

Returning to school after lockdown; a guide for parents and schools.

As lockdown begins to ease, and the talk of returning to school is emerging, it is time to address what specific needs children may have as this time approaches. Anxiety levels may well be higher than usual, with the threat of illness or fear of not being sure what school will look like when they return; with this document, we aim to provide some support for parents and for schools to enable the return to be as smooth as is possible. Please also see our document 'Advice to Parents and Carers during COVID 19.'

Parents and Carers

A key thing to remember is that if you are anxious about your child returning to school, as indeed many of us will be, your child will pick up on it. It is important to show to your child the positives about the next big step and to disguise how you feel when you are talking about it with them. Keeping an open line of communication with school about how they plan to enable your child to return is essential too. More on that later.

As outlined in the aforementioned document, now is the time to start going out using the graduated approach. This can be transferred to a wide range of situations, such as getting used to walking up the road to school, or getting in the car if that is something that hasn't happened for a while. You could also use photographs of your child's school (perhaps from their website?) to make a little scrapbook for your child. If the school use Tapestry (EYFS) or something similar, you should be able to access the photos to remind your child of the happy times/places/people he/she has experienced there. During your discussions, discreetly try to establish what your child's fears are specifically, so that you know what things need to be worked upon in these coming days. For every child it will be different, but being specific will help school to know what your child's needs are and focus their actions in the right direction. It may well be that plans to increase speech demand may need to be shelved temporarily, to prioritise reducing anxiety levels. Once you have the guidance your child's school has agreed upon for the return to school, you can gradually filter in these ideas to your child's mind – for example, wearing their own clothes to school instead of a uniform may be anxiety-inducing. In this context, agreeing with your child what might be good to wear in advance may help to remove the anxiety about it.

Communicate with the school as soon as possible before your child goes back to inform them as to how the lockdown has affected your son/daughter, any anxieties they may have about going back to school and any particular needs you think the school will need to take into account. These may be needs that have increased due to the lockdown period away from school, be new needs that have developed or be related to the new arrangements schools will have to make to enable social distancing. Children are likely to be taught in small groups (or 'pods') kept separate from other groups, which may mean a change of teacher. You may wish to use the model letter at the end of this document and include SMiRA information leaflets to ensure all staff are aware of your child's needs.

Schools

As we are all well aware, this period of lockdown has been extremely challenging for everyone, regardless of our circumstances. Hopefully, this document will help to steer your planning for children returning to school with high levels of anxiety associated with school.

- Regression – some children with Selective Mutism may have regressed over the period of lockdown, so don't assume you can pick up where they left off in terms of confidence, communication and speaking.
- Separation anxiety – the children may have lived in a very intense, close bubble for the lockdown period and may find integrating into bigger groups very challenging.
- Illness-related anxiety – this may present in a range of ways, such as fear of touching things, or fear of moving around freely, excessive hand washing.
- Social distancing – clear rules that are reinforced gently and calmly, delivered with a smile in a cheery manner.
- Friendship groups – where at all possible, consider placing a highly anxious child with peers they know well and are comfortable with to help the process of transition.
- Noise – your highly anxious child may find the newness of the noisy environment quite a big adjustment to make having been used to being at home.
- Additional or new presentations of anxiety – this is a difficult one to summarise – it may be that you have to observe behaviours closely and watch for new manifestations of anxiety (see the link below).
- Anxious children are likely to tire very easily and may need periods of rest or time-out away from other children.

Please refer to this document for further information and general guidance:

<https://ohs.oxon.sch.uk/from-covid-19-back-to-the-classroom/>

Managing anxiety and mental health in children:

<https://www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-your-child-is-anxious-about-going-back-to-school/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3689/school-problems-updated-march-2020.pdf>

https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report_march2020.pdf

<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/age-6-12/mental-health-conditions-in-children/anxiety/tackling-back-to-school-anxiety>

This link is helpful for recognising anxious behaviours that may manifest as 'naughty':

https://www.raftpsychology.com/news/gvid0efdvmfmjw4r9xxly04rwrjd0o?fbclid=IwAR2e_kRkusR9KjD-rh7XzeVH02DA6uJUlpAOuz04iT_c2z9GRa9s6vN4-4Y

You can refer to the files on our Facebook page for more detailed information about supporting children with Selective Mutism, or visit our website at www.selectivemutism.org.uk .

Name *[insert name of child]*

[you may wish to include your contact details]

Dear *[insert name of teacher]*

As you may know *[insert name of child]* has Selective Mutism (SM) which prevents him/her from speaking in some situations due to anxiety. The following information may help you to help him/her to settle back into school as easily as possible:

How *[insert name of child]* has spent his/her lockdown period: *[where, who with, doing what, and changes to their circumstances that have affected them]*

How this has affected his/her anxiety and SM: *[opportunities to speak, who with, effects of lockdown on anxiety levels]*

What *[insert name of child]* feels about going back to school and particular anxieties:

What school can do to help him/her to settle back into school:

Signed _____ Parent/Carer

Date _____.