Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Returning to School

Strategies and Resources

**National Educational Psychological Service
September 2021**

Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs Returning to School
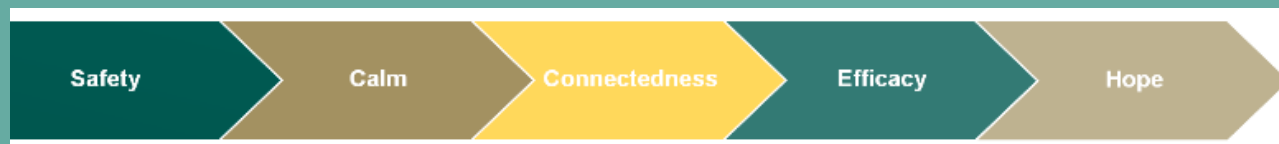
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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for children and their families in Ireland. Many are feeling optimistic and hopeful about returning to school as a step towards re-establishing normality and routine. While many students will feel excited and will adapt to the new routines relatively easily, some students will need additional support in re-engaging with peers and with learning.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, school closures have posed particular challenges for students with special educational needs (SEN) and their families. While teachers have responded creatively to closures by adapting their practice and endeavouring to provide opportunities for remote learning, some students with SEN found it very challenging to engage meaningfully with this. Families have experienced stress in trying to meet their child's learning needs within the home. Many students with SEN have found it difficult to understand the loss of routines and opportunities to interact with school staff and peers. It is important to acknowledge that the transition back to school may be challenging for students with autism due to core differences in the areas of language and communication, social understanding and relationships, flexible thinking and sensory processing.

With this in mind, the following strategies and resources have been collated by Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to assist teachers in tailoring transition supports to meet the needs of students with SEN, including students with autism, who are returning to school. It is hoped that the strategies and resources will also be helpful for parents as they prepare and support their children. The document should build on and complement the work undertaken in the successful reopening of schools in September 2020. It has also been informed by previous collaborative work between NEPS and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to support students with autism and other special educational needs to access the summer education programme. Some of the strategies and resources will be helpful in supporting students with the initial transition back to school while others will assist with interventions throughout the school year.

A framework for fostering resilience developed by Hobfoll *et al.* (2007) has been used to identify and organise the strategies and resources detailed in this document. These strategies and resources, set out according to the five principles of the framework, aim to promote a sense of:

The resources and list of websites contained in this document were collated over the course of the pandemic. They are intended as a guide only and do not imply endorsement by the Department of Education. It is recommended that teachers (in consultation with parents and students) match strategies to the specific needs of individual students and adapt the material as necessary. As resources from other jurisdictions are included, it is important to be aware of the cultural context and to adapt the strategies to reflect the Irish context and current circumstances.

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Safety

Stability, consistency and clear expectations are important in promoting a sense of safety. Re-establish familiar routines and tasks/learning activities (e.g. use of schedule, objects of reference, circle time), using individualised, visual structured teaching approaches, and where possible, with a familiar staff member providing support. If possible use a calendar/visual schedule to help students understand the sequence of activities.

NEPS Wellbeing Webinars & Toolkits

NCSE: Transition from Home to School

Based on the targets set out in the student support plan, begin with low level learning activities and revision to help students to experience success. Allow time for re-familiarisation and focus on rebuilding the skills required for learning (e.g. sitting, attending, listening, asking for clarification, planning and organisational skills).

Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA): Managing Change

Physical Safety:

Alongside re-engaging in school-based routines, be mindful that parents will also be re-introducing home-based routines related to attending school (e.g. sleep/ morning schedules, getting dressed/organised for and travelling to school).

Return to School Pack: Using Calendars

Explicit instruction and visual approaches will help students to understand physical safety measures based on current public health advice (e.g. hand washing, coughing / sneezing etiquette, wearing face coverings, maintaining a safe distance).This should take into account sensory needs, particularly in relation to students being supported to wear face coverings.

Establishing Handwashing Routines

Support students to develop their understanding of how they are feeling physically, and how they can communicate this to staff and parents. Parents may wish to reintroduce practices such as temperature testing so that it is not something a student first experiences at a time when they may be feeling unwell.

NEPS: Face Coverings Considerations

Some children will require support in understanding what social distancing guidance means. For example, students with visual impairment may benefit from experiential activities to enhance their understanding of the social distance rule.

Approaches such as Social Stories™ can help students understand changes they have experienced and the changes they will encounter on their return to school.

Department of Education Back to School Videos. See here

Emotional Safety:

The transition back to school is a process, so allow time for students to readjust. This process can be supported by using visual, written or verbal means to increase predictability, to explain tasks and to help children understand the sequence of events during the day. If necessary, consider reducing the number of transitions.

Social Stories ™

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Safety

Emotional Safety:

Setting the pace based on students' current level of performance and allowing time for information to be processed helps to promote a sense of security.

Transitional objects can be used to support students to feel safe when separating from key adults (e.g. photographs, or a comforting object such as a soft toy or sensory support).

Consider assigning a key adult who can provide reassurance and help identify and respond to individual needs, particularly for students who struggle with transition.

Support students who may struggle with changes in rules and/or other people's adherence to rules.

For students with personal care needs, sensitive and responsive interactions provide an opportunity to promote a student's sense of emotional safety, by providing reassurance that their needs are understood and responded to.

NCSE: Supporting change & new routines

Back to School Tips: Parents, Teachers & Students

COVID 19 & Rule Breaking

Transition Tips for parents & teachers (Episode 9)

Intensive Interaction

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Calm

Environment

Minimise any unnecessary changes to the learning environment, students' routines and to staffing which will help to promote a sense of calm.

Support the student by providing as much information as possible regarding changes to the school environment (e.g. photographs or videos of classroom/school).

For students with severe and profound learning disabilities, their engagement in learning and interaction can depend on many factors, including how their basic needs are met and their experience of the environment (e.g. lighting, noise).

Consider ways to create a low arousal, calm environment in the classroom using, for example, soft lighting, music, objects such as blankets, cushions and sensory toys.

NCSE: Preparing the Classroom

Department of Education Back to School Video for parents

Maintaining Calm: A Family Guide

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Calm

Communication:

Students' responses to school closures and other significant changes are unique and varied. Some may verbalise their concerns, others may withdraw or struggle to communicate in an adaptive way. An increase in repetitive behaviours or behaviours of concern should be responded to by carefully considering what the function of that behaviour may be (e.g. what is the student attempting to communicate/avoid/access through behaving in that way).

It is important to recognise and acknowledge that a wide variety of reactions can be expected and these are normal reactions to abnormal events. Students who have complex communication needs should be supported to communicate their emotional experience.

> Does the student communicate an emotional response or appear outwardly unaffected?

Staying Calm & COVID 19 Resources

Regulation:

Provide opportunities for students to develop a greater awareness of their body cues by modelling how we 'tune into' and think about what our body is saying to us.

NEPS: Relaxation Podcast

NEPS: Relaxation Techniques

Build in movement and/or sensory breaks throughout the day, such as calming rhythmic activities like walking or yoga. These should be proactive (scheduled in) as well as reactive (as required). Consider the use of quiet spaces where students may choose to access to take a break to help self-regulate (e.g. calm corners, tents, relaxation spaces, sensory rooms). Alongside this, individual approaches can include regular check-ins and facilitating students to have access to a calm box (e.g. prompt cards, multisensory activities) to help them to regulate.

> What does this student look like when they are dysregulated or distressed?

Modelling 'Calm' Podcast (Episode 3)

Parents and school staff can support students' emotional regulation by modelling how to stay calm and being aware of and labelling, their own and others' feelings, as appropriate.

MCA: Grounding Techniques

Students can be supported to develop emotional regulation skills by staff acknowledging and validating their feelings and helping them to address any fears or anxieties in a sensitive and responsive manner. Using a whole class approach normalises students' emotional experiences.

Zones of Regulation

Relationships that enable students to experience mutual regulation and promote resilience are characterised by warmth, responsiveness and predictability. It takes time and ongoing consultation with caregivers to understand how students with complex needs and learning disabilities express emotions, and what signs might indicate a change in emotional wellbeing. Adopting an approach of 'Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy' (PACE) can help to increase understanding of emotional needs and build emotional safety in the context of caring relationships.

Complex Needs: Sensory stories & activities

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Calm

Regulation:

An increase in distress or behaviours of concern may serve an important function for the student, such as an attempt to seek support. Therefore, students are best supported when adults remain calm and responsive when faced with dysregulated behaviour.

NCSE: Promoting Positive Behaviour

The use of visual structured teaching strategies to regulate emotions and manage anxiety (e.g. coping cards, emotional thermometers) will help students to better cope with any worries and anxieties that they may have about the return to school. Work to support regulating emotions and managing anxiety should build on and complement previous work to support students as detailed in their support plan.

AsIAm Bridge Back to School: Self-regulation (pp.33-38)

Supporting students with complex needs to experience a sense of calm is not just about removing or reducing factors that might have an impact, it is also about students developing skills to emotionally regulate and regulate their sensory experience. It is important to teach and practise regulation skills when the student is calm, so that these can then be used when dysregulated.

Complex Needs: Emotional Wellbeing (No 6)

Most students experience anxiety in response to uncertainty. Some students, including those with autism, struggle with flexible thinking, predicting consequences and adapting to change and as a result they can experience heightened anxiety. They may benefit from support in increasing their tolerance of uncertainty.

NEPS: Tolerating Uncertainty

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Connectedness

Spend time welcoming students back, building warm and supportive relationships with them, letting them know you are glad to be together again and you are there to support them. This works best when teachers are attuned to how students are feeling and what is going on for them.

NEPS Wellbeing Toolkits: -Primary & Post Primary

Students should be supported to communicate or share their understanding and experience of school closures and their return to school. These opportunities can be provided individually, in circle time or in small-group sessions, and through a range of approaches including art, sensory activities, talking mats, social stories and the use of tools from the 'Bridge Back to School' resource and NEPS Wellbeing Toolkit.

AsIAm Bridge Back to School (pp.30-31)

Provide opportunities for parents to share their views and concerns.
Support ongoing dialogue with parents, for example, virtual worry boxes could be used to enable parents to email worries that you can address.

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Connectedness

In the context of new practices, students may miss assemblies/clubs and opportunities for connections with their peer group/wider school community. Relationships between peers and their sense of belonging can be promoted through play, project work and creative alternatives (e.g. using technology to support social interaction). Extra-curricular activities can be encouraged when it is safe to do so.

NEPS: Listening to young people

Re-engaging in familiar routines such as circle time and action songs can help re-establish peer relationships amongst students with special educational and additional needs.

Talking Mats

Students with autism and those with other complex needs may have had limited opportunities to expand their social skills during closures and will need time to practice and revisit these skills over time.

Where classes are divided into smaller groups or 'bubbles', ensure that students with sensory impairments (deaf/hard of hearing; visual impairment/blind) are placed in a group with one or two friends whom the student can easily understand or who can provide peer support.

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Self and Community Efficacy

Independence skills and skills for learning:

Using a strengths-based approach, gather information from parents and students themselves on their strengths and interests. These can be used to tailor learning activities to promote success.

AsIAm Bridge Back to School: Strengths-based approach (p.10)

MCA: Daily Living Skills

Provide positive feedback and celebrate each successful step.

Identify new skills that the student gained during school closures, including skills they can now perform with greater independence.

The promotion of social and daily living skills can support students' transition back to school, and contribute to their sense of self-efficacy. This can include involving students in setting targets as part of their support plan; in organising their belongings or providing students with jobs or responsibilities.

AsIAm Bridge Back to School Problem-Solving (p.18)

Promoting independent use of self-care skills (e.g. regular use of hand sanitiser) required to keep ourselves safe during the pandemic will be an important area of focus for students with autism and those with complex needs.

Social problem solving

Supporting students to develop skills in problem-solving will help them adjust to changes (e.g. where possible, help students grade or rate the size of the problem using visual supports and support them in coming up with solutions).

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Self and Community Efficacy

Communication and self-advocacy:

Students who are non-verbal should have access to their PECS books/ AAC devices or be supported to use Lámh, as appropriate, to enable them to communicate their needs. Staff should familiarise themselves with these approaches, and with students' communicative behaviours or vocalisations (e.g. turning head away for no) as well as their likes/dislikes.

Supporting choice and decision making, and enabling students to communicate when they require clarification or wish for an activity or interaction to change or stop (e.g. asking for help/a break) can promote their sense that 'I can cope'. In turn, positive reinforcing responses by supporting adults will strengthen students' sense of efficacy in themselves and in their school community.

Self-efficacy and the feeling that 'I can cope' is most important when students are experiencing distress. Consider how to support students' use of coping skills to regulate themselves, or how they can be supported by mutual regulation, in such situations.

Knowing others will respond to their needs promotes students' sense of efficacy in the school community. A sense of community efficacy can also be promoted by enabling students to take an active role in the class, by including them in planning enjoyable group activities (e.g. art, drama, PE). The use of person-centred planning tools enables students to communicate their views on matters that affect them.

Some students may struggle to re-engage or may be reluctant to attend school. Special consideration is given to their needs in the document attached.

NCSE: Total Communication Resource

NCSE: Communication passport

Apps for learners with complex needs

Communication Charts

MCA: Supporting Choice

Social Thinking

Incredible 5 point scale

NEPS: Reluctance to attend/return to school

Strategies to help promote a Sense of Hope

Hope is something we practise rather than a trait we are born with. Calming hopeful messages can foster resilience and reassure students about what school staff are doing to make the school community a safe and happy place.

For students with disabilities, reconnecting with familiar adults provides an important message that separation can lead to reunion and endings can lead to a return to the familiar.

Positive reflection on things that students participated in and enjoyed during school during time away from school emphasises resilience and can be reassuring and help to enhance self-esteem. Positive reflections could be captured in a photobook or art project so that these hopeful messages can be reiterated to support students' return to school.

Re-engagement with routines with an emphasis on fun high-preference learning activities can help shift the focus away from any feelings of distress and allow students to enjoy the present moment and look forward with optimism.

Many of the good practices associated with supporting students with complex needs are central to the guidance all schools implement (e.g. clear and repeated messages about rules, greater use of visuals to reinforce new information, rehearsal of new routines to increase familiarity and mastery). This will help students with autism and others with complex needs to embrace the changes in their school community.

NCSE: Preparing for School

Return to School Packs: Primary & Post Primary

NEPS: Wellbeing Webinars & Toolkits

Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with SEN Returning to School- Summary of Strategies

A Sense of Safety

- Re-establish predictable routines (visual schedules, work systems, circle time), teach new routines, minimise change and uncertainty
- Use a visual calendar/timeline to help students understand the sequence of activities
- Explicitly communicate new safety protocols to families in advance using visual supports so students can practise
- Initially, low level learning activities and revision can help students experience success
- Reassure students that they are safe and their needs will be met
- Allow students to use transitional objects to support separation from caregivers

A Sense of Calm

- Encourage staff to focus on their own self-regulation first and to model this
- Minimise changes in the environment
- Provide a calm, organised environment
- Revise students' understanding of the changes to school using visual/concrete supports (e.g. photos, video tours, Social Stories™)
- Give students time and space
- Provide access to regulating activities, movement, sensory experiences and special interests
- Check-in with how students are feeling. Use visual supports to help students of all abilities communicate their emotional experience
- Provide access to calm spaces
- Expect a variety of responses to recent events; try to understand what the child is trying to communicate through their behaviour

A Sense of Connectedness

- Connect with students in advance – let them know they are missed, warmly welcome them back
- Take time to re-establish relationships with students: observe, play, have fun!
- Focus on reconnecting as a school/class community through creative activities; play, circle-time, assemblies, joint art projects
- Keep good home-school communication

A Sense of Efficacy

- Gather information about student experiences during the time away from school: new interests, skills, ways of learning -use this information to promote engagement and success in school
- Meet students where they are right now - revisit mastered learning, relearn old routines and practise new ones
- Support students with problem-solving skills
- Provide choices and opportunities for self-direction, requesting a break etc.
- Share how the school community are promoting student safety and wellbeing
- Encourage positive self-talk

A Sense of Hope

- Use positive language, repeat calm, hopeful and reassuring messages
- Focus on strengths, highlight and praise the resilience students demonstrate
- Capture what was positive during time away from school in a concrete way – scrapbook, collage, gratitude jar etc.
- Emphasise fun activities to move from feelings of distress/anxiety towards enjoyment

Reluctance to Attend or Return to School during COVID19: Support for Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Reluctant attenders are children and young people who display a range of difficulties attending school. These can include being reluctant to go to school, finding it difficult remaining in school for parts of the day, avoiding an entire day or refusing to attend at all. The Covid-19 school closures have meant that all children and young people have faced an unprecedented disruption to their normal routine. Some may have experienced bereavement in their family and community. Now there may also be changes to their school environment. For those who already experienced difficulties before the school closures, including students with SEN, being out of school for periods of time may have exacerbated these difficulties and some may struggle with the return to school.

For some children and young people we may see
- Anxiety around the risks associated with COVID19
- Frequent complaints of illness before school reopens and in the first few weeks
- Frequent lateness, periodic absence or missed classes
- Difficulty separating from parent/carer
- Difficulty adjusting to the new environment and routines associated with COVID19

This leaflet accompanies the document '**Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Returning to School'** which offers a range of strategies and resources to promote students' resilience as they return to school. Intervention planning should consider the full range of factors which may be contributing to reluctance attending school (i.e. family/community context, school environment) and include an understanding of the function of the behaviour for the student. Early intervention increases the likelihood of a successful return to school. For students with SEN, a return to school support plan should be developmentally appropriate, taking into account their intellectual and language abilities, in addition to their social, communication and sensory needs. Strategies include 1) providing a safe and predictable environment 2) developing a personal return to school support plan and 3) identifying coping strategies:

1. Provide a safe and predictable environment:
- A parental questionnaire can be a useful tool to reconnect with families, to establish a student's individual profile of skills, strengths and needs following school closure. The use of person-centred planning tools can help to identify what is important to the student and what might help to support their transition back to school
- Provide the family and student with as much information about the school and how it will look in order to make the first few days and weeks as predictable as possible (e.g. what will be familiar, what are the changes, where to line up, where they will be collected from, timetable of activities set out on a visual schedule). This can be achieved through photographs or mini-videos of the adapted school environment alongside updated visual schedules of school activities etc. A calendar depicting the return to school might also help. Use the calendar to show the child/young person that they can still do the activities they enjoy after school
- Create a low arousal, calm environment that is sensitive to sensory needs. Carefully plan and manage all transitions and change. A high level of structure and predictability is particularly important for students with autism
- Provide as much information as possible about the composition of the child's class (photograph or video of the class teacher, SET teacher, and SNA, reconnecting with peers if appropriate)

- Identify a 'quiet space' which a student may choose to access (e.g. a pop-up tent, relaxation space, sensory room)
- Adopt a strength-based approach and ensure that activities and tasks are differentiated in line with the student's skills, interests and motivation

2. **Develop an individual 'return to school support plan'**

- Consider if there are any particular factors, events or times in the school day that may be distressing for the student (e.g. unstructured activities, limited/negative social interactions) and intervene to address these
- Implement reasonable adjustments which may facilitate the transition back to school (e.g. meet and greet at the school entrance in the morning, staggered start or finishing time, break or lunchtime arrangements, flexible timetabling and/or curriculum arrangements, identification of key adult for student to check in with throughout the day, buddy system or peer support)
- Identify a key member of staff who will act as a link between home and school (e.g. SET teacher), and advise parents of key supports and services available in the community, as appropriate
- Complete an individual 'return to school support plan', in close collaboration with parents and the student, and external professionals as necessary. Carefully monitor progress and adjust the strategies and goals as required. For further information on planning, see Roscommon and Wicklow Resource Pack listed below
- Acknowledge that children and young people may have experienced disruption, including loss of social friendships and relationships, as a result of school closures. Planned opportunities for children and young people to re-engage with friends and familiar adults will help re-establish these relationships and enhance a sense of belonging. Some students will need direct support (e.g. social story about friendship, and well-structured social activities) to promote their social interaction skills and help them to re-connect with friends and make new friends
- Support an early return to school, even attending for a short period each day. This can then be expanded in a planned way
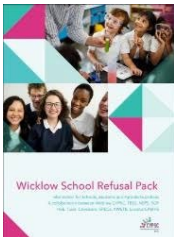
3. **Identify coping strategies**

- Reassure and encourage the child/young person and parents. If possible, highlight times when transition went well for the child/young person in the past and identify what skills and strengths they were able to draw on to support this
- Help the child/young person to identify their thoughts and feelings. Use drawing, visual approaches (e.g. feelings cards or chart) and/or play to support students with communication difficulties. Involve the child/young person in identifying what works well for them in school and who they can ask for help when needed
- Encourage the child/young person to identify things they enjoy about the school day (e.g. a particular lesson, PE, meeting up with friends or teachers)
- Transitional objects can be used to support students to feel safe when separating from key adults (e.g. photographs, or a comforting object such as a soft toy or sensory support)
- Model, teach and reinforce the student's use and practice of coping and relaxation strategies (e.g. deep breathing, count to 10, engaging in preferred sensory activities)
- Provide opportunities for the child/young person to express preferences, make choices, take a break etc.

Some additional strategies to support students return to school

- Establish a warm supportive relationship with the student to strengthen their sense of connection with school
- Asking open-ended questions and listening attentively can help a parent or teacher gain insight into why the child/young person is reluctant to attend school ('how does that feel?', 'what can we do?'). For children/young people with communication needs, encourage them to draw or use visuals to enable them to identify and express their feelings and needs
- Acknowledge that there are reasons why the child/young person finds it difficult to attend school, as distinct from simply 'refusing' to attend school
- If possible, have the parent or carer best suited to encouraging attendance to facilitate/provide transport to school
- Support transition by ensuring that a trusted key adult is the first point of contact at the school door
- Encourage good routines at home for getting up, going to bed, mealtimes, and downtime
- Acknowledge and normalise fears and worries and practice coping strategies learned through school-based programmes (e.g. FRIENDS Programmes)

Resources:

	Roscommon School Refusal Resource Pack: Information for Schools and Parents A collaboration between Roscommon CAMHS, PCCC Psychology, EWO, NEPS, Tusla Family Support Services
	Wicklow School Refusal Pack : Information for Schools, Students and Parents/Guardians *A collaboration between Wicklow CYPSC, TESS, NEPS, SCP, HSE, Tusla, Crosscare, SPECS, KWETB, Lucena/CAMHS*
	Middletown Centre for Autism : Autism and School Refusal Research Bulletin Issue No. 32, June 2020

Tolerating Uncertainty during Covid-19

Autism and Intolerance of Uncertainty

Uncertainty is experienced when one cannot predict the outcome of a situation. Many of us experience anxiety when faced with uncertainty. Individuals with autism struggle with flexible thinking, predicting consequences, generating alternative options, and adapting to change. As a result they are more vulnerable to experiencing Intolerance to Uncertainty and this contributes to anxiety and avoidance behaviour.

Sources of Uncertainty

Individuals with autism are particularly vulnerable to experiencing anxiety when faced with uncertainty. In the context of the COVID19 pandemic there are many factors that may increase levels of uncertainty:
- Loss of familiar and predictable routines
- Evolving safety guidelines and changing restrictions
- Behaviour of others in respect of following guidelines and rules

Responses to Uncertainty

Students may react to uncertainty in different ways, for example through:
- Avoidance of uncertain situations, demands etc.
- Increased rigidity and attempts to control situations and people
- Increases in self-soothing activities such as rituals, repetitive and self-stimulatory (stimming) behaviours, including repetitive questioning and reassurance seeking, for instance seeking information about COVID19
- Focus on rules, routines and boundaries; greater intolerance of change
- Social withdrawal or displaying behaviours of concern

Promoting Coping in Uncertain Times

The following strategies aim to increase students' ability to cope with uncertainty:
1) Provide a safe and predictable environment
2) Build skills to manage uncertainty in the moment
3) Work to gradually increase tolerance of uncertainty

1. Provide a safe and predictable environment:

- Teachers/caregiver managing their own feelings of uncertainty/anxiety and modelling calmness and effective coping strategies
- Using visual approaches to make the environment as predictable as possible (e.g. visual schedules, cue cards, posters)
- Providing opportunities for repetition and practice of new routines/hygiene skills so that they become familiar and predictable
- Minimising unnecessary changes so that the individual has more capacity to cope with the uncertain

2. Develop coping skills:

- Acknowledging that the individual's feelings of anxiety are a normal response to the uncertainty they are experiencing. Reassuring them that these feelings will pass
- Establishing a system for accessing a break /calm space/sensory activities which students may choose to use when feeling overwhelmed by uncertainty
- Accepting appropriate, healthy distraction and self-soothing behaviours as a coping mechanism, while introducing boundaries around these behaviours so that they do not become over-generalised responses
- Teaching calming/mindful strategies that can be used in the moment, for example, slow breathing, counting etc.
- Providing clear strategies and choices (e.g. referring to schedule, visual choice board, access to preferred sensory experiences, movement breaks) so the individual can regain a sense of control

3. Increasing tolerance of uncertainty:

Gradually exposing individuals to uncertainty, within an otherwise well structured environment by:
- Introducing a 'change' or 'surprise' card into the visual schedule to indicate a change of plan
- Playing circle time games like 'what's in the bag'
- Taking turns making choices
- Increasing awareness of what is in the individual's control and what is not through sorting activities, Talking Mats and Social Stories
- Sharing picture-based stories about children and adults who are managing to adjust to change in their lives. Reinforcing the message that feelings of uncertainty can lessen as we adjust to new situations
- Using books, YouTube clips, roleplay and drawing out scenarios to gradually expose the individual to uncertain situations in a controlled and safe way

Resources:

AUTISTICA With knowledge comes understanding	Autistic Webinar: Coping with Uncertainty in Uncertain Situations
Newcastle University	Leaflet: Coping with Uncertainty in Uncertain Times Easy read Leaflet: Coping with Uncertainty in Uncertain Times Prepared by Professor Jacqui Rodgers, Professor Mark Freeston, Renske Herrema, Newcastle University, March 2020
AS I AM.IE	Rule breaking social story Rule breaking social story (text only)
STARS Specialist Training in Autism and Raising Standards	Talking Mats: can be used to support communication of what is causing the individual feelings of uncertainty
AFIRM	Calming Routine to manage anxiety in the moment Supporting children with autism through uncertain times

Considerations for Supporting Students with Wearing Face Coverings

Wearing masks may present problems for some young people, due to reasons such as sensory issues, difficulties with understanding why/when we are wearing them and because this is a new practice, to which they are not accustomed. Here are some suggested strategies to help students who choose to wear masks become more comfortable with the practice:

- Plan for wearing face coverings in advance using approaches such as visuals/Social Stories^{TM}. These should highlight the steps involved in putting a mask on as well as explaining the reasons and the benefits for wearing masks.

- In situations where face coverings are advised, some students may benefit from support in getting used to wearing these (e.g. to enable them to tolerate the sensory sensation of wearing them)

- Experiment with different fabrics and materials to hold the mask in place. For example some students may tolerate elastics around the ear well, others may prefer a fabric tie around the head etc. Cloth neck coverings, often referred to as gaiters, could be considered if tolerating another means of fixing a face covering in place is too difficult.

- Consider a gradual exposure approach and practice firstly in a situation where the student is most at ease and where demands are low (e.g. during screen time). Gradual exposure could involve steps such as initially just holding the mask, then holding the mask against your face, placing the elastic around one ear etc. before extending to full use.

- Gradually increase the time spent wearing a mask, beginning with smaller chunks of time and building towards longer periods.

- Practice wearing them correctly (i.e. ensuring nose and chin are covered).

- Try to make face coverings appeal to the young person's special interests (e.g. include their favourite character on mask).

- Praise the young person for wearing them. If appropriate, consider reinforcing mask wearing behaviour using a reward/incentive system.

- Face masks present specific challenges for students who are deaf/hard of hearing. Perspex visors are more 'deaf friendly' and have the approval of the Deaf Community and Chime.

- Students with a visual impairment and those who are blind will require support and practice wearing a mask that covers the mouth and nose. Those with a visual impairment (VI), but with some vision, may have difficulty with glasses fogging up when wearing a face mask. The top of a mask can also lower peripheral vision and cause a visual distraction; in such cases a visor may be a more suitable option.

Remember, despite support some students may struggle to get used to wearing masks. Try to be patient and empathetic and come up with some alternative solutions to help. If students choose not to, or feel they are unable to wear a mask, advice and guidance has been shared by some organisations such as AsIAm: https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Face-mask-letter.pdf

Resources: (click on the icons for links)

	Social Story about wearing masks.
	A short video and tipsheet on how to wear masks as well as a social story about seeing others with masks.
	Information around mask desensitisation for the younger child.
	Information around mask desensitisation for the older child.
	Social story around wearing a mask.
	Mask Exemption cards to let others know you have an exemption.
	Tips and Social Stories™ on wearing a mask.

Note:

COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable reopening of Primary and Special Schools- Department of Education, August 2020.

"It is not recommended that children attending primary school wear face-coverings."

COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable reopening of Post Primary Schools - Department of Education, August 2020.
 "It is therefore a requirement that teachers, staff and students attending post primary schools wear a face covering when a physical distance of 2m from other staff or students cannot be maintained. "

"All students on the post primary transport scheme should be asked to wear face coverings unless there is a good reason not to do so."

"Cloth face coverings should not be worn by any of the following groups:
- Any person with difficulty breathing
- Any person who is unconscious or incapacitated
- Any person who is unable to remove the face-covering without assistance
- Any person who has special needs and who may feel upset or very uncomfortable wearing the face covering, for example persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory concerns or tactile sensitivity."

Going Back to School

Let's Get Ready!

School is starting back. The teachers are really looking forward to seeing students again. They have been working hard to make sure that the school is safe for everyone.

Now that we are going back to school again, there are a number of things we can do to help keep ourselves and each other safe.
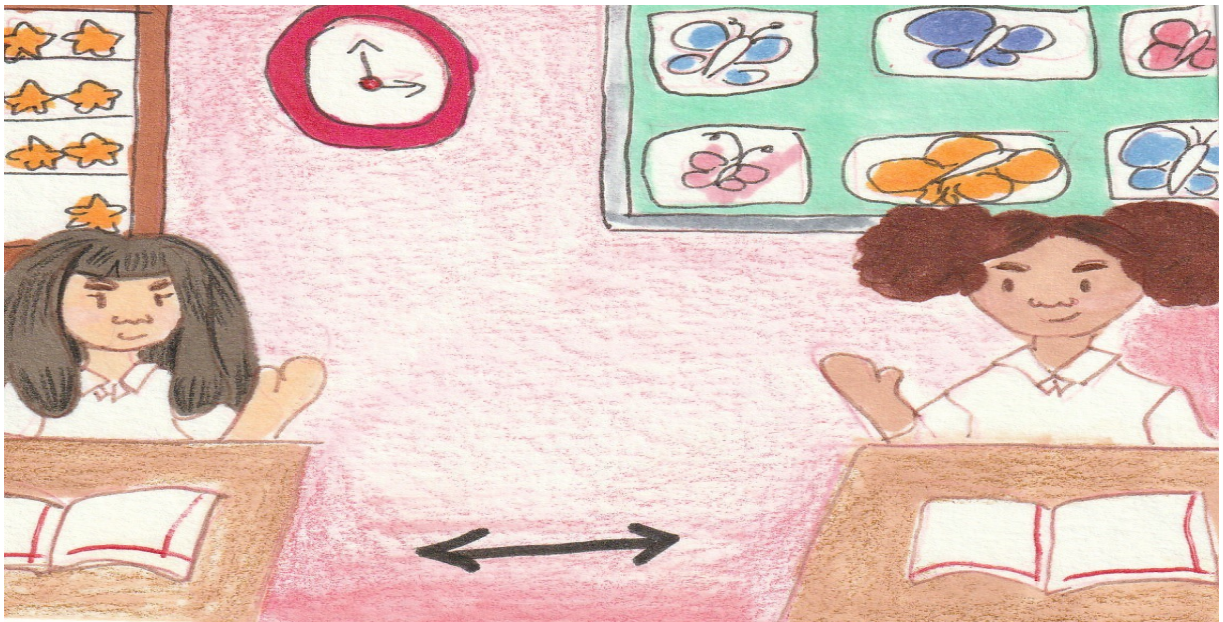
This story can be personalised for individual students by adapting images and/or wording

How You Might be Feeling

Some children might feel a bit worried about going back to school. That's okay. If you feel worried, you can talk to your parents or teachers about it. Other children may feel the same. Remember, there are lots of things we can all do to keep safe by:

- Keeping space between everyone
- Washing our hands a lot
- Coughing or sneezing into our elbow or a tissue
- Following routines and rules in school

We can all help each other to follow the rules.

You may be worried about missing everyone at home. They will miss being with you too! We have been at home with our close family so it's normal that we might find this change a bit hard at first. Remember that in school you are with your friends and teachers and other people who care about you, like your principal.
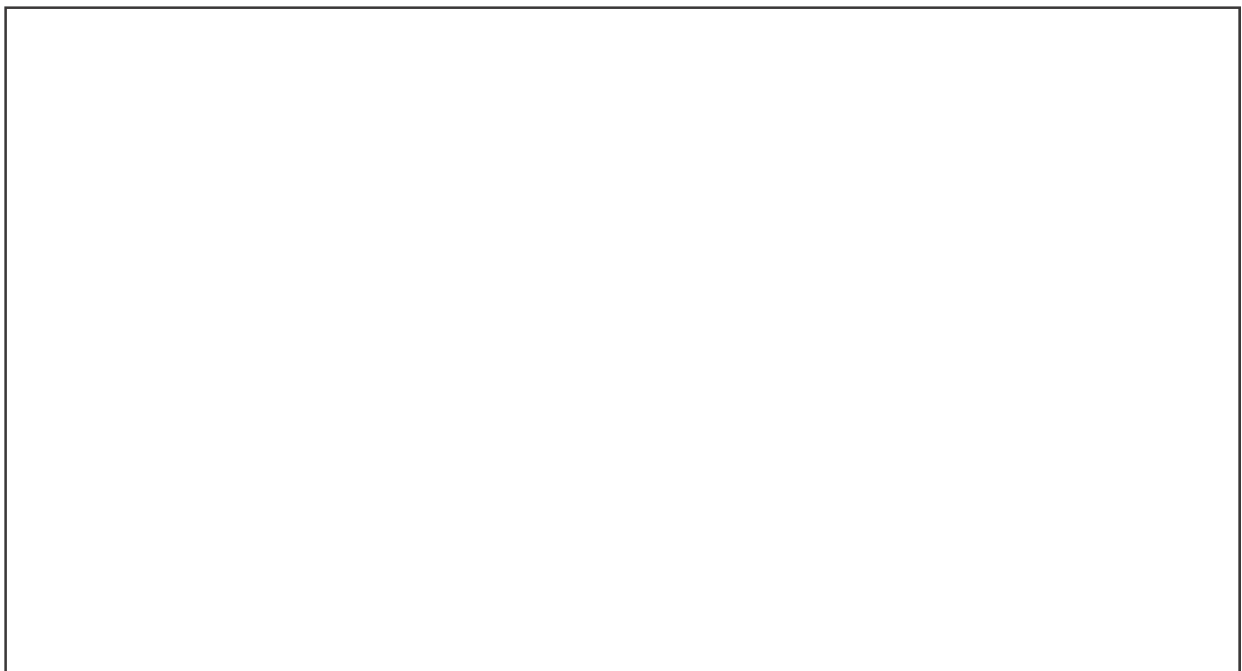

If you have any other worries who can you talk to?

- You could tell someone at home
- You could tell your teacher or principal your worries so that they can help you
- Whatever your worry, there is someone who cares about you and wants to help you

What can you do to help?

- It might take time for everyone to get used to being back at school and that's okay.
- Think about all the things that you are looking forward to doing in school such as seeing your friends again and learning new things.
- If you are feeling worried, make sure to tell someone who cares for you so they can help.
- Look out for anyone who might need a friend or someone to play with.
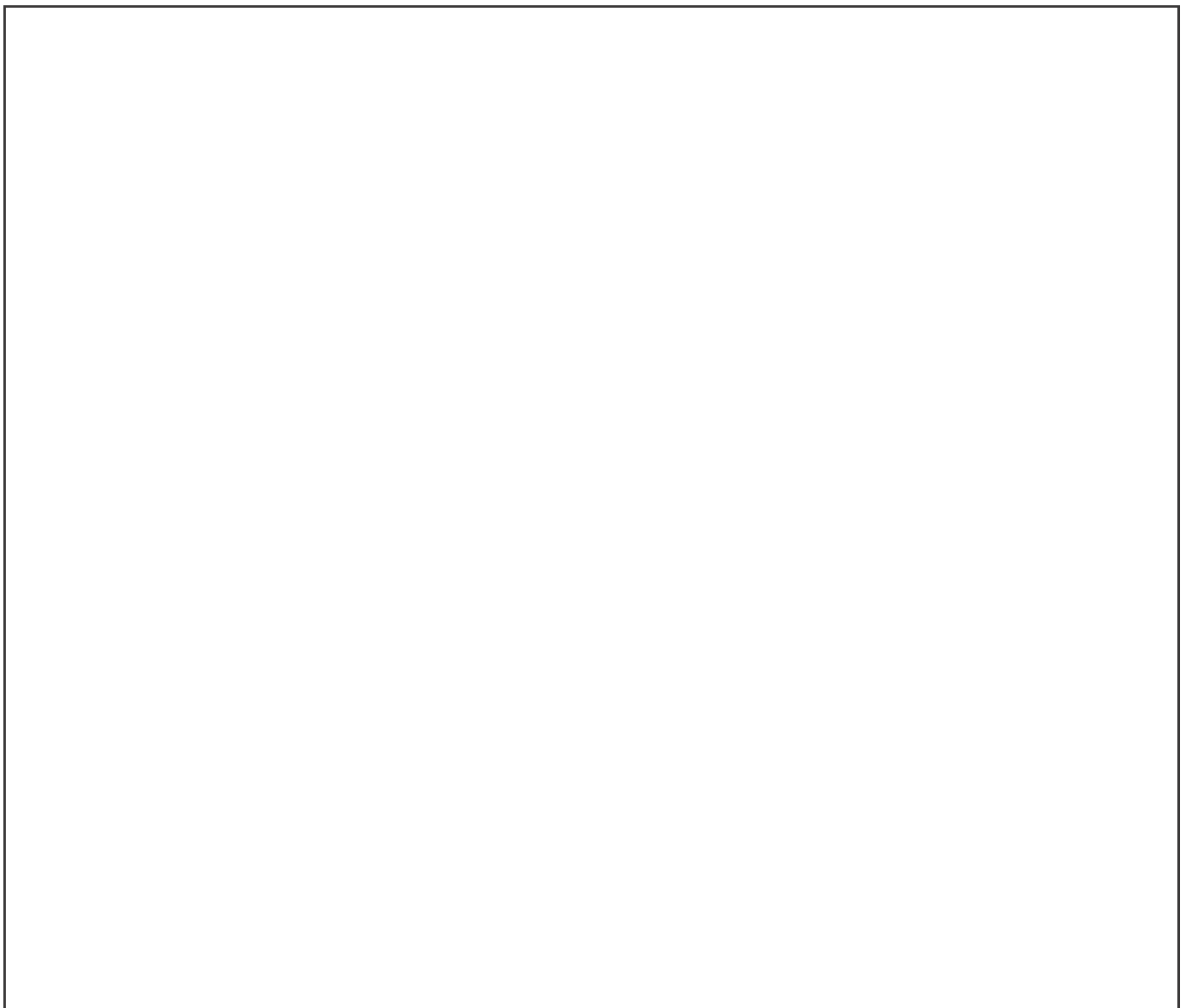
What are the things you are looking forward to the most?

What things would you like your teacher to do when you get back to school?

Draw a Picture of You back at school!

Going Back to School

There is a virus in Ireland and all around the world. It is called 'Coronavirus'.

Our teachers will remind us to do things to keep us all safe in school like:

- Washing our hands more, using hand sanitiser, coughing/sneezing into our elbow or using a tissue, and maybe even wearing masks.
- We might also have to keep our distance from others when at school.
- We will need to use our own pencils, colouring pencils and books.

I will try my best to follow these rules to keep everyone safe.

Some people might forget the rules. My teacher will help us to follow these rules. We are all getting used to these rules together. This might take some time and practice. If I am worried about people not following the rules, I can talk to a teacher.

Going back to school may feel a bit different at first, but it will be okay because my teacher will be there to remind me of all the ways we can help keep everyone safe.

Images are suggestions only and teachers and parents are invited to personalise using their own images.