

# Practical Strategies for Autistic Pupils Returning to Education Settings



Hello and welcome to the autism education trust. This presentation is for anyone working closely with autistic pupils to support the transition back to education settings

It will give you practical strategies to support autistic children and young people to return to the education setting.

## Learning Aims

- Practical strategies for supporting autistic pupils to cope with changes to the education environment and their daily routines.

By the end of this presentation our hope is that you will be able:

## Considerations due to Covid-19 and Strategies to Support these...

- Social Distancing
- Handwashing and Hygiene
- Managing Rising Anxiety
- Developing resilience



This is a list of core considerations that staff will have to think about when welcoming pupils back to the education setting. Suggested strategies of how to manage each of these are discussed in the following slides. These strategies will support all CYP but especially those on the autism spectrum.

## Social Distancing

- Explain the rules of social distancing using a personalised social story.
- Teach personal space through modelling and explicit instruction.
- Explain the structure and expectations of breaks/lunchtime.
- Use predictable and named seating arrangements.
- Give clear markers and visual reminders.

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Autistic pupils can often struggle to understand and use personal space appropriately. They are likely to need additional support in this area. This could be taught using a social story to explain why people need to keep a safe distance from one another during this time. Autistic pupils often benefit from additional personal space specifically when this is clearly explained and defined.

Consider how you will use signs and provide visual information to explain new structures and expectations e.g unstructured times. When lining up will there be clear markers with tape or mats to stand on? You may need to distinguish between distances in the playground by chalking areas which the children could help decorate.

Where possible use names and photos as much as possible e.g. for seating arrangements.

If alternative routes around school are to be used or direction of travel is to be rule based, there will need to be time given to practise these. Make sure arrows clearly define direction and there is no ambiguity. Write down rules specifically and review these with the pupil regularly.

## Handwashing and Hygiene

- Can hand washing be included on a pupil's timetable?
- Use a social story to encourage and explain the importance of hand washing.
- Use visual prompts in handwashing areas.
- Use special interests as a motivator e.g a song/dance.
- Some autistic pupils may present with sensory seeking behaviour.
- Can hand sanitizer be used instead?
- Be mindful of obsessional hand washing behaviour.

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Ensure the pupil has a handwashing routine symbol strip/communication card so they can request to wash their hands. In your hand out (Appendix F) you will find examples of communication cards.

You may wish to use a social story for hand washing to explain why the expectation now is to wash hands more often.

Use Corona Virus Hand washing visuals in washing spaces and use the 'jigs' template in your handout (Appendix G) to break the routine down into smaller steps.

Hand washing is a common difficulty for autistic pupils for a number of sensory reasons. Some children cannot cope with hot water nor very cold water and may need hand wipes if they struggle with liquid soaps. Also they may be sensitive to how the water feels on their skin, which could be painful. For other pupils they may love playing with water and will take advantage of the increased handwashing and use this as an escape from work or opportunity to engage in something they find fun.

Some pupils may mouth classroom equipment, may hug peers and adults and may present with other risky behaviours such as spitting. This should



be addressed through their individual risk assessment which will be written taking into account the pupil/parents views. The risk assessment will outline specific measures to take in each scenario.

## Managing Rising Anxiety

- Talk openly about different experiences of lockdown.
- Introduce a worry box.
- Weekly emotional wellbeing lessons.
- Provide de-briefings/check-ins for emotionally vulnerable CYP.
- Provide increased access to sensory equipment (such as fiddle toys) and activities.

The emotional regulation associated with returning to school will be difficult to manage for many autistic pupils. The sudden return after such a long time off will need to be managed very carefully. Autistic pupils may have previously found school very stress inducing and will have welcomed a long break, but for some pupils they will have suffered from being out of school due to a lack of routine and may be happy to be back.

Establish a whole school generic approach where pupils are encouraged to talk about how they feel in this situation. Talk to the children about it being normal to feel worried about the Coronavirus and what is happening around them. Explain that everyone finds change difficult but change does not necessarily have to be bad. Focus on the positives that have come out of this and discuss them. A calm and understanding approach that recognises and values both the individual and their differences will be the most successful strategy for transition and re-inclusion.

It is important to remember that distressed behaviours are likely to be the CYP communicating their worries and frustrations in the only way they know how. Give the CYP a variety of means to communicate their experiences as they may not feel comfortable speaking in front of others.



Plan to manage everyone's anxiety and stress through regular teaching of emotional well-being.

Some pupils will have a degree of fear of time/work missed and could even have a false belief that they won't catch up.

Some pupils will have worked for exams and not sat them and those anxieties and concerns will need to be addressed with a degree of reassurance.

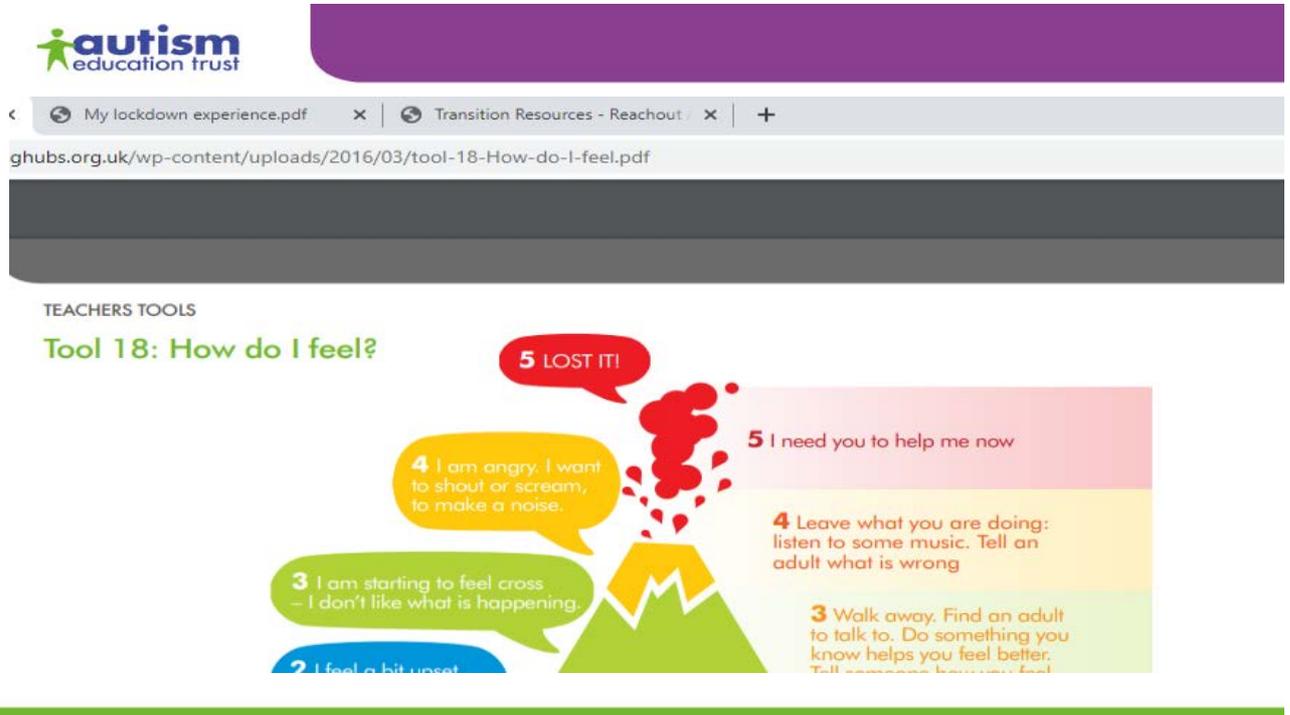
Some will have anxiety about their health and having to interact with lots of people.

Some pupils may struggle to disengage from obsessional thoughts which may lead to increased OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) as they try to maintain control over their feelings of insecurity.

There may have been a loss in the family or friendship circle due to Corona Virus. How will the pupil be supported bereavement?

Be prepared to have a range of sensory equipment such as ear defenders, fiddle toys, move and sit cushions, wobble cushions, calm spaces, Theraputty, Sensory Liquid Cascade timers, sensory pillows, beanbag to sit in, weighted lap pads, stress balls and colour changing toys, regular opportunities for movement and P.E. in small groups.

Slide 7



TEACHERS TOOLS

**Tool 18: How do I feel?**

**5 LOST IT!**

**5** I need you to help me now

**4** I am angry. I want to shout or scream, to make a noise.

**4** Leave what you are doing: listen to some music. Tell an adult what is wrong

**3** I am starting to feel cross – I don't like what is happening.

**3** Walk away. Find an adult to talk to. Do something you know helps you feel better. Tell someone how you feel.

**2** I feel a bit upset.

It is important that CYP learn how to recognise their emotions and how to communicate these appropriately. There are many strategies to help support an autistic CYP to regulate their emotions. One of these is to have an anxiety scale. Work with the child or young person to create their bespoke anxiety scale. See Appendix H for an example.

## Developing resilience

- Keep a positives wall.
- Plan plenty of fun games and activities into the day.
- Keep everyone busy.
- End everyday on a positive activity.
- Raise the focus on Art and creative subjects.
- Share strengths and talents.
- What can the class /group do for the community to feel they are helping and to feel good about themselves.

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Not only will it be important to manage the anxiety of autistic pupils but you will need to proactively build their resilience and refocus them on the positives. You might keep one display wall where children can bring pictures, photos, artwork of all the positives in their lives, things they have done, their favourite things etc. Look at the wall together and discuss regularly as a group. Focus everyday on the positives and looking forward to next steps towards typical daily routines. Discuss together what is working well.

Talk less about the Coronavirus but respond when questions are asked in a matter of fact and factual way...but move on and don't dwell on this. Set aside a regular time to allow pupils to share something they have enjoyed doing whilst being at home.

Keep everyone busy so that those with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder have less time to dwell on their fears and compulsions. Do not comment on these in front of peers but ensure that you are aware of any OC behaviours that pupils may be displaying.

Provide regular opportunity for pupils to express their feelings through all expressive arts and especially through the emotional content of visual art.



## Further AET Resources...

- Covid-19 Information Centre:

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/covid-19-information-centre/>

Where you will find our latest Tools for Teachers Covid-19 edition booklet and a wealth of support materials from our partners across England.

- All of our Covid-19 content is free to access and download.

The full Tools for Teachers, consisting of 44 tools, is available to purchase for £35.99 here:

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/>

The AET are here to help you support autistic children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic and transition back to school.

You can find our latest Tools for Teachers Covid-19 edition booklet and a wealth of support materials from our partners across England.

All of our Covid-19 content is free to access and download.

Our popular [Tools for Teachers](#) resource, consisting of 44 tools, costs £35.99 but, in response to the circumstances, we have created a complementary collection of 6 tools that we think you will find most helpful in the current situation.

## Links to AET Schools Autism Standards...

### **The Individual Pupil – Standard 4**

- Your setting safeguards the well-being of pupils with autism by recognising that they are vulnerable to high levels of stress, anxiety and depression and that these can be prevented or reduced if needs are recognised early and met.

### **Enabling environments – Standard 8**

- Your setting effectively communicates key transitional information on pupils with autism to all relevant adults, including parents and/or carers, and ensures that this information is given to the pupils in the most appropriate way and at the right time.

### **Building Relationships – Standard 2**

- Your setting understands that in order to build effective relationships it needs to actively listen to pupils, parents and carers and promote opportunities for the exchange of information and ideas. This will enable families to feel that staff are open and approachable to discussions.

### **Curriculum and Learning – Standard 3**

- Your setting has activities that are well organised, structured and planned for and ensures that, where possible, advance warning is given (to both pupil and parent/carer) of any changes to familiar routines in a way that is meaningful and helpful to the pupils with autism and their families.

**You can download the standards for free here:**  
<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/>

The Autism Education Trust (AET) developed the autism standards with funding from the Department for Education, to describe the key factors common to good practice for pupils with autism.

Schools working towards these standards will be able to provide evidence for a range of statutory duties.

The standards provide schools with an instrument to build awareness of and reflection upon existing provision.

Completion of the standards will enable schools to identify and remove potential barriers to learning, enabling pupils with autism to make good progress.

## Links to AET Schools Autism Competency Framework...

### Enabling environments – Competency 8

- You understand that enabling environments through making reasonable adjustments is a statutory obligation in disability law (see Equality Act 2010), and that in terms of 'good autism practice' this is a minimum requirement.

### Curriculum and Learning – Competency 5

- At times of transition you co-ordinate and disseminate important information from all key stakeholders (including parents/carers and other family members) and ensure this information is shared with all, including the pupil on the autism spectrum.

### The Individual Pupil – Competency 2

- You use a range of strategies to get to know the individual pupil on the autism spectrum and find out about their particular profile of strengths, challenges, interests and aspirations.

### Building Relationships – Competency 1

- You understand the importance of listening to the voice of the pupil on the autism spectrum and identify strategies to ensure that communication systems are not just used to inform and instruct pupils, but also offer the opportunity for pupils to express their views.

You can download the competency framework for free here:  
<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/>

The AET schools autism competency framework provides a clear structure against which staff can reflect upon and evaluate their practice and aims to provide a source of guidance to help schools assess and develop capacity within their workforce to improve outcomes for pupils on the autism spectrum.

It is designed to be used as an on-going self-reflection tool to help staff focus on which aspects of their autism practice require further development.

Its format enables practitioners to rate their knowledge, skills and personal qualities against a set of descriptors outlining best practice that is recognised and valued by autistic individuals, their families and professionals.

Completion of the competency framework should help teaching staff demonstrate that they are extending the depth and breadth of their knowledge, skills and understanding of good autism practice.



## **Appendix D - Social stories**

### **What is it?**

A Social Story™ (Carol Gray) is a short description of a particular social situation, event or activity which includes specific and accurate social information about what to expect and why. A Social Story can provide a pupil with some idea of how others might respond in a particular situation, and therefore provide a framework for appropriate behaviour. The story is written to a specific structure and format includes social cues, perspectives and appropriate responses. Social Stories™ are designed to be reassuring for the pupil. Their aim is not to change behaviour but to identify and share information that supports alternate responses.

Social Stories™ answer “wh” questions:

- where and when the situation occurs
- who is involved
- how events are sequenced
- what occurs
- why

### **When would you use it?**

To assist autistic pupils to develop greater social understanding by identifying important cues in any given situation. Social Stories™ can be used for a variety of purposes including introducing changes and new routines, explaining the reasons for the behaviour of others, teaching situation-specific social skills, describing routines, rules, situations, upcoming events or abstract concepts, developing understanding around expectations, applauding accomplishments and assisting in teaching new academic skills. Social Stories™ also help peers to see things from the perspective of another pupil, and why s/he might appear to respond or behave in a particular way.

### **How to use it?**

The process begins with the identification of pupil needs through observation and assessment. Once a difficult situation is identified, the practitioner observes the situation and attempts to consider the perspective of the pupil in terms of what will be seen, heard, and felt. A



story should be written at an appropriate level of comprehension for the pupil, and includes descriptive, directive, and perspective statements.

Social Stories™ can vary in presentation from sentences and pictures to newsletter format. They may be written from either a first-person perspective, for younger or more challenged individuals (presenting information from the individual's point of view) or a third-person perspective for older, more advanced individuals, adolescents or adults. These may be more akin to 'Social Articles' and resemble a newspaper article.

### **Guidance for writing Social Stories™**

- State behaviour positively (state what to do rather than what not to do)
- Avoid referring to negative behaviour
- Describe more than direct
- Tailor the story to the individual's abilities and interests
- Beware of presenting literally accurate information
- Begin by identifying the topic of the Social Story™. Topics are identified by the individual's experiences and responses to his/her social world. The title may positively identify main topic

### **When writing the Social Story™, keep three parts in mind:**

- A. Introduction (clearly states the topic)
- B. Body (adds detail by offering descriptions and / or explanations)
- C. Conclusion (reinforces and summarises the information)

Social Stories™ are written to a specific format which involves **6** different types of statement- descriptive, perspective, cooperative, affirmative, directive and control.

### **1. The descriptive sentence provides information on the setting, activity and people.**

Descriptive sentences

- are truthful & observable statements of fact
- identify the most relevant factors in a situation
- are opinion and assumption free
- are logical and accurate
- often contain answers to the "wh" questions
- My name is \_\_\_\_\_ (often the 1st sentence)



*'Usually children go outside at play time'.*

**2. The perspective statement provides a description of the possible reactions of others. They refer to or describe the internal state of other people: their knowledge/thoughts, feelings, beliefs, opinions, motivation or physical condition/health**

*'My brother usually likes to watch cartoons'.* (feelings)

*'Some children work hard to finish their maths so that they can have some time at the computer'.* (motivation)

**3. The cooperative sentence**

- identifies what others will do to assist the individual
- reminds parents, peers and/or professionals of their role in the success of the individual
- may ensure a consistent response by a variety of people

*'The bus driver will remind me of where I sit on the bus'.*

*'My teacher will help me with my work'.*

**4. The affirmative sentence**

- enhances the meaning of statements & may express a commonly shared value or opinion within a given culture (not of one individual or small group)
- stresses an important point, refer to a law or rule or reassure the reader

*'I need to keep my seat belt fastened. This is very important'.*

*'The toilet makes a sound when it flushes. This is OK'.*

**5. The directive sentence**

- presents a suggested response or choice of responses to a situation or concept
- gently directs the behaviour

*'On the playground I can play in the sandbox or go on the swings or climb on the monkey bars'.*

*'I will try to stay quiet and listen'.*

*'I may ask Mum or Dad for a hug'.*

## **6. Control sentences**

- are statements that are written by the autistic individual
- identify personal strategies the individual will use to recall and apply information

*'If my sand castle breaks, my friend can help me build another one'.*

*'I can keep a torch beside my bed just in case we have a power cut'.*

The sentences fit into two categories:

Those that describe: descriptive, perspective, cooperative and affirmative

Those that direct: directive and control

There should be more descriptive than directive sentences, so for every 6 sentences you should try and have 1 or 2 directive/control sentences

Social Stories™ should be written for an individual pupil and a specific situation and therefore it is not really appropriate to provide an example. The Social Story™ below is included in order to exemplify the six types of sentence.

*Some people wear glasses. **Descriptive***

*Wearing glasses is okay. **Affirmative***

*Some people can hardly see at all without their glasses! **Perspective***

*Sometimes, people take off their glasses to play sports, or go to gym class, or wrestle. **Descriptive***

*It is a good idea for people to take off their glasses if they are in a gym or playing sports or \_\_\_\_\_ . **Affirmative (partial)***

*I can remind myself that it is important for people to wear glasses at other times, e.g. if they are at home, or in class, or reading, or driving, or \_\_\_\_\_ . **Control (partial)***

*Wearing glasses is a good thing because it helps people see clearly.*

**Affirmative**

Gray and Garand (1993) suggest three basic approaches for implementing a Social Story™:



For a pupil who reads independently, the story is read twice by an adult, followed by the pupil reading it back. Then the pupil reads it daily.

If the pupil does not read, the story may be recorded with a signal (i.e. bell) to turn the pages or videoed with one page on the screen at a time.

The pupil is taught to read the story, and reads it daily. It is also useful to use visual images to illustrate the story.

## Appendix F - Communication Cards

**I want  
to go  
outside**

**I need  
help**

**I want to  
wash my  
hands**

**I need  
a break**



## **Appendix G - Jigs**

### **What is it?**

A 'jig' is a means of presenting a task in step by step fashion. So for example, rather than asking a pupil simply to wash their hands (a complex task), the task is broken down into manageable chunks to enable the pupil to complete it successfully.

### **Why would you use it?**

To support an autistic pupil to see and understand the steps in the task and support them to complete it successfully and as independently as possible.

### **How to use it?**

You can create a jig for any task. You just need to identify the key steps and consider how the information will be presented. Jigs are generally presented in a vertical format.

The number of steps will depend upon the complexity of the task and should take into account the child's level.

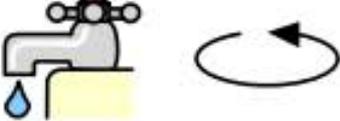
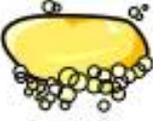
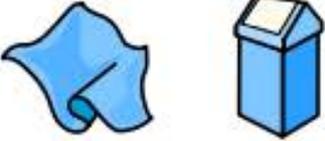
Provide adult support to work through each step of the task when the jig is first introduced.

As the pupil's understanding, skill and confidence increases, adult support can gradually be withdrawn. In time, the pupil should be able to use the jig fully independently to complete the activity.

Once s/he has mastered the task, the jig can be withdrawn.

Please see below for an example of a 'Handwashing' jig. These symbols can be cut out, laminated and placed on a visual schedule.

## Example of Handwashing Jig

 <p>Roll up sleeves</p>	 <p>Rinse hands</p>
 <p>Tap on</p>	 <p>Tap off</p>
 <p>Wet hands</p>	 <p>Paper Towel</p>
 <p>Soap</p>	 <p>Dry hands</p>
 <p>Rub hands</p>	 <p>Paper towel bin</p>



## **Appendix H- How Do I Feel Anxiety Scale**

### **What is it?**

The 'How do I feel' is a visual means of supporting an autistic pupil to recognise and describe their levels of stress and anxiety, as a precursor to identifying strategies which can support them to take action to alleviate it and prevent crisis.

### **When would you use it?**

For pupils who are clearly struggling with stress and anxiety, but who are not necessarily able to recognise or articulate how they are feeling. Typically such pupils may appear to go from a low level of arousal to a state of high arousal with possible loss of control, in a relatively short time and in response to what others might appear to be a relatively minor trigger.

### **How to use it?**

Support the pupil to consider what it feels like to have no stress (1) or an empty bucket, to an overwhelming amount of stress (an overflowing bucket that you just can't pick up and carry around). Ideally you should use the language the pupil uses to describe this – perhaps it is 'melt down', 'explosion', or 'losing it' – whatever term makes sense to and for them.

Once you have this understanding, work with the pupil to try and complete the stages between 1 and 5, describing for each stage, on the left of the volcano, what it feels like, and on the right side, what the pupil, (with support where required) can try to do to alleviate it.

The completed 'How do I feel chart' should be shared with all relevant staff and settings (this might include settings outside school, in the home and /or in the community).

As with the 5 to 1, once the principal of 5 stages of arousal has been secured, this system can potentially be used as a means of communicating levels of arousal to staff. For example, some pupils have established with core staff that touching their shoulder means they are just below crisis and need to implement the relevant support strategy in

order to prevent a 'melt down'. Once this is recognised, the relevant strategy can then swing into action.

Tool 18: How do I feel?



Tool 18: How do I feel?

