perspective about his abilities, interests and needs. Jackie contributes to the discussion by providing information about the school and supports available there, and she is able to

answer the Guggenheims' questions as they arise. She also addresses their dilemma about delaying Kindergarten entry by providing another point of view which the Guggenheims hadn't really thought about. This relates to the benefits of age-appropriate placement, especially when Allan is connecting so well with children his own age at nursery school. She explains that if Allan starts school at six years old, rather than five, he will always be a year older than the other students in his class. If he were to start school this coming year, he will move through Kindergarten to Grade Twelve with his peers. Jackie reassures the Guggenheims that many families go through the same emotions, feeling anxious about starting school. Change is hard for most of us.

The Guggenheims are encouraged by this round robin experience, and are happy to hear about the progress Allan has made this past year. By the end of the meeting, they agree that the transition to Kindergarten is an important next step for Allan, but wonder what they need to do next. They revisit the suggested timeline provided in the Protocol. Jackie has brought along a notice about the Open House at the school in town, which will be happening in early February.

As a team, the group decides the Guggenheims should keep the transition planning form until after they've attended the school's open house. This will give the family time to get comfortable with their decision about enrolling Allan for Kindergarten in the fall and respects their desire to hold onto the questionnaire at this stage.

February > Information Gathering

The Guggenheims leave the baby and Allan at home with Grandpa, and attend the Kindergarten Open House one evening in February. It's been many years since either of them has been in a school, and they are surprised and reassured to see how much the Kindergarten classroom resembles Allan's nursery school. They point out the many books that are on the book shelf, including one of Allan's favourites, *Aliens in Underwear*. At this school, Kindergarten is a full day on alternate days of the school cycle, so that some weeks, Allan would attend three days, and other weeks, only two. Mrs Guggenheim really likes the idea of Allan being at school for a full day, reasoning it will give her lots of one-on-one time with the baby who will be an active toddler by then. Allan no longer naps in the afternoons so should be able to manage the longer day. On the days he does not go to school, the family can do some activities together such as attending the parent-child drop-in program at the community centre or story time at the library. Before they leave, they meet the school principal, **Mr. Freeman**, sharing a bit about their son's needs. They are reassured to learn that the Kindergarten class is projected to have fewer than 20 children, which is about the same size as the nursery school he is used to and that a school bus can pick him up and drop him off after school. They complete the registration form on the spot.

April > Transition Planning and Implementation

Mr. Guggenheim contacts Claire to arrange for another meeting which they schedule for later in the month. They invite Debra, the child development worker, and Jackie Border, the Student Services Administrator for the school division. Claire also suggests inviting the school's guidance councillor, **Mr. Yang**, and Kindergarten teacher, **Ms Arevelo**, because the team will develop a specific plan for Allan at this meeting which may include roles for each of them.

At Mr. Guggenheim's suggestion, they also invite Mr. Freeman, the school principal they met earlier in the spring and he agrees to come. Jackie is glad that key people from the school will be included, as it is her goal to have a school transition meeting about each new student with exceptional learning needs. The nursery school teacher and the therapists are all available to attend and Grandpa will stay at home with the children.

The meeting is held at the school and is co-chaired by Mr. Guggenheim and Claire Weins. They confirm that the family has decided Allan will go to Kindergarten this fall and they share the completed transition planning form. Claire also helps the Guggenheims discuss key information from the planning form so everyone is up to date. This also brings Mr. Freeman, Mr. Yang and Ms Arevelo into the loop, providing the information they need as new members of the team. Similar to the previous meeting, there is a round robin exercise where each professional involved with Allan shares their perspective, providing an update on his development and the strategies which have been helpful for him.

The therapists have not noticed any changes in Allan's behaviour, however Ms Kelly, the nursery school director, describes some recent incidents which help the team to reflect on how Allan may be experiencing the changes they are planning for. Allan has been showing some separation anxiety at drop-off time in the past few weeks and is very clingy to his grandfather and weepy once he leaves. As the spring weather has been so pleasant after a long winter, the children and their educators have been enjoying more time outdoors and have even had circle time around the big tree in the play yard. Allan has been visibly upset by these changes to the formerly quite predictable routine and angrily showed Lyla his daily schedule with its photos and descriptions of what should happen each day. The other day, he had an intense temper tantrum and refused to eat when snack was moved outside to be served picnic style on a tarp.

Mrs. Guggenheim shares that Allan hasn't been sleeping well at night and has been waking up with nightmares and complaining of tummy aches at breakfast on nursery school days. The team understands that Allan's escalating behaviours are signals of his anxiety about change and the June school visit which the adults have been talking about with him. The Guggenheims are very concerned about the transition, second guessing their decision to enroll this year. Claire Weins helps them to focus on an important question, asking them to consider what kinds of things the school could do to prepare for Allan's arrival.

The team brainstorms some ways they can help ease Allan's anxiety and build his comfort with the coming changes. Before the nursery school year comes to an end in May, Mr. Yang offers to visit Allan there in the coming weeks to observe him as he interacts and plays with others, follows the nursery routines, and demonstrates his various skills. Mr. Yang explains that these kinds of observations will help the school to confirm Allan's support needs, so they can design an individualized plan that will work best for Allan. His visits to nursery school will help Allan get to know one of the new adults from the school in a setting where he is already comfortable. Mr. Yang can then be present at the school during Allan's visits, serving as a familiar face in a new situation.

Next, Ms Arevelo has an opportunity to talk about her Kindergarten program which is very play-based. She is an experienced teacher and puts the Guggenheims at ease with her enthusiasm and confidence about meeting Allan's needs. She explains that the transition to Kindergarten is often difficult for many children and describes the inclusive strategies she uses to support all children in her class. She is curious

about what else she could do to support Allan and to reassure the Guggenheims. One of their questions relates to how home-school communication will be set up since the plan is for Allan to ride the bus and there will be no face-to-face opportunities for the Guggenheims to talk to the teacher. They wonder if a communication book will be used. Ms Arevelo recounts that she has used communication books for many children over the years, but can also text parents to their smart phones if they would like to exchange information that way, too.

Ms Arevelo and Mr. Yang offer to create a new social story. Rather than waiting until June, a first visit is planned for Allan to see the school in early May to take photos of him in different areas of the school and with his teachers. The school staff will create the social story with these photos and will have that ready for him at his next visit.

Mr. Yang comments on the similarity between an Individual Program Plan (IPP) in the preschool system and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) used in the school. They both refer to a written document developed and implemented by a team (that includes parents) outlining goals and supports uniquely designed for a specific child which address his/her strengths and learning needs. Allan's IPP has been guiding the work of Claire, Debra, Andrew, Maureen and Ms Kelly in the nursery school setting. Mr. Yang confirms that any therapies Allan might need during Kindergarten will occur within the context of the classroom as much as possible. These will be determined at the first IEP meeting at the school next fall. He also reviews the consent forms from the Protocol, ensuring that forms are signed so that all the preschool partners are able to share their reports with the school personnel.

Mr. Freeman mentions that there is an active Parent Advisory Council (PAC) at the school and that either Mr. or Mrs. Guggenheim would be most welcome to join and to become involved in the school community.

After hearing everything that will be done to support their child, Mr. and Mrs. Guggenheim commit to going ahead with enrolling Allan in Kindergarten this year. They share their hopes and dreams for Allan: one of the most touching of these is the Guggenheim's wish that their son develops true friendships and is invited to his friends' birthday parties.

May - June > Transition Planning and Implementation

In mid-May, Mr. Yang visits the nursery school and introduces himself to Allan and the other children. He has some photos saved on his smart phone of NASA's New Horizons mission to explore the dwarf planet Pluto which helps him to make an immediate connection with Allan.

About a week later, Allan visits Ms Arevelo in her Kindergarten classroom and is happy to see his new friend Mr. Yang there too. Mr. Yang provides a tour of the school, showing Allan all around and introducing him to some of the people who work at the school such as the librarian, the custodian and the nice lady in the front office. Mr Yang takes digital photos of Allan in the classroom and in different locations in and outside of the school. These will be used in Allan's Kindergarten social story which will be ready for Allan to take home soon. Two more weekly visits are planned in addition to the regularly scheduled Kindergarten orientation day, where every child gets to attend for half an hour with a parent or family member. Mr Yang is present at each of these visits.

Staff at the nursery school have set up an opportunity for Allan and the other children who will ride the school bus to Kindergarten to have an experience on the bus before the summer break. One afternoon before the end of June, parents and children arrive at the nursery school where they all board the school bus. Safety rules are reviewed and an exciting ride around town ensues. As a follow-up, the Guggenheims purchase a toy school bus for Allan to play with during the summer.

July - August > Transition Planning and Implementation

During the month of July, Grandpa and Allan stop by the school's playground a few times before heading to the library or the splash park. By the middle of August, they begin to come several times per week. During the first few visits, Allan is quite alarmed by the sound of the school bell. Grandpa explains that the bell lets the children know when it's time for school to start, time for recess and lunch, and time to go home. By the end of summer, Allan barely notices the sound while he plays. He rushes with confidence to the structure where he is now brave enough to slide down the pole.

Mrs. Guggenheim contacts the parents of two children from Allan's nursery school who will also attend Allan's Kindergarten class in the fall, and invites them for lunch and playtime at their home. There are new kittens on the farm and the three children play happily with the kittens in the yard for much of the visit. Their parents plan a couple more play dates throughout the summer.

Allan's parents and Grandpa use the social story created by Ms Arevalo and Mr. Yang with Allan throughout the summer increasing the frequency near the end of August. The week before school starts, they read the story to Allan each night before bedtime. They remember what Ms Arevalo told them about young children and repetition. Unlike adults, children don't get bored with repeated use of books and toys. They often revisit these activities with the same level of interest and joy. Allan's parents notice that it's like the first reading each time they read his social story together. It's the predictability, knowing what's going to happen next, that brings him comfort. Allan is beginning to recognise some of the words in the book, and "reads" along with the adults.

At the end of August, Allan is thrilled to find a letter in the family mailbox addressed to him! It's from his new Kindergarten teacher, Ms Arevalo, and includes a photo of the two of them together at his June visit. She tells him how much she looks forward to seeing him when school begins, and lets him know she has ordered space Lego to add to the Kindergarten classroom. Allan has never received a letter before and carefully hangs the photo, the letter and the envelope it came in on the fridge with three alphabet magnets.

Last Two Weeks of August > Transition Planning and Implementation

Mr. Freeman, the school principal, is in the school during the last two weeks of August. One day, he notices Allan and his grandfather playing on the outdoor climbing structure. He comes out to the playground to greet them and talks about how excited he is about the upcoming school year. He wonders if Allan would like to go into the school. Allan shyly nods his head "yes" and takes Mr. Freeman's hand going into the building with grandpa following behind. They walk through the hallways, visit the gym, library and main office where Mr. Freeman has a desk. He offers Allan a glass of water and a sticker from the roll on his desk.

The following week, Ms Arevalo arrives to set up her Kindergarten classroom and notices Allan and his grandfather in the playground. She invites Allan to come in and help to organize the library centre. She ensures there are books about space, remembering this is a topic of interest for Allan. The space Lego has not yet arrived, but she hopes it will be here soon.

Kindergarten will begin right after the Labour Day Long weekend. Ms Arevalo has set up a staggered entry for the first week so that only 10 children attend at a time. She has arranged for Allan and his two nursery school friends to attend together on their first day and Mr. Yang will be there, too.

Beyond School Entry > Ongoing Collaboration and Planning Across Care Settings

The school clinicians have had a chance to observe Allan in Kindergarten and to discuss his adjustment with Ms Arevalo. They've read the profile in Allan's transition planning form, but are looking for more clinical detail as they develop his individual education plan (IEP). Fortunately, the Guggenheims have provided informed consent for such information sharing. This allows school staff to directly approach Dr. Marchuk, Andrew and Maureen to ask for their most recent reports. The ability to transfer knowledge in this way, between school and preschool systems, helps ensure a seamless transition for Allan.

Later in the fall, Ms Kelly phones to invite Allan to come back to visit the nursery school on an in-service day. This provides him with the opportunity for closure and a chance to reflect on and celebrate the learning he did as a preschooler. Mr. Guggenheim senior jumps at the opportunity to drive his grandson to nursery school again. This time as a "big kid", though.

Characters in Order of Appearance

Allan > Four and a half year-old boy

Claire Weins > Family support worker

Mr. and Mrs. Guggenheim > Allan's parents

Ms Kelly > Nursery school director

Lyla > Nursery school inclusion support staff

Debra > Child development worker

Maureen > Speech and language pathologist

Andrew > Occupational therapist

Mr. Guggenheim senior > Allan's grandfather

Jackie Border > Student services administrator

Dr. Marchuk > Child psychologist

Mr. Freeman > Principal

Mr. Yang > Guidance councillor

Ms Arevalo > Kindergarten teacher

Characters in this story are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons is purely coincidental.