

Settling back into school: understanding emotions video transcript

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[Katrina] Hello, I'm Katrina Brooks, I'm an educational psychologist and part of the family learning and support hub which is part of the Bristol Autism Team.

[Josie] And I'm Josie Ball and I'm also am part of the Bristol Autism Team. Also, I'm a mummy of two children who have been diagnosed with autism and have lots of autism in the family, so I've got lots of experience and we're hoping we can share some help with you.

We're just doing three videos because lots of parents that we've spoken to have said that their children are having trouble settling back into school, which is totally understandable when they've been at home potentially for two and a half months or perhaps they've been at school but it's been very small groups and it's felt quite different, so we just wanted to bring a few ideas of some of the things that seem to be helping children to be settling back in to get used to school again. This one's going to be thinking particularly about understanding emotions.

As we said it's a tricky time for some of our families, there's big changes which we know our children with autism can find quite difficult. I mean, it's difficult for adults it's difficult for all of us at the moment as things gradually

change and we gradually have different expectations on us, so we need to be understanding that there's big things happening.

Our children might show their heightened emotions in lots of different ways. It might be that they're having trouble sleeping, it might be that they're waking early, it might be that you're seeing very clingy behaviours and that they don't really want to leave your side. It might be that they're showing more distressed behaviours, or they're reluctant to go to school perhaps and getting out the door in the morning is tricky. It might be that you're seeing more sensory behaviours, perhaps they're doing more spinning or needing more time on the trampoline.

I think it's important that we all acknowledge that we're all juggling quite a lot at the moment and as parents you're juggling a lot, so we're just giving you a few ideas but please be realistic with what you can fit in and what works for you.

And you know there's a lot of tiredness around the net that's very understandable if you know getting them out of the door in the morning is a big enough achievement but there are just a few ideas here just in case there's anything else that might support.

I think one of the first steps that we think about when we're thinking about emotions and how to help our children deal with the different emotions they might be having, is by us as adults modelling and telling them what's going on for us a little bit so that they begin to understand 'okay we all feel different things about different places'.

So, an example might be when you're in the playground "wow the playground seems really busy, I'm not used to busy places, I'm going to take a really deep breath to help me feel calmer", so that we're giving our child a little bit of insight into what might be going on for us inside and that we have to draw on strategies to help us so we can help them think about strategies they can draw on to help them.

We're really trying to help children to build that link between knowing that feeling that they've got in their tummy, or they've got in their heart, or they've gotten it in the rest of their body, and trying to help them understand the name of that emotion and then hopefully what they can do about those different emotions, or how they can express it. And for our children with autism it might be more tricky identifying the feeling that's going on for them and it might be quite tricky for them to get that across to another person or to see the point in telling somebody how they're feeling.

So, we're trying to help build up that link. And it might be that you're helping them to explore and label 'what's going on in their bodies?'

There's an example here which is from all the resources that are on the Bristol Local Offer that Tanya Rawlinton put together, where there's a picture of a body, and it might be that you might want to draw a picture of a body and you show you draw a little picture on the tummy where you might feel it if you feel a bit worried, and get your child to draw where they might feel it if they feel a little bit worried. Or maybe a plasticine person and if you do it like that, try and help them make the link of what does it feel like inside.

It might be that they're worried about going to school, or they're worried about something else that they're starting up again football club or something that they're not used to. And it might be that just talking through the school day you can help them identify which bit of it that they're worried about. Is it going into the classroom in the morning, or is it break time when they have to stay in a particular area but they're not really sure which area it is.

So sometimes kind of jotting down a timetable or different pictures of the different parts of the day might be a good tool to help explore with them which bits that they're finding tricky. And ideally if you can have a chat with school about you being advocate for your child and telling the school if there's something that your child has told you, having a joined-up meeting together can be really helpful so that you can help give them some strategies and ideas and have a bit of a joint thinking, so your child feels understood.

Another example here is: it might be that your child knows that they feel a bit anxious about perhaps going into school in the morning, but they find it difficult to express that with words. So sometimes having a visual, having some pictures that they can hold up to show how they're feeling might be a good tool for them to be able to express that. And there's lots more ideas on the Bristol Local Offer.

I'm going to share a few ideas of what helps at home for us, and always thinking and making that link between home and school. So, what I find works really well at home I will always share with school and hopefully they can back that up.

But again, like Katrina said - you know you're wanting to model that behaviour with your child. 'I think you're feeling this way, why don't you...!' 'When I feel like that, this is what I do...!' So, I came up with a box that we use at home and I use it a lot for helping my children understand when they're feeling a certain way, this is what you can do to help yourself feel better.

So, I have some zones here. I have the blue zone at the top and on here it says it says "you may be feeling sad, you may be moving a bit slow, might be feeling a bit sick, or tired, or bored". So that's my blue zone.

So, I might say to my child "oh I can see, I think you're hanging around a bit and you don't really know what to do, you're walking back and forwards, I think you might be a bit bored, why don't you go to your blue zone"

So, then he'll go along to the blue zone and inside the blue zone I'll have things that will stimulate him - maybe that bit of sensory stimulation he might need, or you know if he's feeling a bit sad, or a bit sick, there's a few things in here. So, I have things like this [a vibrating face massager] because I know that he likes enjoying putting that around his body and waking up his senses. I have a few things like some word searches and some crosswords that he can do in there. Little things like memory mazes to get going again, and I'll always put a packet of sweets or something in there. So, I'm thinking about everything that I can do and so, if he can teach himself that will help him feel that little bit better, a bit more alert.

Then we have the yellow zone. So, this is when there's a bit of loss of control, okay, he might be really excited, really silly, or "wiggly" I've put on here. I've used words that he'll relate to, if feeling a bit frustrated. So, I can

say "gosh I think you're feeling you know a bit cross, I can see you're a bit frustrated Kelvin, you don't really know what to do. Run along to your yellow box". So then inside the yellow box is pretty much a fidget bag. It will have lots of things to keep him occupied and calm him down at the same time. And again, it's all trying to teach him to be able to regulate himself and know what to do in those situations.

So, it could be funny - one of these funny timers he loves watching, or some silly wiggly bits, a kaleidoscope, you know just lots of bits in there that I know he'll enjoy. And it will either help ground him again think 'yes you know I'm feeling okay, I've had a break'. Or the same if he's a bit frustrated it can do the same - bring him back down. So that's the yellow zone.

And then the red zone is the complete 'out of control; I'm terrified, things really aren't going well, I might be really mad, really angry'. So, we go to the red zone and quite often I will be the one to say 'you know you've had it, you've had enough, go to your red zone.' And in here will be the things that I know that he really needs at that point. So, there'll be some headphones he loves, these stretchy lycra body bags, so he's got one of those. And there'll be some sweets in there as well so when he really can't cope with anything you just need that minute to calm yourself down you go to your red zone. And what I've found is the more that we've used this at home, and I've really been modelling that, 'I can see this is how you're feeling', I'm doing less of that now. So he is actually recognising when he's a bit bored, I'll find him up in the blue box and that's really worked for us at home. And that's something I've really shared with school and they've then been trying to use the same language and maybe the same colours of zones that we've been using at home.

So, it's that relatable 'home in school' to bring down the anxiety, that whatever it is. And these also work really well for that that anxiety and not really understanding you've got so many worries - school, going back into school, everything's changed you know, 'there's lots of things I don't know anymore that I used to know'.

And this is just a worry post box [*shows red shoe box*] that I made out of a shoe box and covered it in some red, you don't have to do that, but it was just more appealing to the eye. And it has on here a few steps. So, it says 'write or draw on the slips what you're worried about, drop your worry into the box and then leave your worry behind', and the box will hold on to it for you. So, it's that idea of 'actually, you don't always need to, because I think a lot of the time, they don't necessarily want to hold all these worries inside. And can you imagine being really cross or angry or upset or worried and keeping that inside - it's quite damaging, I think. So if they can't necessarily express that to you through communication or letting you know, it's quite a nice way of explaining to them 'well actually you can get rid of that worry, post that anxiety away, give it a jot on the paper and then let go of it'. You know it's gone, it's another form of communication of just letting it go, and that really worked well for my children.

Thank you, hopefully there's some ideas to get you thinking about what you might be able to do to support your children. And thank you to all the parents that have given us lots of ideas over the courses that we've been doing with them. Thank you.