Communication and Interaction Team

Autism and Transition from Home Learning to School
Supporting children and young people through a changing environment

Transition means change. Many people find change difficult, but especially those who have autism. Transition is not just about the major changes that occur in phases throughout life. There are many transitions that occur during a typical day, including from;

- One task to another
- One room to another
- Home to school/college
- Inside to outside
- Class-time to break-time
- Teacher to teacher
- Group to group

Covid-19 and the subsequent closure of schools has meant that children and young people have experienced huge change in their lives, for a prolonged period of time without any clear finish point. Some have benefitted from being able to access learning from home, without the pressures of unpredictable social interactions. Some have found this enormous change extremely challenging.

All children will need some support to transition back into school. Those children with autism, will almost certainly need significant support to make this transition. Their routine will need to change again to accommodate attending school, and schools will inevitably be changed environments. Classrooms, assembly halls and toilets will look different, there might be different start and finish times and there will be new rules to learn about social distancing. Children and young people are in effect returning to an 'unfamiliar familiar.'

Those children who are transitioning to a different setting, will not have had the opportunity for extended transition visits and to meet key staff in person. They are facing a huge transition or change, potentially without having had the opportunity for preparation.

Why can transition be a challenge?

People with autism will typically respond best to a consistent approach, and this can be interrupted during transition periods. As a result, difficulties may be encountered in the following areas:

- Increased anxiety about the unknown
- Understanding the expectations and social rules of a new environment and social distancing.
- Understanding how to physically interact with a new and notably changed environment
- Interpreting and acting on new social cues and expectations
- Predicting what might happen in the future

The sensory processing differences that many people on the autism spectrum experience can also contribute to the difficulties associated with transitions because:

- They may quickly become overwhelmed with new sensory stimulus
- They may have adjusted to the sensory environment in one setting, and the unfamiliarity of new stimulus could well be distressing in the initial stages

How can we provide support?

Preparation for Transition, work together with parents to support:

- If children are changing setting, or classroom, or if things will look different when they return to school, Transition Booklets should be created and sent home. They should include photos of key areas of a setting for example; classrooms, toilets, assembly halls, the canteen, playgrounds and outside areas. Any areas where there are new environment changes, should be highlighted. In addition to this, photos

of key staff and their roles should be included. Transition booklets should also include what will be the same and what new rules will be in place. Visual checklists of equipment needed for different days/lessons will be useful.

- Ideally, schools will create a virtual tour of the setting, highlighting any changes and introducing key staff. This will enable pupils to view the film and to refer back to it as needed. Pupils and families should be signposted to the virtual tour at an appropriate place on the website.
- Where appropriate, schools should request pupil views on returning to school, acknowledge and respond to them. These views might impact on provision and bespoke timetabling.
- Whilst at home, in preparation for the return to school and in order to introduce routine and predictability, families should be encouraged to keep to routines as much as possible, including morning and bedtime routines. As the time to return to school draws closer, gradually move these towards the times which reflect their schedule when attending school.

- Once the date for school opening is known, countdowns and calendars are very useful to visually indicate and prepare for the number of days until school return. A child or young person might want to cross off days as they pass so that the number remaining is clearly indicated.
- Children and young people with sensory difficulties should familiarise themselves with the wearing of a uniform again – especially if they are moving setting and it is new to them. Shoes can be particularly problematic – wear them around the house for short periods of time, with a view to increasing this time, so that tolerance can be developed.
- Use visual checklists (provided by school) to help organise school bags, and practice packing it with the items needed for different days.

- Consider using exercise to practise the journey to school and back and any changes this may involve.
- Social stories, provided by school and differentiated to the needs and abilities of individual students will be useful to support these new routines and expectations.

Transition back to school or a new setting:
- It is important that we have realistic and appropriate expectations of the young person on the autism spectrum – these expectations will likely need to be reduced during times of transition.
- Staff need to know and understand that children and young people with autism are likely to be particularly anxious during periods of change and transition. This may mean that their receptive language skills are diminished. Instructions will need to be given in accessible chunks and where possible, supported visually.

- New rules of the class will need to be explained and presented in a visual way, so that pupils have the opportunity to process them and also have a concrete resource to which to refer back.
- Visual reminders will also be needed to help children to understand and remember other new expectations and changes, such as assembly, dinner arrangements, movement around the school and the playground.
- Where possible, consider developing a map of the new environment within the school building so that changes due to social distancing are clear. Again, this is a concrete, visual tool a child or young person can refer back to.
- Seating arrangements within the classroom will need to be carefully considered. The children are likely to benefit from a consistent seating plan, and must know where they will sit in each lesson. Take into account sensory issues, a child or young person may find it difficult to work next to the door with corridor noise

coming in for example, or next to a window where shadows move on the desk.

- Many children and young people will need a key adult or mentor figure identified, with whom they can connect to help unpick worries and issues which arise. This can either take place as needed, or during more regular and structured mentoring sessions, as often as daily during initial transition phases.
- Children and young people who find this kind of 'face to face', direct communication means of mentoring problematic, will need an alternative system through which they can raise their concerns and access support.
- Consider procedures for break and lunchtimes which can often be the most stressful time of the day for children and young people with autism. These may now have changed due to social distancing. How will much needed lunch clubs, learning support rooms and quiet areas be made accessible? Again, pupils will need to be prepared for the changes, by providing images or bullet pointed rules for the new areas.
- Safe spaces will also need consideration. The spaces used previously, may not be available or may need to be adapted. The child or young person, will need these changes to be presented to them visually.
- Some children and young people will benefit from support to create and use a 'scale' to help identify their anxiety and actions they can take to help manage it.
- A relevant and up to date pupil profile which details areas of strength and difficulty, including achievements during home-learning is highly recommended, particularly when a pupil is moving to a new setting. Where appropriate, the child or young person's pupil voice should feature within the profile. This profile should be shared with all staff.
- Profiles can be used to begin to develop relationships between staff and students. Key staff who might be new to the child or young person should create their own (brief) profile, with a photograph of themselves, so that the pupil can begin to 'know' them.
- Whilst students are at home, positive links with key staff should be sustained or new staff

introduced. For some children and young people, being able to talk or face-time staff, or perhaps play a game over the internet is beneficial. Contact does not have to be about 'work'. For others, phone calls or face time is overwhelming. It might be best to communicate via email. It is important to bear safeguarding practice in mind when staff are communicating through social media platforms such as FaceTime.

- Visual schedules and systems are essential to support the pupil's understanding of new routines. These should be differentiated to suit the needs of the child. Some will show what is happening Now and Next perhaps followed by a motivating activity, others might show the routine for the entire morning.
- Many children and young people will need regular movement breaks as part of their daily routine. During times of transition or change, anxiety may be heightened, and so more movement and/or sensory breaks will need to be built into their day.
- Social stories can be a really useful resource to explain Covid 19, change, the reasons for change and to reassure children and young people. They should be differentiated and adapted to suit the age and receptive language level of the pupil.

Remember: All children and young people have had to adapt to significant changes, and many will be experiencing some anxiety. Best practice suggestions support strategies typically used for children and young people with autism will be beneficial for every pupil.

Time and resources spent supporting children and young people during this transition period and return to school will naturally facilitate enhanced attendance, engagement, progress and of course, positive experiences of education.