

Tips for parents to help with coronavirus changes:
Tackling some of the specific challenges for children with autism

Introduction:

We have put together this resource to support families with planning for their child over the next phase of transition relating to coronavirus changes. We are aware of some specific difficulties that have come up for children with autism over this time.

These include coping with sleep problems, anxiety about going out or meeting others, separation anxiety and regulating intense emotions or behaviours.

This resource therefore contains some ideas to help with these so that the move towards the transition phase and/or returning to school can become easier.

Of course, as always, take those bits that are helpful for you and your family and remember that at times of change trying to do too much can be quite overwhelming for children with autism as well as their parents. When working with emotional needs/difficulties, try to prioritise which needs are most important based on the level of distress to your child and/or the likely impact in their life.

Coping with sleep problems which have emerged over lockdown:

Sleep routines have been challenging for many families over lockdown. In many ways this is natural with more time being spent at home. If this is the case for your child, it will take time leading up to your child's transition back to school to gently work on this.

It can help to consider some practical issues such as:

- Gently bringing the end of screen time earlier in the evening or moving this into the day.
- Gradually bring in familiar evening routines where they may have slipped (perhaps using a visual schedule where this is positive and doesn't create too much pressure).
- To support bringing bedtimes earlier, try using a range for bedtime each week rather than an exact bedtime (e.g. Week 1: Bed between 9 and 10, Week 2: Bed between 8.30 and 9.30, Week 3: bed between 8.00 and 9.00).
- Some children with autism may appreciate warnings leading up to bedtime or a 'green, orange and red' zone to represent how important the bedtime request is.
- A reward system could help in the short-term to get a bit of momentum going again.
- Remember to also consider the time that they get up in planning this (moving away from long lie ins as they get closer to school).



Consider emotional issues too:

Sleep disturbance such as fear of being alone or nightmares have been fairly common over lockdown for many children so do be patient and think outside of bedtime about any anxieties that may be coming up for your child overnight.

- One thinking strategy that has worked well for some anxious children over lockdown is to develop some repetitive bits of positive self-talk/sleep affirmations. The child can then repeat this to themselves to help with sleep (e.g. “Sleep helps me feel strong”). Some say that combining this with a further positive statement about their day and saying their affirmation in a rhythmic way is extra helpful (e.g. “Sleep helps me feel strong”, “I had fun in the woods today”).
An older child might enjoy making a visual of their sleep affirmations or ideal routine to help with motivating themselves.
- Some children have appreciated having some additional sensory strategies around bedtime which are known to be calming for them such as soft sounds or lights and soft fiddle toys.
- Sleep research also tells us that listening to something calming (*using a device/player that is not connected to the internet*) around bedtime can be an effective way of promoting sleep. This might include, audio books, relaxing music, sounds or mindfulness. Sometimes just tweaking something to create some calm in a bedtime routine can make a big difference.

Cerebra is a national organisation which provides helpful resources and advice specifically for sleep:
<https://cerebra.org.uk/get-advice-support/sleep-advice-service/>

Coping with fears about going out or meeting others:

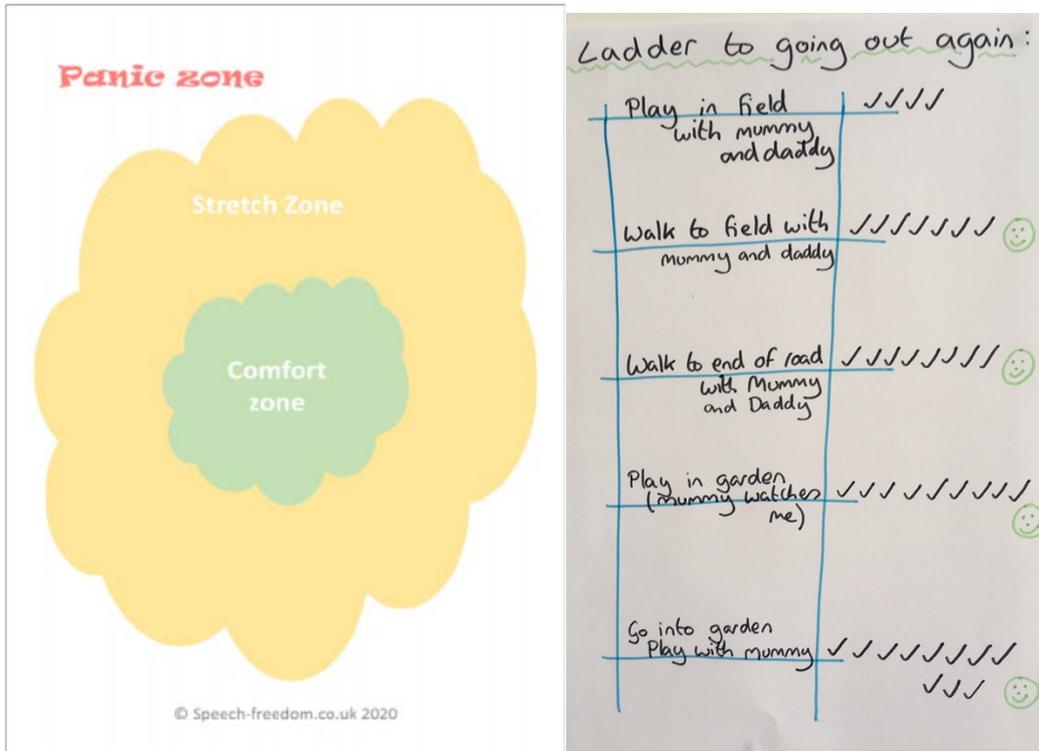
It is natural following so much time at home that some children may feel particularly anxious about going out, meeting up with friends or family and/or going back to school.

It is helpful to be gentle on your child’s anxiety, reassuring them that with practice they will be able to manage these things again. It is less helpful to let their anxiety be in control. In general, avoiding the things that we are fearful of is likely to support anxiety to grow.

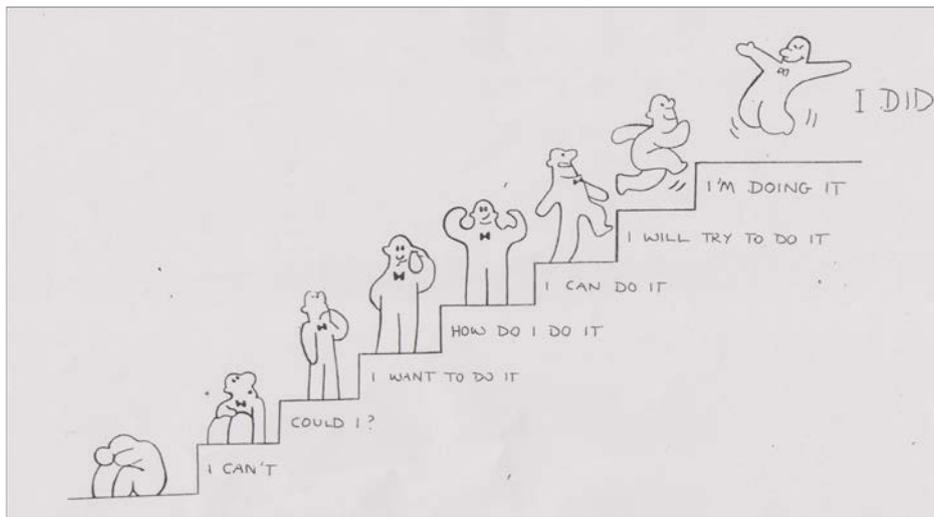
Developing plans with some steps to help with practicing activities is key to working with this sort of anxiety (making things less scary). There are many ways of making visual plans. Choose and goal or area to work on and then start with the tasks that are easiest. It is important to practice these several times before moving on to the next step/task. This work



can be hard initially but most families find that once things start rolling the child can become more motivated. It is important to think about what is motivating for your child in this process – so plan activities that you think they would or used to enjoy.



Help your child to rate how they feel about the steps either using a scale or the visual shown below – curiosity like “Could I?” or “I want to do it” is usually a good starting point in terms of the level of worry to start with. If they feel like they can’t do it then it could help to come up with an easier step first:



(attached again at the end of this document for printing)

- *Think good feel good (by Paul Stallard)* is a helpful workbook for children which can help further with some simple doing and thinking strategies for managing avoidance.
- *The Scardy Squirrel series by Melanie Watt* (who has a diagnosis of Aspergers) was also written for children who get anxious about going out and interacting. Read aloud versions of the stories are available on You Tube.

The national selective mutism charity (SMiRA) have recently released some advice to help with supporting children who tend to retreat in response to their anxiety:

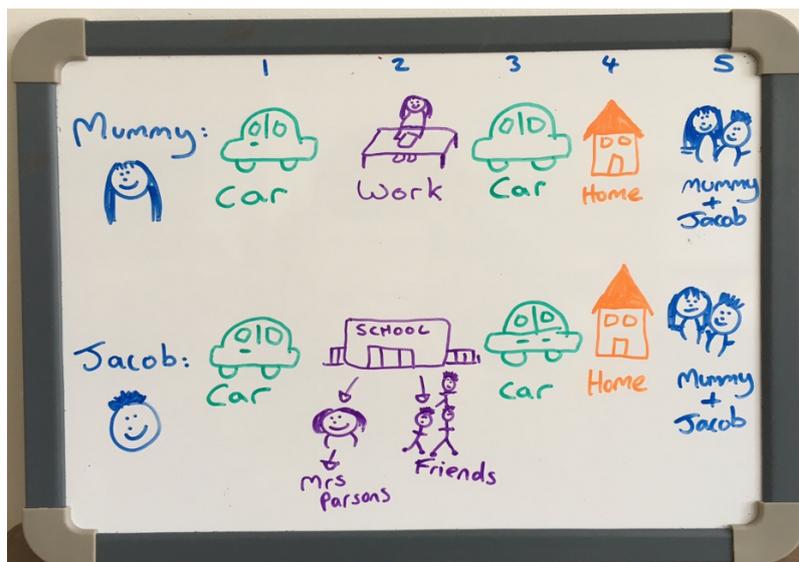
- <http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/information/information-for-parents/>

Planning for separation anxiety:

Many children having spent so much time with their parents will naturally show some degree of separation anxiety in going back to a setting or school and also in terms of the pace of family life picking up again. For children with autism changes away from home and parents may seem especially challenging.

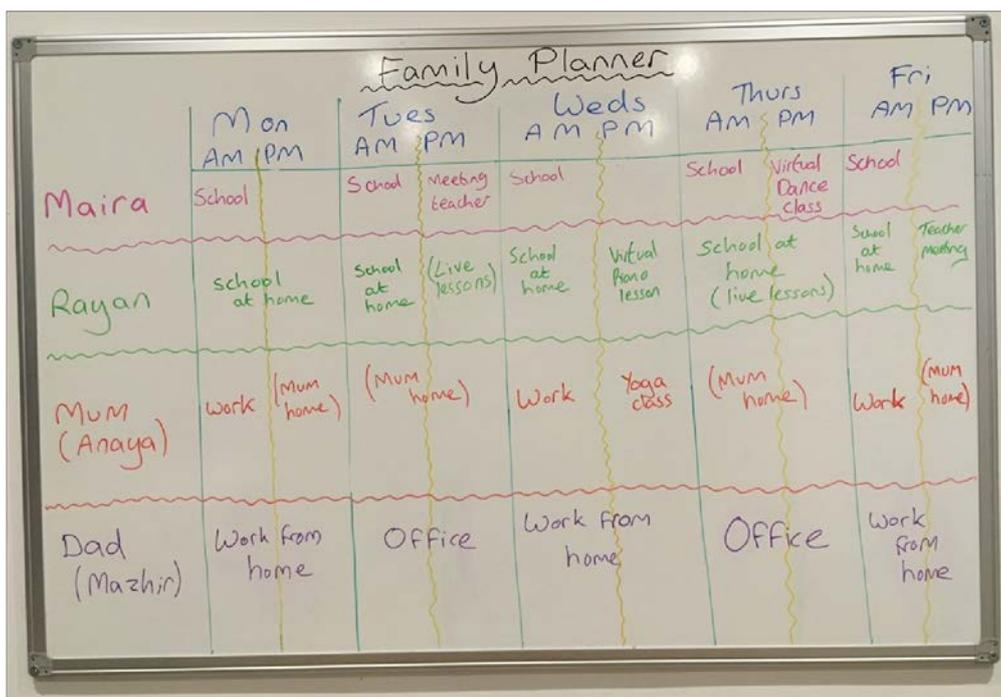
Think about what you think your child could manage and talk to your school about a phased transition and/or shorter days initially if you feel that this would make things more positive/manageable for them in the short-term.

To support separations, it helps to provide a plan that shows what they will be doing and what you will be doing. This could be especially helpful in initial days/weeks and it shows to them that they will come home and you will be together again.



Your child may also be interested to see pictures of what you have been up to at the end of the day. A communication system between you and school would be particularly helpful in supporting this to be a two-way exchange about their day too.

For older children this could be a family planner or wall chart which will help everyone understand who is doing what over the coming weeks. If you have been using a whiteboard to help with teaching at home perhaps this could be transformed but a piece of paper stuck on the wall can work just as well:



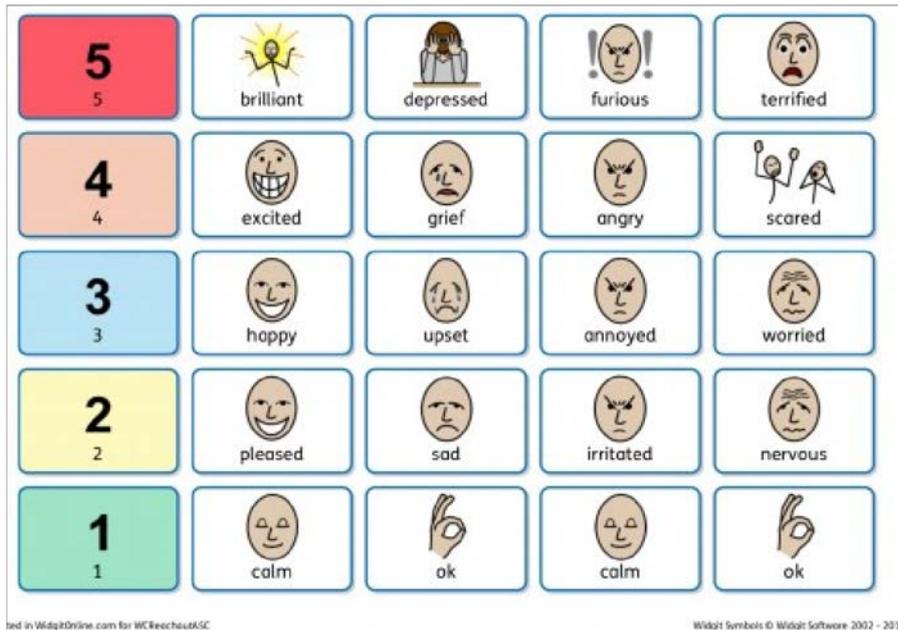
Family planners are available to buy on-line like this simple one available from Amazon:



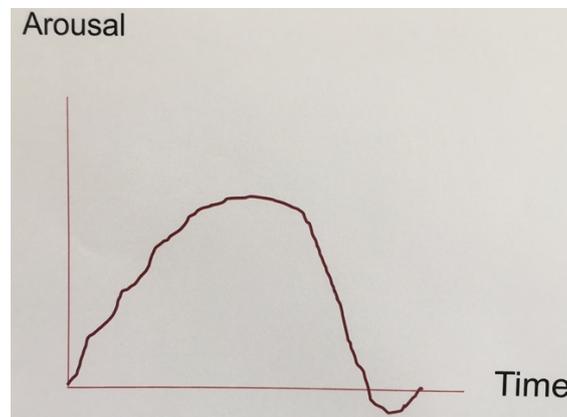
Helping emotional regulation:

Some parents have been describing more emotional extremes in their children over lockdown and at times where all the family is together. It may have been more difficult for your child to find time or space for themselves and for many reasons emotions may have felt heightened.

‘Zones of regulation’ is an approach often used to help regulation in children with autism:



This approach helps to explain how any heightened emotion can lead to meltdown with one emotion quickly changing to another in the red which would be at the top of the arousal curve. Also, after a period of intense high arousal we can expect a low time where recovery and repair will be needed.



If your child is experiencing some emotional extremes, then it may help to share this information with them so that you can explore some ways of being aware of different levels of arousal.

Although we often think about difficult emotions like angry, this idea is also helpful for positive emotions like excited or anticipation. These feelings may emerge more as we enter a different phase and it will help to plan with your family how to keep a calm balance of activities and strategies at home as different changes and situations arise which could push feelings further up the curve or scale.

A safety plan for the reds: Many families find that having a plan for those most intense times can help to reduce frequency and intensity (especially in terms of meltdown or distress). This can be as simple as a routine which is planned by parents or if possible with the child (e.g. “I can go to my room - lie on my bed with stretchy teddy - put my music on loudly - Mummy will come and check in on me”).

If the distress involves aggressive behaviours, then try to think of some key words or sentences to use calmly when managing things (e.g. “Jonny - sit down to calm down”) and emphasise safety for your child and for others.

Have a box or virtual toolkit: Sensory boxes are helpful for many children and it could be helpful to relook at this with your child in terms of the bits that they may like to take out with them or to school to support their transitions.



Some teenagers have been clever in recording their safety plans or top strategies onto their phone or Alexa so that they can for example ‘ask Alexa’ to help them when they get distressed. If your teenager would find this helpful, try to come up with the top 3 things that are most helpful to them when they are upset - this could be an action and/or encouraging thought (e.g. “music on - play game on phone - just give myself some time”).

If you are particularly concerned about safety or your child seems stuck in an emotional process or cycle then do have a think about seeking some more advice or support. Enquiring to services at the end of this document and/or your child's school could be a helpful start.

Further references for coronavirus coping:

Here are some further and updated links relating to coronavirus:

American Psychological Association: Information on Pandemics (a wide range of resources)

https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/research-information/pandemics?utm_source=linkedin&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=apapandemics&utm_content=pandemics-resources

BBC: How to protect your mental health

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51873799>

CBBC: Video and Questions

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51861089>

ChildMind: Talking to Children

<https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>

ELSA: Coronavirus Story for Children

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/coronavirus-story-for-children/>

Evidence for learning: Including Barry Carpenter's work on the need for a recovery curriculum

<https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

National Association of School Psychologists: Parent Resources

[https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-andcrisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-\(coronavirus\)-a-parent-resource](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-andcrisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-(coronavirus)-a-parent-resource)

National child traumatic stress network

Describe the range of natural responses that children may show relating to coronavirus trauma and change

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/parent_caregiver_guide_to_helping_families_cope_with_the_coronavirus_disease_2019_covid-19.pdf

Reach out ASC

Lynn McCann is an autism specialist and teacher. She has put together a comprehensive course to support the transition of children back to school following lockdown – this free course made up of 5 minute talks is highly recommended for parents and teachers (following the www.schudio link below).

<https://www.reachoutasc.com> (see transition resources in the resources section)

<https://www.schudio.tv/courses/preparing-autistic-send-children-for-going-back-to-school>



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Society

Star Stream

The Star Stream team based in Leeds have put together a comprehensive collection of social stories and resources to support children with autism in their emotional coping and transition packs for different ages all relating to coronavirus. There is a useful free symbols sections for parents to personalise their own stories and timetables: <http://www.starsteam.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>

Young Minds: Feeling Anxious about Coronavirus

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-you-re-anxious-about-coronavirus>

This educational psychology website provides a further helpful overview of advice and resources:

<https://edpsy.org.uk/blog/2020/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-children-families-and-professionals/>

Here are some books which may be help communication of feelings:

Draw on Your Emotions

Margot Sunderland. A resource to help people express and communication their emotions.

Have You Filled A Bucket Today? A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids

Carol McCloud. Encourages positive behaviour and expressing kindness and appreciation.

How are you Peeling: Foods with Moods

Saxton Freymann & Joost Elffers. Explores how emotions look through pictures of Foods. A good way to talk about emotions with young children.

The Way I Feel

Janan Cain. Explores feelings and a helpful way to talk about emotions with young children.

'Think Good Feel Good': A CBT workbook for children and young people Paul

Stallard (2002).

What To Do When You're Scared & Worried: A Guide for Kids

James Crist. A help guide to processing fears and worries (ages 9-13).

Scaredy Squirrel (Series of children's books for children who worry about outings/events)

Melanie Watt (2008). Also available in spoken form over You Tube



Here are some books which may help communication about difficult events or bereavement:

Something Bad Happened: A Kid's Guide to Coping with events in the News Dawn Huebner. How to process different world events (ages 6-12).

The Day the Sea Went Out and Never Came Back

Margot Sunderland. A story for children who have lost someone they love (ages 4-12).

I have a question about death: clear answers for all kids, including children with ASD. Grad Gaines, A & Polsky, M (2007) Jessica Kingsley.

**With thanks to children and parents for sharing their work and resources
With thanks to Lynn McCann and www.reachoutasc.com for sharing their resources**

**This document has been researched and developed by Tanya Rawlinson
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