

Newcastle City Council

Transition back to school for autistic pupils after Covid-19



June 2020

Transition back to school for autistic pupils after Covid-19

Every autistic child or young person (CYP) has a unique set of strengths and challenges. For many autistic young people, their neurodiversity can make transitions especially tricky. Transition back to school after a significant period away is likely to be especially challenging due to changes to the routine and structure of their day; changes to the familiar school environment, staffing and the CYPs in their class/'bubble'; and ongoing worries around the Covid-19 pandemic. Autistic CYPs are therefore likely to face increased levels of anxiety regarding their return to school.

Careful planning and preparation will be crucial to manage and reduce this anxiety. Clear structures and routines which are communicated clearly in a way the CYP can understand will be vital to support emotional regulation, thus allowing for a smooth transition. Co-production with CYP and families should be at the heart of this.

Before the return to school

- Gather experiences and views from parents/carers. This could include information about the family lockdown experience (including any illness or bereavement), what has worked well/not so well for the CYP, which vocabulary the family has used to discuss Covid-19 (e.g. Coronavirus, Covid), views on the return to school (parents/cares and CYP) and main worries and concerns.
- Gather experiences and views from the CYP. This could include the use of a 'lockdown experience' recording sheet or journal.
- Complete a new one-page profile/CYP passport to be shared with all staff involved in teaching/supporting the CYP. This should be co-produced with parents/carers and the CYP. Ensure you include any significant lockdown experiences, new 'triggers' and new interests.
- Identify a key worker/ adult to reassure the CYP and support them during their transition back into school. Ideally, the child should have a 'back to school chat' with this person, either virtually or as their first experience upon returning to school. This could be supported by a 'talking mat'.
- Plan to minimise the number of changes for the CYP e.g. if their class is to be split into groups, try to keep the CYP in a familiar room with preferred peers and staff (where possible).

Co-produce a personalised transition plan

Using the above information, co-produce a personalised plan to support transition back into school. In advance of the return, provide:

- As much notice as possible about when the CYP will return to school.
- A detailed timetable clearly explaining which days / times the CYP will attend, where they will be, what they will be doing and who they will be with (staff / peers).
- An electronic or printed transition booklet/guide. This could include:
 - Visual information showing what will be the same and what will be different (classroom, adults, peers, environmental changes etc.)
 - Visual schedules and social stories explaining any new rules, routines and expectations (e.g. social distancing, what a bubble is, how to enter school, how to get lunch, where to go at break). Photos should be taken from a child's eye level.
 - Explanation about why any new rules are required.
 - Photographs and information about any new staff.
- Short videos explaining any new rules, routines and expectations from a child's eye-level. Some children would greatly benefit from a video explaining each part of the transition from the school gate to their seat in the classroom.
- Information about any additional adjustments to support wellbeing and happiness during the transition period (e.g. arriving / leaving school earlier / later than peers).

During and after the return to school

- Reduce the demands which are placed on the child.
- Plan activities that the child enjoys or that are based on a child's special interest.
- Plan 'special interest time' – the child could either engage in or talk about their special interest for a specified period (a visual timer could be used to support this).
- The CYP's anxiety levels may be high, so ensure that there is a calm space for the CYP access safely. Provide additional opportunities for sensory breaks or 'chill time' (planned and responsive to the child's needs). For some children this will involve extra sensory input and for others it may be a break from the social demands of the classroom.
- Provide regular 'check-ins' with the child's key person. This could be supported using a 'talking mat'.
- Maintain frequent home school communication to ensure that the CYP's successes are celebrated and any challenges are identified and addressed.

Useful links

Northumberland Educational Psychology Service 'Padlet' – a wide range of information and resources to support a return to school, including example lockdown recording sheets, transition booklets, talking mats and social stories.

https://padlet.com/nies1/return_to_school

STARS Coronavirus resources (see 'Transition Resources')

<http://www.starsteam.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>

Social stories about returning to school (there are further examples of social stories on the Northumberland 'Padlet' and STARS Coronavirus resources, above):

<https://static.lgfl.net/Covid19%20Social%20Story%20School%20is%20Opening.pdf>

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cFYEs1oBS1qO5G7IM7rljTYDMEQfMOy/view>

Schudio TV Webinar – Preparing autistic and SEND children for going back to school

<https://www.schudio.tv/courses/preparing-autistic-send-children-for-going-back-to-school>

Schudio TV Webinar – The big transitions for autistic and SEND CYPs after lockdown

<https://www.schudio.tv/courses/the-big-transitions-for-autistic-and-send-CYPs-after-lockdown>

Creative Education Webinar – Support a safe and successful return to school using the SWAN framework

<https://elearning.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/support-a-safe-successful-return-to-school-using-the-swan-framework/#learndash-course-content>

Learning disability Matters – Covid-19 resources, advice and support

<https://learningdisabilitymatters.co.uk/covid-19/>

National Autistic Society links and support

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus.aspx>

CAMHS Resources - bank of useful resources to support mental health and well-being

www.camhs-resources.co.uk

For bespoke transition support and resources for individual pupils, please contact Caroline Broadfoot or David Mcleod (SENTASS Specialist Teachers for Communication and Interaction).

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