

Supporting children with social distancing

Supporting children with autism to transition back into school following lockdown is a difficult task. Preparing our pupils for a successful transition is key.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbQocWHSiUQ&t=6s>

The following list highlights some key issues to consider and resources to support your journey.

Avoid known anxiety triggers so that children are less likely to need physical support. Wherever possible, prioritise preferred activities that will support the child's confidence and familiarity with the school environment, especially in the early days and weeks. A risk assessment may be required to ensure staff have a clear understanding of how best to support each child.

Provide time and a safe space to accept their anxiety about returning to school. Find out what elements are causing anxiety about returning to school and provide the information they need to alleviate these, where possible.

<https://phoenixlearningcare.co.uk/assets/Tuesday%20-%20Helping%20children%20with%20additional%20needs%20cope%20with%20difficult%20emotions.pdf>

Develop a clearly structured (possibly new) routine to the school day. Try to start with the familiar where possible and introducing the concepts of new routines gradually. All children will benefit from the use of visuals to support their understanding of new routines, for example, pictures that show how to line up or videos to show how things are different in the classrooms. Consider physical and/or visual markers within the environment to demonstrate space allocation for social distancing such as tape on the floor, clear boundaries for desk space, use of equipment.

For examples, please see <https://www.oakfield.hants.sch.uk/>

<https://www.widgit.com/resources/popular-topics/back-to-school-june/index.htm>

Build regular handwashing into the regular routine of the day. Ensure it is part of the daily visual schedule.

https://www.kingwood.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Handwashing_techniques-NHS.pdf

Support the child to understand the changes as far as possible. Some children may benefit from social stories that explain the new routines and expectations. For an example, please see

<http://www.services.derbyshire.gov.uk/Services/2667>

<https://www.reachoutasc.com/resources/transition-to-new-class>

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

If a child regularly relies on physical comfort from an adult, they may need an alternative way of getting this sensory feedback. For example, if a child normally sits on an adult's knee for a story, they may be able to use a cushion with a wipeable or washable cover. *The DFE are advising removal of all unnecessary soft furnishings and toys which are hard to clean, therefore, it is important to ensure that sensory equipment must be stored safely, regularly cleaned and used only by one person. Please check current and up to date guidance.* If toys and other sensory equipment can't be immediately cleaned, ensure that they are not shared between children, can be stored safely between use and cleaned/ rotated daily.

Moving some activities to a different location may help to break the association with physical contact, for example, if a child normally cuddles up in the reading corner to share a story, try a different location in school.

Teach children how to give themselves a hug and/ or to provide self-massage to their hands or lower arms. This could be accompanied by a song, e.g. 'This is the way we hug ourselves, hug ourselves, hug ourselves...' It will help if the familiar adult models the activity alongside the child to provide positive reinforcement. See: <https://educationsvoice.wordpress.com/2016/10/25/mindfulness-in-the-classroom-mindful-hand-massage/> Also see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xa_qNH8u3OM for a Sesame Street video about giving yourself a hug.

Provide lots of activities to meet the child's sensory needs. Activities that provide proprioceptive input can be particularly helpful to soothe a sensitive nervous system. These can include physical activities, for example, riding a bike, trike or scooter, climbing on a climbing frame, hanging from the monkey bars (if they can be cleaned after use) or 'heavy work' that involving pushing and pulling (e.g. sweeping with a brush or digging in the garden). Other activities that may be helpful are those that encourage squeezing and pushing with the hands, for example, squeezing a stress ball. Tactile sensory activities using resources that can be disposed of after use may help some children, for example, playing with dry pasta, rice or homemade dough or 'slime'. For further information and ideas for activities, see: <https://sensory-processing.middletonautism.com/sensory-strategies/strategies-according-to-sense/proprioceptive/>

Virus transmission is known to be reduced outdoors so encourage outdoor activities as often as possible. Request that children bring waterproofs and wellies (and staff too!)

Hope this guide has been helpful.

Autism Outreach Team