

This information sheet looks at transition back to school. It looks at the particular issues raised by the Covid-19 lockdown but also transitions at other times which can be problematic for autistic children.

Covid-19 (Coronavirus)

The lockdown has been a difficult experience for all. However, some children have liked the isolation and have coped well; glad of the break from pressures and demands and enjoying the freedom. They may have been able to get up and go to bed later and choose their own activities. Others have really struggled and have found the lack of structure and routine extremely difficult.

When life eventually returns to some form of “normality”, we do not know what it is going to look like. We do not know when this is likely to happen either. This uncertainty creates much anguish. What is certain is that it is likely to be a difficult transition for all.

This information sheet has general advice about preparing for a return to school and other school transitions, but specific Covid-19 advice is included where appropriate.

Autism and managing change

Being able to cope with change depends on understanding why something is happening, what the underlying social rules are and having the coping strategies to overcome anxiety when things change unexpectedly.

Some autistic children may not have the communication skills and social understanding to understand why change is happening. Some may experience stress and anxiety when even minor changes in routine occur.

Others may have trouble problem solving due to inflexible thinking. This can make it difficult for them to imagine a different plan if the original plan has to change, leading to increased stress and anxiety.

Parents need to be prepared for increases in anxiety within their child and be able to reassure and help the young person acclimatise to the change. Autistic children may not recognise or communicate they are feeling anxious but may show their anxiety in changes in their behaviour.

Signs that you can look for that show your child may be feeling anxious include:

- Withdrawn
- Clingy
- Crying
- Wetting themselves or the bed
- Tummy ache
- Feeling sick
- Arguing or verbal aggression
- Physical aggression
- Increased sensory sensitivities/needs
- Increases in rigidity

School Transitions

Education is a partnership between the school, the parents, and the individual child. Both teachers and parents want children to be happy in school and schools have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments for autistic children.

Autistic children may find school difficult for several reasons including:

- Struggling to make and keep friends
- Taking longer to process information
- Understanding questions and text
- Difficulties with organisation and prioritising things
- Sensory differences
- Perfectionism
- Being misunderstood
- Misunderstanding other people
- Struggling with change
- Finding unstructured times e.g. breaks and lunch times difficult
- High anxiety levels
- Poor emotional regulation

School Transition comes in many different guises. It may be a big transition like starting school or moving from primary to secondary school or small transitions like transitioning between activities in a lesson.

Changing Schools

Once you know what school your child will be attending you can work with your child and feeder school on producing a passport or one to two-page profile about your child. This could outline what your child's interests, strengths and challenges are. It could also include how your child would like to be supported. It is useful to include indicators that your child is unhappy or anxious so teaching assistants and teachers can pick up on these signs and act before bigger problems occur. If your child has significant sensory differences, it is worth doing a separate sensory profile about your child and bullet pointing strategies that you and your child have found useful.

You could check with the feeder school what transition arrangements are in place for your child. All schools arrange visits to the new school, and many get children to complete transition booklets. It is worth checking with your child's current school if your child will get extra visits. If this is not the case, you may be able to arrange extra visits yourself. Some schools may produce social stories for your child to help them prepare for the change and some schools may produce virtual walk around school clips on their websites.

Some children are anxious about transitioning up to a new school. Common anxieties include:

Starting Primary School	Moving up to Secondary or High School
Feeling scared	Not making friends
Missing parent or carer	Being bullied
Getting lost	Getting lost
Not making friends	Not being able to do the work
Being bullied	Homework
Not liking the teacher	Travelling to and from school
Finding the work too hard or too easy	Not having the right books and equipment
What to do at break and lunch times	Not knowing what to do if there is a problem
What to do when you want the toilet	Not getting on with a teacher or teachers
Getting picked up at the end of the day	Getting into trouble

Talking to your child about changes/return to school

Autistic children should be given opportunity to express their fears. This can be done in a variety of ways depending on the child's age, stage of development and interests. For example, writing a worry diary, using a worry box or drawing how they are feeling.

You can pre-empt some of the anxiety by playing a what if ...? game. This entails having a bank of questions on a post-it notes or pieces of card e.g. What if I am bullied? Your child can pick a post it or a card and you can discuss the problem question and possible solution with your child. This could be extended to include some blank cards that your child could write on that you can then discuss. You could record the possible solutions on the back of the post it or card giving your child a permanent record that they can refer to as many times as they want or need to.

You could also discuss what will be similar and what will be different. This gives a balanced view, reassures your child that some things will be the same and counteracts any possible views that your autistic child may have that everything will be different.

Return to school strategies

A countdown visual to the start of a new school or going back to school may be helpful. This could be linked to their special interest by using an image of their special interest with a number on it showing the number of days to go before school starts. They can change the number as it gets nearer and nearer to the date that school starts. For older children they could do a countdown back to school by marking off the days on a calendar.

After a long time away from school you may have to gradually bring the getting up and going to bed times forward so they are used to waking up at a time that is early enough for them to get to school on time.

You could practice doing the school run. Your child could also practice putting on their school uniform. If your child has sensory sensitivities, you may need to wash new school uniforms a few times to get rid of the new feel and smell of the fabric.

You could colour code maps of the school and timetables and / or create visual timetables. Exercise books can also be colour coded to match the colour coding of the timetable e.g. blue is science, red is maths.

Working with school

If you and / or your child have specific anxieties and concerns, try and discuss them with someone in school as soon as possible so that things can be in place before your child returns.

If changing schools, it is a good idea to make an appointment to visit the school and meet the person responsible for special educational needs and the class or form teacher. You can then discuss your child and any additional needs they have and share the passport or one to two-page profile with them. You could take with you any questions that you and your child still have that you have not got answers to during school transition days. If your child has not been given a social story or has access to a virtual tour of the school you could ask if you could take photos or video parts of the school that you can show your child before they start. This would need to be done at the end of the school day when children are not in the school due to safeguarding measures that the school will have in place.

The following strategies may be helpful to your child and may be offered by school but if they are not you can suggest them.

- **Visual stress scales** e.g. a stress thermometer, or a traffic light system, 5-point scale to help regulate their emotions.
- **“Buddy” system** to link your child up with supportive peers to help during break and lunch times
- **“Brain break” or Time Out Card** if they need to remove themselves from the classroom for a short space of time. It is useful to clarify where your child should go at such times and make sure that your child knows this.
- **Home – school - book** to record things in that may be useful to know within school and at home. For older children it may be more appropriate to do this as an email between the class or form teacher and the parent. It is important that a balance of positive and negative things are recorded so it does not become a record of negative things.
- **Designated, named person** (preferably known to the child) in school, who the child trusts and who will check in with the child at the start, middle and end of the day.

If problems occur contact the school and discuss them at the earliest possible opportunity. Ask if the problems and outcomes of the conversation could be emailed to you or follow it up by emailing the school your interpretation of the problems and outcomes.

Remember when school has finished for the day some autistic children may feel stressed and / or exhausted. Identify with your child a routine that they can follow when school has finished for the day.

Coronavirus and returning to school

It may be helpful to support your child to express how the lockdown experience has been for them, this way they are starting with the familiar and what they know. This can be done by producing a "My Lockdown Experience" sheet which can be shared with the child's class teacher to help them understand how life has been for that child.

Include:

- What I liked
- Any significant events
- What was difficult?
- How did I learn best?
- What am I worried about, going back to school?

It may also be an idea to share with the teacher the vocabulary that has been used at home around Covid 19 e.g. "because of the germs"

If you have explained why they are in lockdown, then explaining why they will be coming out of lockdown is important. Be logical about it, give them the facts. This may be helpful for some children if it is in the form of a social story. This can be read many times with the child at a time when they are feeling happy and relaxed. You could try practicing social distancing rules.

Find out what changes are in place at school and share these with your child. If the school has not provided your child social stories or information about what will be different, create them yourself.

It is important to talk with the child about the positives of returning to school e.g. seeing friends again, there will be less people in school, they may be able to access other areas of school that they haven't been able or felt able to access before.

If you and / or your child have specific anxieties and concerns regarding returning, try and discuss them with someone in school as soon as possible. These can be discussed over the phone, email or using other technological tools like Zoom with a relevant member of the school staff.

If you suspect or experience your child not wanting to return to school and / or refusing to return to school after the summer holidays, you may be able to negotiate a gradual phased return to school by speaking with the person in school that is responsible for special educational needs and the person responsible for inclusion.

Useful Links

One page profile templates:

<http://www.sheffkids.co.uk/adultsite/pages/onepageprofiletemplates.html>

Starting primary school:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/collections/starting-primary-school/1>

Starting Secondary school:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/tags/zh4wy9q/starting-secondary-school/1>

Elsa Transition Resources:

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/?s=transition>

Autism Education Trust has lots of useful resources including:

Working together with Your Child's School:

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/?s=working+together+with+your+child%27s+school>

School stress and anxiety:

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/exclusions-resources/>

Schools re-opening and changes to SEND legislation:

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/back-to-school/>