

Supporting your child's wellbeing

Learning from home can result in different responses from children. Some may enjoy the novelty of trying something different and enjoy the change of learning outside the formal classroom environment. However, for some autistic children, this change can be difficult for them. We have provided some guidance on some of the factors that can impact on children's wellbeing during this time. The most important factor is to be led by your child.

1. Adjustment, transition and processing time
2. Keeping information consistent
3. Structuring a day of home learning for autistic young people
4. How to use supportive tools like now & next and visual timetables
5. Dedicated learning space
6. Positive language
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Adjustment, transition and processing time

Some children may have quickly adapted to learning at home, and will transition back to learning at school with ease. However, other children may take weeks, or longer, to adjust to the change. For some autistic children, this could cause a great deal of distress and anxiety. This could even result in self-injury, or making physical contact with others when in a state of distress.

Things to try:

1. Consider usual adjustment time if the child has had big life changes before.

Has your child ever experienced a significant life change in the past? Think back to how long it took them to fully process this change. This can give your family an idea how long it may take for your child to understand the change that has happened.

2. Keep information consistent

If your child is struggling to understand the change, it may be tempting to give more information about the situation in order to ease their anxiety. If you have identified, as above, that your child experiences some amount of time to understand changes, try to keep information as consistent as possible throughout this period. For example, the following reasons:

- “School is closed to keep you healthy”
- “You can’t go out to school because of coronavirus”
- “If you go to school, you might get sick”
- “You cannot go to school today because no teacher will be in”
- “All girls and boys are off school today”

These could all be processed as separate reasons to an autistic child if given separately over time, or different reasons given by each family member. Agree with your family on one reason to help reassure your child. Alternatively, you can use one of Scottish Autism’s stories to present to your child each morning to help them communicate in the morning why they are not going to school. You may find that stories written by other organisations, or adaptations to stories, work better for your child.

3. Consider the right amount of information for your child

Although some children may be curious about the details of coronavirus, others may find that too much information (such as what it is, how it’s transmitted, how school can increase transmission rates) might be too much for them to process at once. Try to keep communication, and information, tailored to what they need to know at that moment to support them.

4. Aim to reduce stress during the adjustment period

If your child is showing signs of extreme anxiety, such as self-injurious behaviour or physical contact with others, a focus on their wellbeing and stress reduction will take precedence over their completion of work at that time.

→ List several activities or tasks that you know your child finds relaxing or enjoyable. There may be tasks that your child can engage in continuously, supporting them to a place of mindfulness. Ensure these are incorporated into their day.

→ Reduce demands. If you have worked on supporting your child to develop life skills, or you feel your child has made good educational progress, consider if these demands contribute to your child’s stress levels and consider postponing them. They may be better placed to continue these once they have adjusted to the change.

→ Reduce sensory information or arousal in the home where possible.

→ If you are continuing your work from home, have a conversation with your employer about your caring commitments and what changes can be made to your working day to support your child.

Take the adjustment slowly if needed

Although the child may have been given work by their teacher, or may be requested to continue with their curriculum, this may need to be incorporated slowly into their schedule if they are particularly distressed. An example of this could look like:

Week one: “Learning at home” initiated for a couple of hours in the morning, focusing on the curriculum that they enjoy the most. This can continue until the child is familiar with the routine of “learning at home”, and is comfortable with this included in their day.

Week two: “Learning at home” increased to include other areas of the curriculum, and time increased slightly for a full morning.

Week three: “Learning at home” increased to a comfortable level of curriculum completion, and a new routine of “Learning at home after lunch” included.

The plan for introduction of learning at home, including the length of time taken to reach the next stage, will be different for every child. Some children will be fully comfortable with a full day of “learning at home” immediately after school closure. The above is an example of how it can be introduced to your child in stages. If you feel your family is having difficulty during this period, you can contact an Autism Advisor at Scottish Autism should you feel you need advice, information, or emotional support.

Dedicated learning space

Many children may associate their home as a place of play, recreation, and family time. The use of the home environment for learning can cause distress for some children. If you have a space available, such as a chair and table, a spare room, a section of your home where this can be set up, consider if your child would like to do their work there.

This can allow learning time, and home life, to be separated in a healthy way. Alternatively, your child may prefer to learn at various parts of the home moving to avoid sensory information or fatigue.

Structuring a Day of Home Learning for Autistic Young People

Structure and routine can be hugely important to autistic young people and many will utilise this while learning at school. During this period of home learning, it can be helpful to try and introduce structure and routine into the home learning environment. Always remember to keep the young person's interests, skills and needs in mind when creating a daily structure or routine.

If you are in contact with your child's/young person's teacher or school they might be able to advise you about what their structure and routine was like in school, which you may wish to replicate in the home learning environment.

However, it is important to remember these routines and structures might need some tweaks for it to work at home or it might need to be redesigned to fit into this different environment.

Music, songs, alarms and sounds from things like bells or signing bowls can offer further defined structure to a home learning routine, for example, to begin or end an activity.

These sounds can be soft and gentle or more upbeat depending on your young person's sensory preference and the activity in question.

Structure and routine can be helpful in reducing anxiety, offering consistency and predictability.

Remember, that even with the best of intentions and clearest structure, things do not always go to plan, and this is ok. Be flexible, adapt and learn from these experiences.

Environment:

At school, your child's classroom might be very structured. Creating a clear space for learning at home might be helpful in offering a clear, distinct area to signify where learning tasks take place. Of course, some learning might be play orientated or outdoor focussed so a defined space might not be required. Organising the learning space and any associated materials by labeling and removing clutter can offer further clarity.

Workstation:

It might be helpful to clearly define your child's home learning space in some way. This could be marking out an area or putting your child's favourite cushion on a chair to identify this as their learning chair. They might want to create a name plaque to identify that as their learning space. If using activity sheets or similar, it could be helpful to have a tray where your child can select home learning tasks and a finished tray where they can put any finished work, which can signify an end to that activity.

Daily Timetables:

Having a daily timetable for home learning can be a great way to offer structure and routine. How this looks can be varied, using only pictures or photos, a combination of pictures and words or it could simply be a written list. Here are some examples that might be helpful to amend to suit your own home learning routine:

8am	Get up	Have breakfast, have shower, get dressed and tidy bedroom
10am	Exercise then 'choose' time	Jump on trampoline, go for a walk or indoor activity like Joe Wicks PE
11am	Home learning time	This could be learning from an area of the curriculum, either online or activity sheet
12pm	Lunch time	
1pm	Home learning time	The afternoon could be used to do a creative activity
2pm		The end of the day could be dedicated to relaxation, yoga or mindfulness. There's lots of online channels to guide this.
3-5pm	This time could be spent choosing, watching TV, going for a walk or playing a computer game	
5pm	Dinner	
6pm	Relaxation before bed	Reading, jigsaw, bath or quiet time
7pm	Bedtime	Evening routine and bed

How to Use Supportive Tools like Now & Next and Visual Timetables

There are various different strategies and approaches that can be supportive during this time where young people might be learning at home. These tools might be helpful in enhancing any structure and routine you are creating during this time of change and uncertainty. These tools can still be worthwhile using, even if you or the person you care for is not engaging in home learning.

Visual Supports:

The term visual supports is wide ranging and encompasses a range of different ways of presenting information. The key thing to remember with all visual supports is that they should be personalised to the person who is going to be using them rather than having a one size fits all approach.

Visual supports can explain what is going to happen in a given situation, offering concrete communication and the next or subsequent steps of the situation. A visual support can be spoken through in advance, broken down into manageable steps and referred back to (possibly numerous times) and can use pictures, real photos and/or words and can include things like picture cards, Boardmaker symbols, timetables or 'now and next'. Google images can be helpful for creating these type of resource.

Visuals can also be used to support, reinforce or develop verbal communication and can allow your young person to communicate without relying on the spoken word which might support to reduce feelings of frustration, anxiety or upset.

In the context of home learning, visuals could be used to help map out a plan for the day. Depending on your child or young person, they might like to have a visual that supports them through their whole day, like a daily timetable or they might even like to create this themselves using a whiteboard, or they might prefer it to be broken down to only focus on one or two activities at a time, such as using 'now & next' or 'first & then'.

By breaking learning activities down into manageable chunks you can focus on the activity we are doing now e.g. reading and the activity that will be happening next, e.g. snack time.

Now	Next
Reading	Snack time

Social Stories:

A social story can be written to explain any situation or event that can cause frustration, upset or anxiety, with the overall aim of easing these feelings and, again, offering explanation about what is going to happen and why. They are designed to be personalised to a particular person or situation, short, use clear, simple language and they are a concrete tool so they can be referred back to when required or to offer reassurance. For example, you might create a social story about why your child or young person is not currently going to school or why they are currently learning from home.

Positive Language

Children's learning environment in school may result in them seeking positive appraisal for their good work as their teachers will normally give them, and feeling upset or anxious when they get things wrong. This can be a motivation for many children in school, as approval from their teacher makes them feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in their work.

Things to try:

1. Be generous with praise and be specific if necessary

Some autistic children may grasp the concept of short phrases that keeps communication meaningful to them. In a way, that allows them to understand that they have been praised for their work, and without giving too much information.

Examples:

“Great work”,

“Good job”,

“Well done”.

Some children may prefer non-verbal praise, such as a tick on their work, a thumbs up, or sticker.

Other autistic children may need more specific praise in order to not become fatigued by the appraisal process. This would involve identifying what they did well within the piece of work or activity.

Examples include:

“Well done, that sum was very tricky and you solved it.”

“Great job, your spelling is really good. Those are big words.”

“You found that question hard, but you tried really hard and got the right answer.”

2. Consider alternative language if mistakes make them anxious.

It is normal for some children to become disheartened, stressed, or anxious if they get answers wrong.

For some autistic children, it can be difficult to grasp the process of making a mistake → finding out what when wrong → trying again → getting the answer correct.

As a result, some autistic children may not see past the stage of “making a mistake”, and the emotions which accompany that stage can linger. They may have had negative experiences with teachers in the past, where their perception of body language, body cues, and tones have been perceived as being reprimanded.

Some children may prefer a more concrete response to whether or not their work is correct or incorrect. However, the following positive phrases can be used if your child becomes particularly anxious or upset with being told an answer is wrong or they have made mistakes.

Here are some ideas of phrases you can try:

“Good try – let’s give it another try”

“Let’s look at that question again”

“Let’s give it another go”

“Let’s leave this one for later”

“Let’s google how to spell that word”

“That question is tricky, let’s look at it together”

“Do you want me to help, or do you want to try it again yourself?”

If your child is becoming overwhelmed with difficult work, consider encouraging them to take a break, or try something they are particularly skilled at. Be generous with praise.

Other wellbeing resources:

Young minds

[A website with dedicated resources to support your child’s wellbeing](#)

GIRFEC Toolkit

[Your resource for Improving Children and Young People’s understanding of their wellbeing](#)

Place2Be Website

[Mental Health Resources for schools](#)

Autism Toolbox

[A website dedicated to giving information and resources to schools and professionals. Includes information on transitions and supporting anxiety.](#)