

From mountain to sea

Educational Psychology Service **Returning to school: Supporting autistic learners***

Autism

How can school and parents support autistic learners to return to school following the COVID 19 lockdown

Autistic learners often need support or adjustments because of the way they experience the world and absorb information. Although children/young people are individuals and have a variety of needs, the patterns commonly associated with autism will mean that in a school setting the child or young person may need help to overcome the following barriers to learning:

- Sensory difficulties in responding to stimulation from noise, crowds, light, and processing their responses.
- Social communication and understanding how to relate to and take the perspective of others, and interpreting intent. Relationships may be difficult to form or maintain.
- Thinking style can appear rigid and difficulty in changing and adapting to new information can mean learning and adapting or transferring skills may be difficult, and they may prefer facts to 'grey area' thinking.
- Motivation impact from coping within a social system which relies often on skills which they find difficult.
- Stress and Anxiety is common as the world can seem confusing and vague in its rules and expectations. Many autistic learners feel a constant level of anxiety which can be higher than for others, and this anxiety can increase very easily.

How can schools help autistic learners to overcome these barriers to learning when they return?

The following advice is taken from the National Autism Implementation Team.

- Routines and relationships may require re-establishing.
- Autistic children and young people may require individualised support which is in line with their developmental stage and their environment. Expectations should be appropriate in work being undertaken, including understanding the change in circumstances, coping with different routines, and communicating their feelings.

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- Staff should be anticipatory – don't just 'see how it goes'- expect that some difficulties in supporting young people in transition will require extra consideration.
- Listen to parents – use time to listen to what parents have noticed, what they have been working on, and any information that might be helpful in supporting the young person cope with challenges.
- Provide a safe space for child to regulate – specific and open – might mean different things and may be lots of places e.g. tents or cloth over a table. This place should be used by child for support (**not** sent at times of challenging behaviour).
- Offer movement breaks to calm or regulate.
- Ensure that the school experience is predictable on a day to day basis.
- Where possible, show don't tell – use visual supports where possible, including social stories in pictures to help build the child's expectations and 'picture' of the future.
- Seek to understand the child's motivation in their behaviour – and avoid language based 'post-match analysis' of behaviour.
- Have clarity in what is allowed and not allowed in clear terms.
- Where possible have two identified members of staff who know the young person and can support them if difficulties arise.
- Sharing specific photographs of classroom to help child or young person predict their new environment are likely to be helpful. Virtual walk arounds or if possible, walk-arounds if available are invaluable to autistic learner. Further resources including useful tips for different age groups and parents can be found online as follows: <https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/>

The Educational Psychology Service are often involved in supporting transitions and we have developed some materials about transitions in general on our website.

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/as/aberdeenshireeps/transition/>

We have also been developing a number of resources specific to Covid 19 and you can find more information on autism specific ideas and resources here.

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/as/aberdeenshireeps/coronavirus-covid-19/>

*we use the term autistic learner or autistic children in line with the Autism Toolbox but we are aware that the complex nature of autism gives rise to a range of personal and professional perspectives and terminology preferences.

<http://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/understanding-autism-terminology>