

Transitioning autistic children back to school after COVID- 19

Introduction

It has been a strange period for us all and getting back to normal will take a long time.

It is important that we don't jump straight back in with what we were doing before March and that we take time to consider a transition for all children, not just those with autism.



How has COVID-19 affected children with autism?

Many schools have closed but some children whose parents/carers/families are key workers, or those who have EHCPs and it has been determined that it is best for them to be at school, have been attending school throughout the lockdown.

Many families have chosen to keep their children at home throughout.

Lots of families have reported a reduction in anxiety from their autistic child from not attending school.

Reasons autistic children find transitions difficult

Not being informed of what is happening

Not knowing the expectations

Sensory issues

Not being given enough time to process changes

Not being given enough information

Being comfortable in their current situation and not wanting it to change

Unsuccessful transitions

No planning

No preparations

No communication between the parties – home, the child, and the school in this case



Preparations before returning






It is important that the child is informed of what will be happening. It may be that they are only coming in on certain days or times to start with.



Lessons will be different than before – try and get a timetable to the child at least a week before returning so that they can process it. Keep them informed of any other changes with enough time to process them.

It will be important for children to know if they are going to be in a different classroom, have a different teacher, if break and lunch times are changing and so on before coming back to school.

Preparations before returning

Timetables will support the understanding of changes to the routine. They can be in a variety of formats – whatever works best for the child. They can be symbols, pictures, or just writing. Some children will want to know the whole week, some a day, and some just what is happening now and next.

 Monday							
 Tuesday							
 Wednesday							
 Thursday							
 Friday							

 Now	 Next

Preparations before returning

It is also important for them to know the things that are staying the same, so all the changes are not too overwhelming and there are some familiarities, as this will bring comfort. This could be communicated as 'you will be in the same classroom, but it will look a little bit different'.

We suggest **taking some photos** of the new environment and sending them to the child before their return. This will be helpful for the child to have an idea of what to expect.

It will also be worth familiarising them with things around the school again – perhaps a photo of where the toilets are, what their teacher looks like, and where the dining area is.



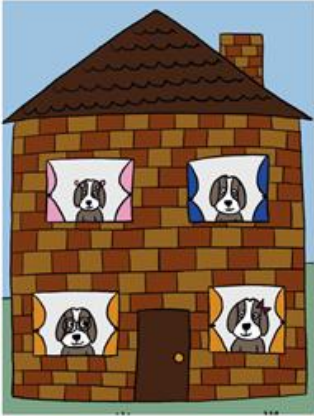
Preparations before returning

Producing a social story or a booklet could help communicate the changes.

We have created an editable booklet that you can use to explain to the children what is going to be happening.

The details need to be clear and have reasons why you are making these changes. Try to make it unambiguous. The more details, the better.

Example pages from 'going back to school' story



We started year ... in a classroom.

Because of covid-19 we have spent some time at home, to try and stop the spread of the virus.

We did our school work at home and did different activities.



We must try not to touch other people or their things, so this means we need to have our own pencil case and water bottles.

We cannot share these things at the moment.



We need to try and practice 'social distancing' which means we should try to stay around 2 metres away from anyone else, apart from the people we live with.

Some people may wear masks so that they don't spread any bugs.

This may look different but its OK.



Preparations before returning

Ensure that a quiet or safe space is available as we may find children being more overwhelmed and more sensitive initially, because they have not been in this sort of environment for a while.

It may be worth trying to create a **calmer space** overall by taking down overloaded displays on the walls around the school and classroom.



Consider their lockdown experience

Everyone will have had a different experience of lockdown. For some children with autism, they may have enjoyed not having as much social interaction. For others, the change in routine and not going to school may have caused a lot of anxiety.

Some children may not be happy about coming back to school and this may be causing them anxiety.

Some may have had a traumatic time during lockdown due to the big changes and not being able to follow their usual routine.


Consider their lockdown experience

We have created some visuals that you could use either before the child returns or on their return. This may give us an insight to how they enjoyed lockdown and support us with their transition.




What did you like?



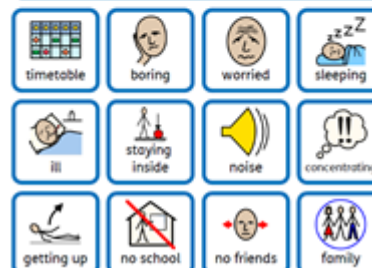



Did anything happen?





What was difficult?





How did you learn best?



Consider their lockdown experience

Whilst in lockdown, the pressure and demands to communicate with others has been less. Online communication may have suited a lot of autistic people as there is less reliance on reading others' body language and more time to process information.

The communication demands from school may be a shock for a lot of autistic children.



Practical planning for schools

There needs to be a transition period. Schools and children cannot go back to being exactly as they were before.

Autistic children cannot be expected to cope with these changes without support in place.

Schools should try and implement a transition curriculum where the focus is on transitioning children back to school and back into a routine.

They are not going to be used to such an intense day, so we also need to build their stamina back up.

Practical planning for schools

The focus during the transition curriculum shouldn't be on academics, but the well-being and mental health of the children.

It should be about compassion – remembering that a lot of children may have lost someone close to them.

Going back to school will be very difficult for a lot of children, not just autistic children.



Practical planning for schools

Other considerations -

Staggered starts – explanations may be needed as to why this is happening.

Play/break time – how will this look and how will you ensure all children understand this?

One-way systems – clear explanations around this and visuals to support such as arrows.

Others coughing – some children will be fearful and more aware of this so ensure you know what to say and do.

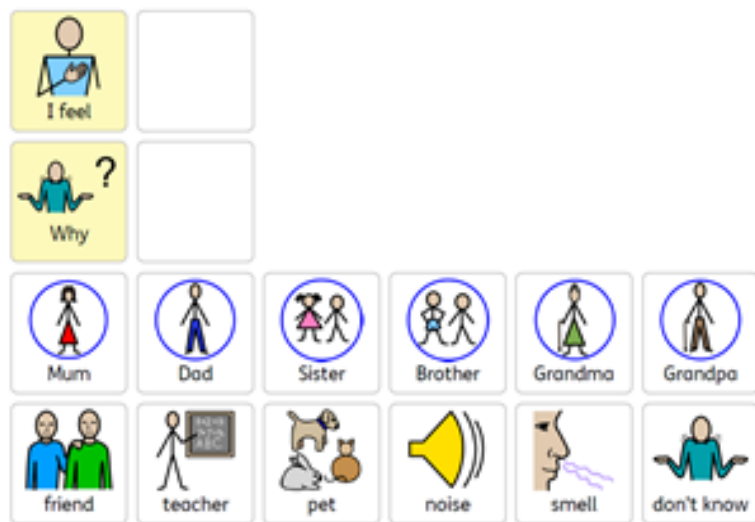
Behaviour policy – consider any alterations that might need to be done to your behaviour policy temporarily.

Feelings

Using a visual feelings board can help us to understand how the child is feeling if they struggle to verbalise this.

Some children will be able to choose from a large selection but others will find it easier to choose from a few different ones so cutting these up will be beneficial.

Some children may not be able to tell you why but may be able to choose a broad reason.



Practical planning for schools

Some of the key things that we will need to work on during the transition/recovery curriculum are:

- Building relationships with both their peers and adults
- Following routines
- Re-learning skills that may have been lost
- Confidence and self-esteem building
- Learning new skills such as social distancing, queuing, independent playtime
- Building stamina
- Mental health
- Sensory issues
- Having less flexibility

<https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

Remember...

You may find that the children with autism are showing more signs of stimming as they try to self-regulate.

They have been in an environment at home where they have probably been able to take sensory breaks when needed, so these may need to be increased at school for a while.

Conclusion

School is going to be a very different place than it was when the children were last in, and we need to be sensitive to this.

It is going to take time to get back to where we were before, but we don't need to rush or force it. Everyone is in the same situation!

Children are going to learn best when they are in an environment where they feel safe and happy so that should be our focus to start with.

This is new for everyone so all we can do is try to prepare as best as possible.

Preparation is key!

Suggested resources

For a copy of any the resources that you have seen in this presentation, please contact theautismservice@cognus.org.uk

- 'Going back to school' information story
- Lockdown experience
- Feelings board
- Visual timetable templates and symbols



Cognus

Thinking about ... Education