

LBAT & ASCT Getting Started Guide to Returning to School in September 2020

Introduction

This guide is designed as a starting point for parents with children returning to school or transitioning to a new school, following an extended period of absence due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been put together by advisory teachers from the Learning and Behaviour Advisory Team (LBAT) and the Autism and Social Communication Team (ASCT) at West Sussex County Council (WSSCC).

The same but different

- Use information shared by your child's school and the school website to help prepare them for going back to/starting a new school e.g. videos and photographs of key staff, information about the structure of the school day at an age appropriate level.
- Children returning to the same school will notice some things that are the same and others that are different. Talk about what will be the same and what will be different e.g. we will go into the same school gate, you will have a different classroom and teacher.
- Focus on the changes that have been made to help to keep the children and staff safe e.g. staggered start times, more opportunities to wash hands etc.
- Children going to a new school or setting may have a bigger challenge. Consider talking to friends who attend there already for reassurance. Refer to information shared by the new school or setting. Write down any questions your child has for which you cannot find an answer and be sure to email the school or ask the questions when they start in September.

Protecting mental health and wellbeing

- Encourage perseverance and resilience building with your child. Provide opportunities for them to 'bounce back' from difficult situations.
- Using relaxation strategies can be very effective for many children in managing stress and anxiety. Practice mindfulness and relaxation activities together, make it a fun and playful part of your day. Talk about and plan for which strategies could easily be used in school if your child becomes worried or anxious.
- Support your child to challenge negative or irrational thoughts and beliefs through communicating and modelling effective questioning yourself.
- Encourage and model physical activity, appropriate sleep and diet.
- Be patient, persistent and consistent. Your child's behaviour may be impacted by their anxiety about returning to or starting a new school. Be understanding and ready to reassure them.

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Making connections

Some children will have had very little social contact over the 'lockdown' period. It is important for children to have opportunities to make connections over the coming weeks, to support their emotional wellbeing. You can support your child with this by trying some of the following ideas:

- Talk to a friend, either in person or on a video call. Ask about their weekend and really focus on what they tell you.
- Write to your new teacher. Tell them about what you enjoy, what you have been doing over 'lockdown' and any worries you might have about going back to school. For younger children, scribe their ideas or encourage them to draw them.
- Do at least one activity a day that involves making contact with others e.g. write a postcard, send a picture or photograph, send a message.
- Plan to engage in 'random acts of kindness' with your child e.g. shopping for an elderly neighbour, making a cake for Granny.
- Model asking for help and problem solving to help your child to feel comfortable to ask for support when they are worried, both at home and at school.

(See also resources 5, 8 and 9)

Ideas and activities for support

- Talk with your child about what they are most looking forward to about going back to school. Record this in a creative way e.g. a poster, a picture, a collage, a video or voice recording. Refer back to this over the coming weeks.
- Talk about fears and worries about the return to school. How can you work with your child to minimise these? Who could help you and your child? Plan small steps towards overcoming a worry- you could draw a ladder to help your child to visualise the steps to success in overcoming their fear.
- Practise the journey to school over the summer to remind your child of the route.
- Walk or drive past the school, point out which entrance you will be using in September. Look at the outside of the school. What is the same? What has changed? E.g. the gate looks the same but there is a hand gel dispenser next to it that wasn't there before.
- Make a family gratitude jar. Write or draw something you are grateful for every day and put it in a jar. On the day before your child goes back to school, empty the jar and read the contents for a 'wellbeing boost'.
- Plan something special to do after school on the first day back.

(See also resources 2, 3 and 7)

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Specific support for Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC)

Whilst many of the strategies already included in this document would be appropriate and helpful in supporting the return to school for children with autism and/or social communication needs, the following are some more specific examples of ideas that parents could use:

- It may be useful to support children's social understanding regarding what will be the same and different through the use of social stories or social articles for older pupils. For example, a story that explains the routine of the day, the environment, why we go to school or expectations of on the environment. More information regarding social stories can be found here: <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/>
- Introduce visuals to support with understanding when school will start again such as a countdown calendar to show which days will be at home and which days at school.
- Further visuals can be used to support with carrying out new routines or remembering previous ones. In addition they may be helpful for showing what the routines may consist of at school, if coming in and going home are going to be different to how they were.
- If your child is moving to secondary school, consider providing them with a credit card holder which can be discreetly kept in a pocket or bag which contains cards with pre-rehearsed solutions to 'What if?' problems or scenarios that they are worried or unsure about.
- For secondary transitions, encourage your child to re-read any transition information that has been shared with them and practise reading the school timetable and map.
- Support with any sensory processing difficulties your child has by trying on and wearing of uniforms, particularly shoes (as these can cause major discomfort and blisters). This may be needed whether the uniform is new or just because it has not been worn for a long time.
- Consider documenting your child's sensory processing differences to share with you child's new SENCo, teacher or tutor. This could be emailed in advance.
- Help your child to develop a 'toolbox' of strategies to help them self-regulate. Ideas such as the '5,4,3,2,1 grounding technique' can be useful if your child is feeling anxious about the return to school.

(See resources 11 and 12)

Have you seen the new ASC Team Wiki? It contains information about autism and links to resources, you can find it here:

<https://wiki.rixwiki.org/west-sussex-mmm/home/asc-team-wiki>

(Please note the Wiki works best when using Google Chrome).

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Useful resources for further reading:

The following are a range of resources to support parents and families with children returning to the same school or a new school in September 2020, following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is by no means an exhaustive list.

1. A Toolbox of Wellbeing: Helpful strategies & activities for children, teens, their carers and teachers by Tina Rae, Hinton House Publishing (2020)
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/collections/starting-primary-school/1> This includes easily navigated content on starting primary school comprising sections on: encouraging growth mindset, building resilience, transition planning, mindfulness, developing positive routines and much more. There is a dedicated section for SEND
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/tags/zh4wy9q/starting-secondary-school/1> This is a guide to starting secondary school. There is information on practical and emotional support, friendships, cyber- safety and other pertinent issues. There is a dedicated section for SEND.
4. https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3702/how-to-support-your-child_corona.pdf This includes advice on how to support your child if they are anxious about Coronavirus
5. <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2957/top-ten-tips-poster.pdf> This includes helpful tips for parents to support their children with managing change
6. <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/supporting-your-childs-mental-health-during-covid-19-school-return> This includes some helpful answers to FAQs.
7. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/away-from-home/at-school/> This includes sections on preparing children for going back to school and talking to children who are worried about going back to school.
8. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfVgWWNqce46lxiVQNThooXa5PBNESLXY> A series of webinars designed for parents by Surrey and Borders NHS Trust. Themes are: What is Anxiety?; Strategies for managing anxiety; Transitions to a new school: Covid-19; Returning to School from Lockdown and Covid-19; Anxiety in the context of Covid-19.
9. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5LDmj_f9js&t=355s This is a recorded Q&A session with Pooky Knightsmith, talking about anxiety and its impact on children, calm communication and coregulation, amongst other subjects.
10. <https://www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/factsheets.html> Useful fact sheets around areas pertinent to the Covid-19 pandemic from Reaching Families.
11. <https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/updates/education-and-school/back-to-school-guide.aspx> A guide for parents on returning to school from the National Autistic Society.
12. <https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/updates/education-and-school/return-to-school-in-england.aspx> FAQ's about the return to school for children with additional needs from the National Autistic Society.