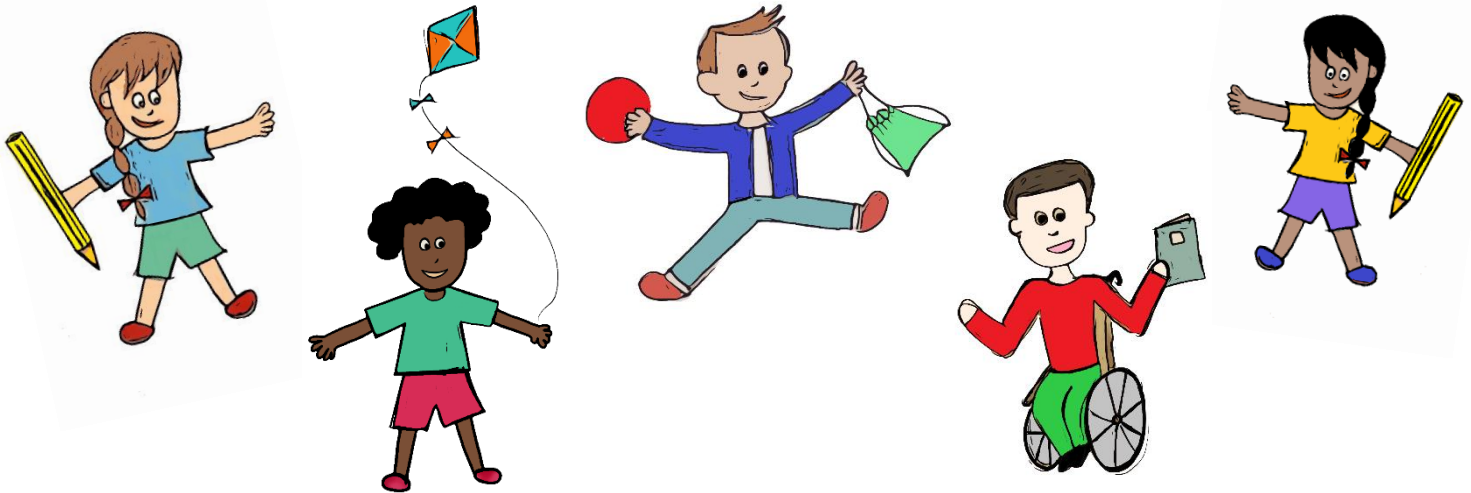


7 steps to supporting your child with going back to school



Parent Resource Pack

Neurodisability Psychology Team

Introduction and contents

This resource booklet is designed to accompany the slides from the '7 Steps to supporting your child with going back to school' parent workshop.



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1. Think preparation

‘Children with developmental difficulties often find change difficult and will need to adjust to going back to school.’



Give your child as much notice as possible of changes, including how they will be helped and what will stay the same.

Talk to and plan with school about what support will be in place.

Talk to your child about what to expect when they go back to school and some of the activities they may be doing.

Try to get taster visits to school before other children come back if possible.

Use a calendar to mark down the days until they return to school.

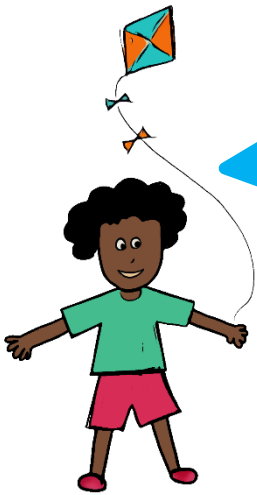
Social Stories allow information to be communicated in an accessible, meaningful and accurate way. They help to make information visual meaning there is less to remember.

Social Stories should be adapted for each child, and you can use these to provide information that your child needs to know to help them manage their anxiety about returning to school.



See our ‘top tips’ sheets on how to adapt and share a Social Story

2. Think relationships



'For a child returning to school, relationships with teachers and peers are key, even for children who may struggle with social interaction. A strong, trusting relationship can help a child to feel safe.'

Try to make a link with a key member of staff. They may be able to answer questions that you and your child may have about the return to school.

Talk through the names of the key members of staff with your child, letting them know who is there to help them.

Use pictures to support this information if you can. You may already have a picture of your child's teacher, if not try looking on the school website.

If it's been a while since your child saw or spent time with their friends, they may feel worried about whether these friendships are the same, or what might have changed after so long.

Help your child re-connect with friends. Encourage them to talk over a video call or meet up before the return to school.



3. Think preparation

‘Children with developmental difficulties often thrive on structure and routine, and may struggle with the change to their day that comes with returning to school, especially after lockdown!’



Structure helps children to feel safe and secure. Talking to your child about what their new routine might look like will help.

Practice the new school day routine beforehand.

Go to bed and get up at the same time as a school day for a few days before going back.

Walk the school route earlier in the week to help increase familiarity and reduce anxiety.

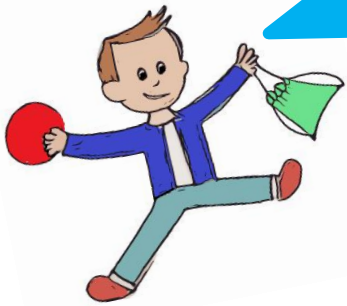
Use visual timetables or now and next boards with symbols or pictures representing what they will be doing.

Talk through their timetable, especially with an older child. Help them to think how they will get between different classrooms.

Use a calendar or something similar if your child is going back part time, so they can see which days they'll be at school.

Check out the school website for information about how things will look after COVID-19. It might be useful to go through this with your child to increase the feelings of structure that will help them to feel more confident returning to school.

4. Think sensory



‘Children with developmental difficulties often have differences in how they process sensory information.’

Your child may be over-sensitive to sensory information, under-sensitive or likely a mixture of these. This may also change from day to day.

Use ‘sensory exercises’ and include regular sensory breaks.

Communicate with school about your child’s sensory needs and if any have changed during the break from school.

Use a sensory toy as a transitional object for them to take to school (e.g. fidget toy).

Plan with your child what they can do to help with specific sensory difficulties in school.

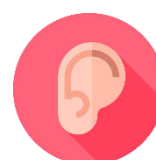
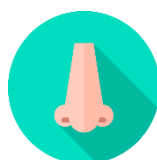
There is a two way relationship between sensory processing and anxiety.

Increased anxiety



Heightened senses

Anxiety will be high during transition back to school and supporting your child’s sensory needs can help reduce this.



5. Think emotions

'All children will have many different feelings about going back to school. Some will be pleased to go back to learn or see their friends. Some may feel worried about academic performance or missing their family'



Talk to your child about how they're feeling. Show them you're interested and there to listen to their concerns.

Validate how they're feeling and see if you can do anything together to make them feel better.

Go back to basics and help your child learn the words for different feelings.

Suggest emotions e.g. 'I wonder if you're feeling worried'. Name your own feelings too e.g. 'I'm feeling a bit sad today'.

Try using emotions cards or photos if your child struggles to talk about feelings.

Get your child to draw how they feel about going back to school and what they are looking forward to.

Use visual prompts such as feelings thermometers and emotions faces cards to help your child put into words how they are feeling.

Try to make sense of the emotions by **talking about physical sensations in their body** when they are feeling anxious.

5. Think emotions



'I'm worried about going back to school'

'It's understandable that you feel worried'

'I know you can do it because you've done it before'

'Let's see if we can come up with a plan together'

Your child may be able to talk to you about their worries which is great because then you can listen and problem solve those worries together.

However, many children might find it hard to talk about their worries. They may also not know that they are worried themselves. You may see signs in their behaviour that show you that they're anxious.

Loss of appetite

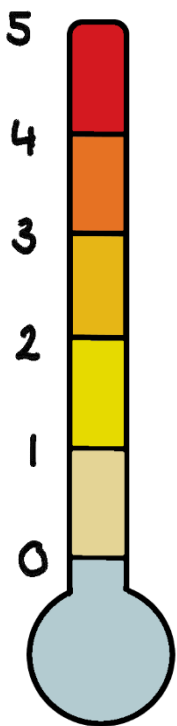
Seeming more tired than usual

**Difficulties
getting to sleep**

Being more irritable

5. Think emotions

‘Once you’ve recognised the feelings your child is experiencing, they may also need your help to take control of how they feel’



One way to help your child to take control of their feelings is by using a feelings thermometer.

Use this to think about their **early warning signs** of anxiety.

Think **about ideas of what they can do** at this point to stop the feelings of anxiety getting any bigger.

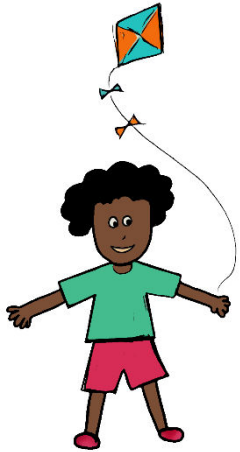
Put a list together of a few **different things they can try** to help calm their anxiety

Sensory strategies include fiddle toys, gym ball exercises, visual calming strategies such as a lava lamp.

Breathing exercises can help to slow down the feelings of anxiety in the body

Distraction, calming activities or mindfulness exercises can also be useful

5. Think emotions



‘Children with developmental difficulties in particular use up a lot of energy trying to cope with life in general due to the social and sensory demands they face’

Think about your child’s energy levels like a mobile phone battery. Different activities will drain the battery faster than others and it needs regular charging to work most effectively.

Think about the **things that ‘sustain’ and ‘drain’ your child’s battery.**

The key is trying to balance the sustainers and drainers. If you know they are going to do something that will be hard for them (a drainer) try to counteract with a sustainer. Help them to learn to do this too.

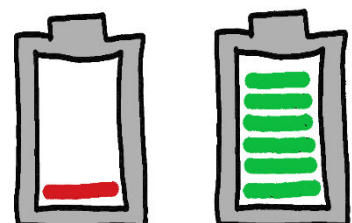
This is particularly important after the first few days back at school. Plan in a sustaining activity or some down time to charge up their battery.

Ideas of ‘sustainers’

- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Healthy diet
- Computer games
- Reading

Ideas of ‘drainers’

- Socialising
- Change
- Loud noises
- Being teased



5. Think emotions

‘A ‘meltdown’ describes how someone is acting when they’re under pressure or stress and have reached a point where they are no longer able to cope.’



A meltdown is caused by a feeling of being overwhelmed and out of control. It is most helpful if these meltdowns are understood as a response to their emotions rather than defiant tantrums.

You are your child’s emotional brakes. Your response to the ‘meltdown’ can make a huge difference to the outcome.

Try to stay calm and respond in a calm, reassuring way.

When in a meltdown, a child is often unaware of those around them, and unable to think about what others might think of their behaviour. **Sanctions, punishments and rewards are unlikely to work**

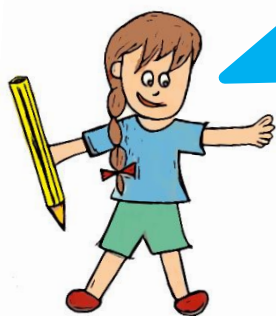
It’s important to prioritise the safety of your child and those around them, but also remember that things broken in a meltdown can be mended.

Keep communication to a minimum but if you do speak, use simple, neutral language e.g. ‘I can’t let you do that’. Reduce and simplify demands and instructions.

After a meltdown your child is likely to be feeling vulnerable and may feel shame/guilt. They will need time to calm further.

Provide a safe place to calm and a snack/drink. Reassure them that it’s over and reassure them that you still love them.

6. Think success



'This is not the first time you and your child have been faced with a difficult transition. However tricky they have been before, you've got through the other side of them!'

It can be hard to think about the successes you've had before when you're faced with a difficult situation. Your child might be finding this hard too!

Think about what has worked for them before. If you've found something that has helped before, it's likely to work again.

It can be hard for some children to make the link between past and future situations. Help them by reminding them of times when they've managed a situation like this successfully. Social Stories can be a helpful way to share this information

Draw on positives that might have come out of lockdown as well as things they may have missed about school.

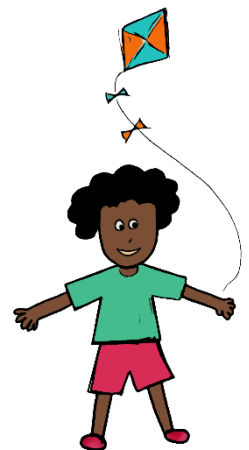
Focus on each achievement however small, and praise your child for each success.



See our example Social Story 'Getting Used to Changes at School' on the Sheffield Children's Hospital website.

7. Think you!

‘The COVID lockdown has been a difficult process for any parent or carer. Looking after yourself means you can be there for them even more.’



The instruction in a flight safety briefing on an aeroplane is always ***‘fit your own oxygen mask before helping your child’***. Supporting your child’s emotional health works in the same way!



Take a moment to recognise what you’ve achieved during lockdown.

What challenges have you faced and overcome?

What did you do that you wouldn’t have done without lockdown?

What have you learnt about yourself and your family?

Ensure you take time for yourself. Consider what helps your own wellbeing. **Schedule in some time to do something you enjoy.**

Plan a reward for yourself for when your child is back to school, after all, you deserve it!

Energy Management












Things that use up my energy

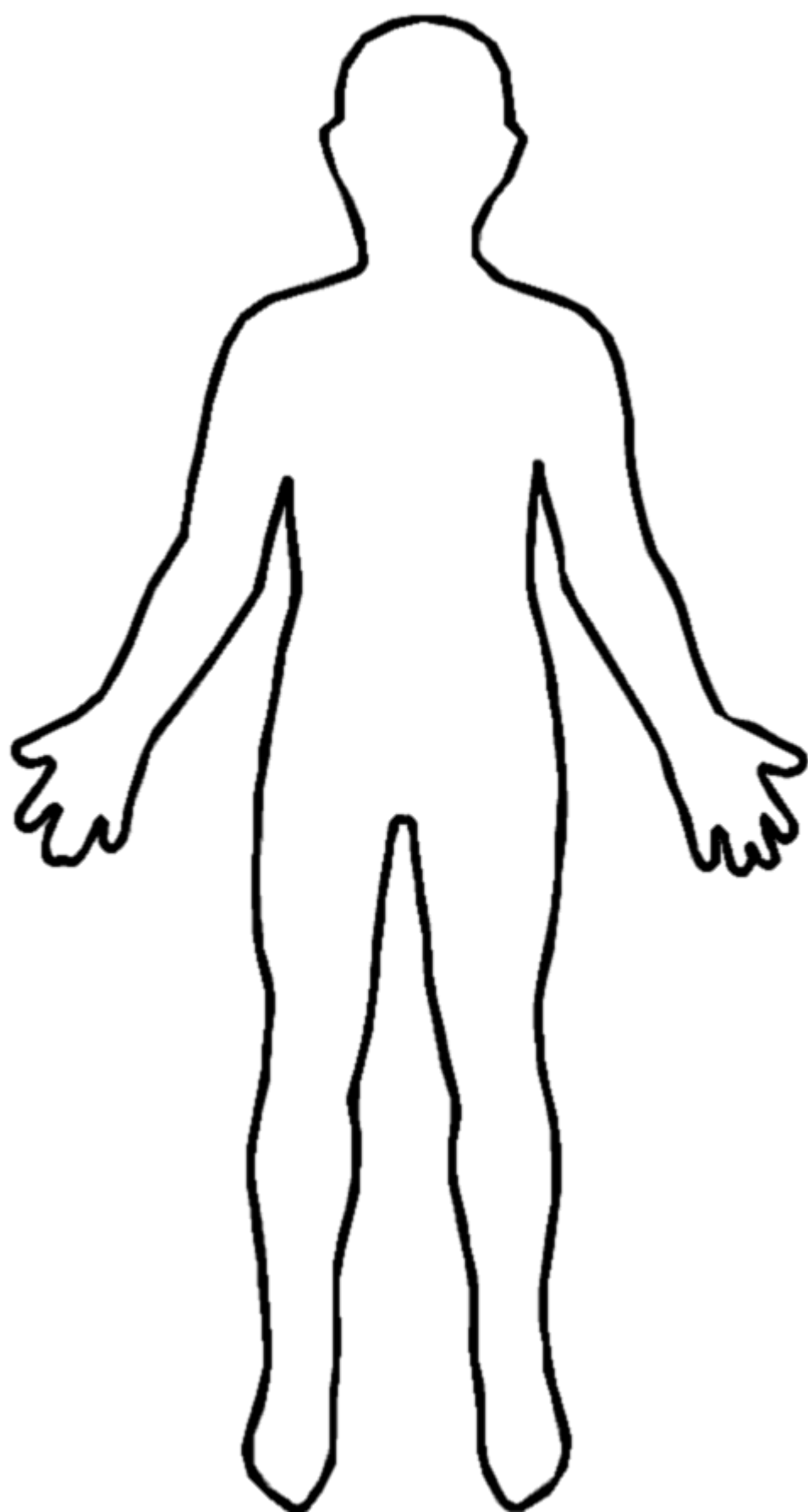


Things that recharge my battery



Feelings chart

		
Happy	Unsure	Sad
		
Upset	Worried	Angry
		
Embarrassed	Relieved	Frustrated



The Emotion Thermometer

	5		Boiling over!
	4		Getting hotter
	3		Hot
	2		Warm
	1		Cool