

NAIT Key messages for returning to school

Introduction

The following key messages have been agreed through consultation with the autism community including: autistic people, parents of autistic individuals, professionals from health, education and third sector.

This set of key messages have been particularly tailored to take account of the current context we find ourselves in as a result of COVID-19.

They are designed to guide planning for the return to school for autistic children and young people and those with related needs. Further guidance about each of these key messages can be found at www.thirdspace.scot/NAIT

1. Ensure adjustments are anticipatory
2. Listen to parents
3. Provide predictability
4. Use visual supports
5. Provide a Safe Space
6. Plan for movement breaks
7. Seek to understand distressed behaviour

Additionally at the secondary stage

8. Two Key Adults

1. Ensure adjustments are anticipatory

The Equality Act (2010) requires 'reasonable adjustments' and states that these should be 'anticipatory' - Let's not just see how it goes!

Taking an anticipatory approach at this time means we need to find out about the learner's recent experiences and really try to get to know the child's strengths, needs and preferences. It is important to take time to plan and prepare before they return to school.

2. Listen to parents

After such a long time together with their child and young person, parents and carers may have a new, unique and fresh insight from engaging with them at home and trying to support their learning.

Communicating with parent/ carers in advance of the return to school will provide an additional perspective and additional insight into the family context and individual needs and preferences.

Parents/ carers will have made different decisions about the balance of time spent doing structured school work or other regulating activities, based on each family and child/ young person circumstances and we may be able to learn a lot from this.

It is important that school staff are sensitive to parent/ carer's feelings and worries that they may be viewed as having not done the 'right thing' or what they think was expected by the school. Often reassurance is helpful.

3. Provide predictability

Predictability helps to reduce anxiety. Disrupted expectations increase anxiety. By understanding current concerns and creating the right environment the return to school will feel more predictable.

4. Use visual supports

An individual visual timetable is recommended for all children with ASD.

It can support predictability and desirability each day. It supports transitions and managing familiar and unfamiliar as well as unexpected and expected events. The length and type of timetable depends on the child's stage.

In addition you may use a whole class visual timetable.

- It is a sequence of symbols usually organised from left to right.
- On the left is the current activity square and the rest of the symbols indicate the sequence of events for all or part of a day.
- When an activity is finished the child put the symbol in a finished pocket and puts the next activity on the current activity square.
- The child is taught to use it and the adults support it by ensuring that it is true (i.e. the symbol on the current activity square is what is happening now) and that it is accessible and visible.

Other developmentally appropriate visual supports are recommended for autistic learners. They can be objects, photographs, symbols or written words. They can be printed and laminated for regular use or can be hand written on a white board, paper or a Post-It. They are often used with Velcro on the back for easy attachment and removal, although this is not compulsory.

Visual supports are used alongside other supports or interventions for children with a range of communication support needs, including autism. They are a relatively low cost support, although families may need assistance to print, laminate and put them together or to find helpful ways to organise and store them as the number of symbols increases.

Visual supports are used in education settings, at home and in the community.

The benefits of using visual supports which match the child's stage and current needs include:

- reducing anxiety
- increasing predictability and desirability of day to day experiences
- supporting understanding
- supporting expressive communication
- supporting positive social routines and interaction with others
- supporting successful transitions and help prepare for change

As a result, they can improve motivation, engagement and participation in the child or young person.

Visual support resources and guidance can be found at <https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources/>

5. Provide a Safe Space

A Safe Space is an area of the learning environment where a child can choose to go when they feel overwhelmed or need time and space to regulate behaviour. Safe Spaces should be:

- Readily accessible to the child so that they can go safely and independently when they need to
- Available whenever they are needed by the child, for as long as they are needed
- Specific to one child, with their name on it and not a shared space

In some classes you may need several individual Safe Spaces for different learners. It can be different things in different settings, e.g. a cloth over a table, a pop up tent or a high backed chair in a quiet area.

6. Plan for movement breaks

Everybody benefits from physical movement. It makes it easier to focus attention, be ready to learn and enjoy activities. It reduces feelings of being overwhelmed or overloaded. Movement can be calming or 'regulating'.

Some children tend to lose focus when they are still or seated for a period of time. Others may be over-stimulated by events and activity or simply by noises, smells and busyness in the immediate environment. Movement breaks are used to provide sensory input through joints and muscles that is intense enough to calm those children who are over-excited, or to alert children who are feeling sleepy. The same activity can be effective for both.

A movement break (sometimes called a sensory break) is a planned activity that is different from what you have just been doing. They are predictable and desirable; they have a clear start and finish.

Movement breaks can:

- be for one child or for a group of children together
- be timetabled across the day (e.g. every half hour) or happen at regular times (e.g. just before lunch or before reading a story)
- help to regulate a child before a less preferred activity
- provide an opportunity to step away from an activity and return
- support transition between two activities (e.g. maths – movement break – Assembly)
- be adapted to suit a child's interests or motivations e.g. include a favourite song or character
- require no equipment
- be fun!

Movement breaks work best when they are planned at regular intervals across the day. Providing predictable and engaging movement opportunities can help a child to retain a calm and regulated state and to avoid getting to a point where they are bored, frustrated or distressed.

Movement breaks can meet a range of sensory needs and preferences. Not all are desirable for every child. Knowing what kind of movement a child likes and does not like will help you to choose from these ideas. If a child is not enjoying an activity or expresses discomfort, stop and do not repeat.

7. Seek to understand distressed behaviour

The mindset with which we view distressed behaviour, affects how we respond to it.

Some distressed behaviour in the child/ young person might be expected and there also may be some unexpected distress, even when everyone has done their best to prepare and plan. Having a good, up to date knowledge of the individual's recent and current day to day experiences could help in understanding and supporting children and young people.

The signs they show that they are becoming distressed may have changed and some who previously used 'regulation' strategies in school, may need to relearn these. The child/ young person and their parents/carers may be able to share useful ideas and strategies for avoiding or responding to distress. There may be sources of stress outside the context where they show the distress and it is important to communicate between school and home to better understand this.

In order to understand distressed behaviour school staff can:

- Seek to understand 'why?'
- Identify potential triggers or explanations for the distress
- Avoid 'post match analysis' with the child

- Make adaptations to avoid the same situation arising again

8. Two Key Adults

In the often large and complex context of a secondary school it can be difficult for an autistic young person and their parents or carers to know who to contact and confusing trying to work out what to do when a staff member is unavailable.

It is therefore recommended that each autistic young person should have two consistent key adults, ideally including one from the Senior Leadership Team, to be key contacts and a conduit for communicating with the wider school staff.

If the young person needs to seek support or advice during the school day, they should be prepared and know how to access one or both adults. Should one be absent, the other may be available, making it more likely that any concerns or incidents are dealt with in a timely manner.

To support this team approach, any email, written communication or planning meeting should include both key adults.

This is particularly important at this time of transition.