

Supporting pupils with Autism Spectrum Condition and Social Communication Needs to return to School

All of us have gone through the most unusual, challenging and unprecedented events in living memory.

The coronavirus outbreak and lockdown has affected us all. Not least in terms of our mental health - leading to increased levels of anxiety and stress. It is likely that pupils will feel anxious about returning to school.¹

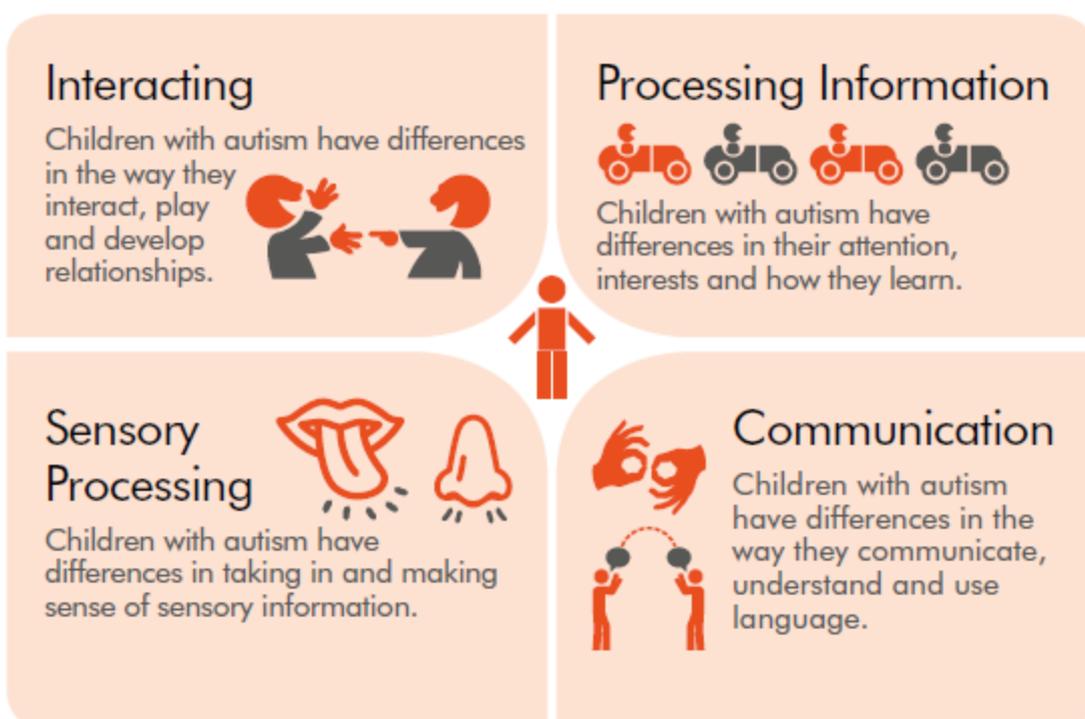
All pupils have experienced loss of routine, structure, friendship, opportunity and freedom during the pandemic. It is unrealistic to expect any child to return to school and resume their education where they left off.²

For pupils with autism, this transition may present with additional challenges and anxieties.

Children with autism experience differences in the following areas:

Four key areas of difference

Every child with autism will have a range of abilities within each of these areas. Many children with autism have high levels of anxiety as a result of these differences.



¹ <https://beaconschoolsupport.co.uk/newsletters/the-new-normal-returning-to-school-after-COVID-19>

² Barry Carpenter (2020), *Recovery Curriculum*.
<https://barrycarpentereducation.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/recovery-curriculum-loss-and-life-for-our-children-and-schools-post-pandemic.pdf>

Schools will need to be mindful of these differences and help to promote positive mental health and wellbeing. Create opportunities for pupils to share their worries during the school day. Examples could include:

1. Frequent **check-ins** and **de-briefings** for pupils to share their feelings. This can be done verbally or using a non-verbal cue such as thumbs up/ down
2. **Mood board** containing visual symbols for pupils to share their feelings.
3. Explicitly **teach emotional regulation** skills to support pupils recognise how they are feeling and support their problem solving skills. Zones of Regulation provides a helpful framework to support teachers

<https://occupationaltherapy.com.au/learning-self-regulation-with-the-zones-of-regulation/#:~:text=Created%20by%20Occupational%20Therapist%20and%20Autism%20Resource%20Specialist%2C,and%20improve%20their%20overall%20ability%20to%20problem%20solve.>

4. Using a **Five Point Scales** allow pupils to share how they are feeling. They can also be used by adults as a method of verbally exploring with the pupil how they might be feeling particularly if the pupil is struggling to regulate their emotions themselves. A Five Point Scale could show a pictorial representation, colour and number to help pupils share how they are feeling
<https://www.5pointscale.com/>
5. Ensure that pupils have a **safe base** to turn to **if they need time out** of the classroom. Arrange this with them at a time when they are calm, so that you can plan and rehearse ahead of time

Many children with autism experience high levels of anxiety, and transitions can be particularly difficult for them. Dr Rhona Hobson, Principal Educational Psychologist, has produced a helpful toolkit to support schools related to what is normal in response to trauma and includes many useful strategies

<https://localoffer.haltonchildrenstrust.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Aftermath-of-COVID-19-pandemic-what-is-normal.pdf>

In addition resources have been developed by the Autism Education Trust which may be helpful to access including: a Teacher Toolkit with many helpful resources and ideas, and strategies to support anxiety

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/covid-19-information-centre/>

Be mindful that some children may have had limited structure and routine while being at home and it may take time to re-establish this in school.

Strategies to support macro and micro transitions to school:

1. **Include parents** in discussions and planning around the pupil and be mindful that interest, motivators and special interests may have altered. Ensure that pupils have updated **pupil passports** or **one page profiles** which reflects pupil voice and details how best to support them.
2. **Be flexible** in school's approach to lessons recognising that pupils with autism will need some additional time for adjustment. This could include: **flexible timetabling, reduced timetables** building up to complete timetables, **staggered start times**, additional breaks and a **gradual reintroduction** to lessons.
3. Make effective use of **visual timetables** with the pupil and show clear start and end points to activities
4. **Now and next boards** can also help to break down activities further. They support pupils to make the transition from one activity to another, and can provide a motivator to engage in an activity.
5. Use **I'm working for boards** to help motivate and reward pupils for completing task. This serves as a visual reminder to indicate that when they complete a task or part of a task, there is an enjoyable reward at the end.
6. Pre-warn and **prepare** pupils about **changes to the school environment** such as access to parts of the building including the hall and playground and seating arrangements.

Adjusting the curriculum

1. Provide **opportunities for breaks**. Getting to know pupils and recognising when they may need a break is important.
2. Be mindful of **sensory needs**. Completing a classroom sensory audit can be helpful for teachers to create an environment that supports participation and suggests reasonable adjustments to the classroom

<https://www.aetraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/37.1-Sensory-audit-tool-for-environments.pdf>

There is a useful resource pack designed to help schools identify sensory needs and plan appropriate activities available:

<https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/field/pdf/2017/9/21/Sensory-processing-pack-for-schools-KS1-4.pdf>

and for Early Years

https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/field/pdf/2017/1/31/early_years_sensory_processing_resource_pack_multiagency_final_march_2014.pdf

3. Establish a **buddy** or **mentoring system** to support pupils navigate the building and support during unstructured times.

Supporting pupil understanding strategies could include:

1. Use **social stories** and **Power Cards** to help pupils understand what is expected of them.
 - a. A social story accurately describes a context, skill, achievement, or concept according to 10 defining criteria. They are written in a descriptive, meaningful way to the pupil and are physically, socially and emotionally safe for the pupil

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/what-is-it/>

Further input and training is provided through the SEN Service.

- b. Power Cards can be particularly effective if the pupil has a particular motivator or character that interests them and can be used as a prompt to help remind them about expectations

<http://autismcircuit.net/tool/power-card>

2. **Explicitly teach personal distance** and social distancing to support pupils understand what this means. Some pupils with autism will struggle to understand this concept and recognise personal distance.
3. Explicitly **teach handwashing** and use visual resources and video clips to support this. Be mindful of sensory considerations which may cause challenged such as water temperature, the smell and feel of soap etc.

Schools can freely access support from Halton SEN Service via a named child referral to the Specialist Teachers. Whole school and group training on Autism awareness, tailored to your needs can also be provided.

Please contact:

Ami McNamee

0151 511 8571

ami.mcnamee@halton.gov.uk