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COVID-19 & Children with Additional Needs: Preparing for the Return to School

Different Emotional Responses

- The coronavirus outbreak has caused major disruptions to daily life and routines.
- As every child is different, what might be considered positives about these changes for one child, could be seen as negatives by another.
- While the return to school may be welcome and exciting for many students, others may be feeling anxious or frightened.
- Children and young people will respond in different ways to challenging experiences. Remember, the same child may have different responses from day-to-day.

Parent Responses

- It is very important to remember that children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. If parents seem overly worried, children's anxiety may rise.
- Manage your own worries and stress first. If you notice that you are feeling stressed, take some time to calm down before trying to have a conversation or answer your child's questions.
- Be mindful of what we say (our words), how we say it (body language, facial expression, tone of voice) and what we do (our behaviour). What you say and do about COVID-19, current prevention efforts, and related events can either increase or decrease your children's stress.

Routines and Consistency

- Many children with additional needs prefer familiar routines and find unexpected change hard.
- The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place. Children with additional needs often take comfort in familiar habits, so they know what is going to happen every day.
- Children may respond best to a consistent approach and this is likely to be interrupted during a transition period, such as returning to school after lockdown. They are likely to cope better and gradually adapt if they can prepare for changes in advance.



Create consistent daily routines

- Start aligning waking and sleep times to that of school if possible
- Establish a morning routine and keep it consistent
- Align meal times to what to the time they will be on the return to school



On the first day of school

It can be a little daunting to have all 'new' clothes, bag, lunchbox, pencils, beaker etc.

- Buy these gradually over the summer, and allow your child to try them out and get used to them
- Practice getting dressed for school
- Give your child their lunch in their lunchbox a few times during the holidays.
- Try to pick bags and lunchboxes that the child can open themselves if possible, and practise doing.

Keep Routines Consistent After the Return to School

- When adapting to a new routine, consistency is important
- Try to avoid any disruptions and keep the daily routines familiar and consistent until your child is well settled.

Communicating Effectively

Why Use Visuals?

- Using visual supports, children see what is coming up next and what they are doing.
- Visual supports can help your child to understand what will be happening and reinforce verbal communication.
- This provides predictable order to their day and can reduce stress and anxiety.

How Can I Use Visuals to Prepare?

- Visual Schedule (daily/morning/bedtime routines over summer holidays)
- Mark the day of the return to school on a calendar. Encourage the child to check off the days until that day.
- Show your child photos of their school and school staff they will meet (teacher/SNA/principal/secretary/caretaker) and their classroom and classmates.
- Make a book of photos, or a collection of images on their device, so that they can look at it before and during the return to school.
- On the day of the return to school, a visual timetable can be useful to explain exactly what will be happening.
- Create a social story (example at end of tipsheet)
- Ask the school/teachers for information in advance about
 - What will be the same
 - What will be different
 - Rules for social distances
- Add this information to Visuals/Social Stories so that you can individualise them for your child.



Refamiliarising and Reconnecting



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Refamiliarising

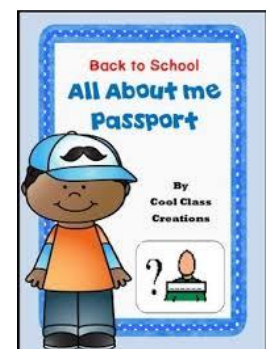
- If possible, arrange with school for you and your child school to visit before it officially reopens.
- If a visit is not realistic, you could arrange a meeting (virtual or face-to-face) with their teacher.
- If this is also not practical, you could ask the school to take a few photos of key places in the school – a visual tour – and share these with your child.
- That way, your child can familiarise themselves with their school environment again, see their teacher and get used to the layout of the school. They may feel reassured to know that some things have not changed.
- Drive past the school and/or use Google Maps to look at the school
- Remind your child of the people they might be meeting again by mentioning their names & showing them photos of them (e.g. teachers, SNAs, classmates, secretary, caretaker...)
- Ask the school if they can send photos if you do not have them.

Reconnecting

- Due to social distancing and restrictions, friendships may have weakened. Reconnecting and rebuilding relationships and friendships will be important.
- If/when safe and appropriate, arrange activities that involve school friends over the remaining summer holidays.
- Safe and monitored use of online games, social media and video chat programmes can provide great opportunities for children to reconnect with their school friends while at home too. This should be balanced with offline activities such as time outdoors.

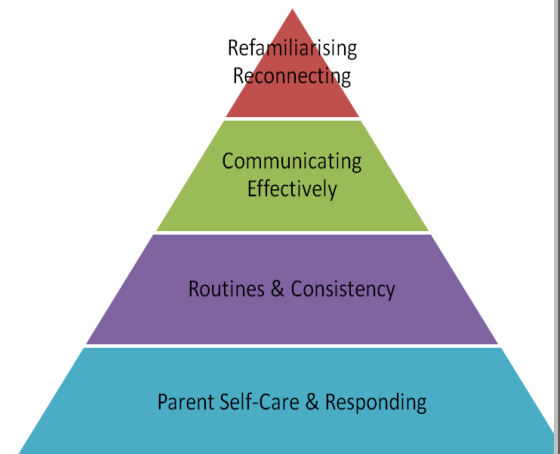
New Class/New School

- As the lock lockdown period brought an early end to the school year, the usual preparation that would be done with all pupils for their transition to the next school year will be reduced
- This will be particularly challenging for children who were starting school, moving from primary to secondary school, and those who are leaving school.
- Use a 'Pupil Profile'/'passport' to outline key facts about your child to their new education staff/school including their;
 - Interests, strengths, needs, likes, dislikes
 - Communication strategies, sensory profile
 - How they could be supported in school
- Liaise with your child's education staff from last year if needed to fill this



Managing Anxiety

- **Look out for signs** of anxiety and support the person to express how they are feeling. Signs might not be obvious or may 'look' like something else (e.g anger)
- **All the strategies mentioned above help to reduce anxiety and worry**
- **Reassure children** about safety measures in place to keep students and teachers healthy and remind children that they can also help prevent germs spreading by washing their hands with soap and coughing or sneezing into their elbow.
- **Remind children about the positives** – that they will be able to see their friends and teachers (if they are physically returning to the classroom) and continue learning new things.



- **Distraction** For some children with additional needs, identifying negative thoughts and turning them into positive thoughts can be too difficult. For these children, distraction may initially be a better approach. The child can be encouraged to do something they enjoy that would distract him/her from negative feelings.
- **Make Anxious Thoughts Visual and Concrete.** Anxious or negative thoughts can be written down and then destroyed, stepped on, buried, erased or scratched out. A worry jar is another option here. The child can be encouraged to fill the jar with negative thoughts, rather than their head. Children could also be encouraged to blow their anxious thoughts away, by blowing bubbles or blowing up a balloon. This also uses deep breathing techniques which can help calm and soothe.

Schedule 'Chat Time'

- This is only appropriate for children who experience excessively frequent worry rather than those who occasionally worry.
- 'Chat time' can be scheduled for a particular time of the day (in the evening, not too close to bedtime, often works well).
- The child can be encouraged to say "I don't need to worry about this now, I can do it later". This gives the child/adolescent a sense of control over their worry.

1. Praise the child for managing to put aside their worries until now

2. Listen to their child's worries

3. Use problem solving to deal with the worries

4. After the worry time the child should be distracted into something fun/absorbing

5. After worry time, parents should avoid getting sucked into more discussion about worries until the next scheduled time.



After School

Build-Up Throughout The School Day

- During the initial weeks of school, many children will experience tiredness while adjusting to the longer day and new routine. Reduce demands on the child when they return from school.
- Some children show little or no obvious changes in behaviour until crisis point (i.e. go 0 – 100 quickly with no apparent cause)
- This is often a result of dealing with complex social environment, language demands and sensory needs all day.
- They experience a build up of small stressors throughout the day. Then something minor can trigger outburst.
- For many children, this stress cake builds during the school day, but they understand that they must hold it together in school. But as soon as they get into the car or in the door at home, the slightest thing might set them off. So even though the root of the problem might occur in school - home is where all of the meltdowns occur.



Chill-Out/Quiet Time

- During the initial weeks of school, many children will experience tiredness while adjusting to the longer day and new routine. This is especially true for children with additional needs. Possible supports include:
 - Lower demands when child returns from school
 - Delay start of homework
 - Use a visual schedule
 - Schedule 'quiet time'
 - Support the child to engage in a relaxation activity
 - Give the child some space
 - Give time to engage in special interests



Further Resources

- <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/health-emergencies/> Sesame Street video on health emergencies and changes for children
- https://youtu.be/XQ94znZw_0w?list=PLk5q7adkkneQ-GLNaBNVMMB7DGYxKXthZ South Lee ASD Team 'Coping with Covid-19' child and parent version
- South Glos Parents and Carers "Going Back to School After Covid-19"
<https://www.sglospc.org.uk/coronavirus-social-stories> (South Glos Parents and Carers, 2020)
- Reachout ASC by Lynn McCann – "Coronavirus, home & School and Transition resources"
<https://www.reachoutasc.com/resources/transition-to-new-class>
- See <https://southleeasd.wordpress.com/transition-to-primay-school/> for 'pupil profile/pupil passport' in transition packs