

Transition Back to School



Introduction

Why we are providing a Transition Back to School Kit for families in our service.

Importance of Routines

This section looks at the value of having a strong routine when children are faced with significant transitions and the best ways to maintain routines at home.

Using Visuals

Examples of the different types of visuals that may be useful for your child as they return to school will be explained.

Using Social Stories

A summary on how to create social stories and resources that supports transitions. Examples of social stories that may prove useful are recommended.

Transition Workbook

This workbook is tailored for young children heading back to school, to get them prepared and highlight the positive aspects about the return to school.

Top Transition Tips

This section summarises useful transition strategies for the return to school life.

Introduction

Since March of this year children have been away from their schools. During this time, children and their families had to adjust to a new routine of being at home. Every child and family's experiences of the lockdown period will be different. For some, it may have been a safe and enjoyable time at home. However, for others, it may have been a challenging time.

Returning to school after their sudden closure may be a significant transition for your child. This may be a daunting and stressful time not only for children with additional needs, but also for parents. Research has highlighted the need for transition planning for children with additional needs.

Why are transitions sometimes more difficult for children with special needs?

Some children with special needs can have;

- Difficulties with planning and sequencing
- Unpredictability can cause anxiety – related to the unknown
- Understanding of social situations.

For example, children on the autism spectrum and with special needs may be uncomfortable with the idea of change, however they may be able to cope better if they can prepare for changes in advance.

This guide aims to outline the best ways to support your child during their transition back into a school routine into senior infants or first class, offering explanations, recommendations, and links to resources to help during these times.



Importance of Routines

Routines help children learn, feel safe and in control of their worlds, and build their self-confidence and create a sense of belonging.

Top Tips for Establishing Routines

- Keep things consistent and reliable at home, during times of big changes. It may not be the best time to introduce new expectations or pressures on your child, for example, when your child is returning to school, keep their diet stable and let them enjoy the foods they like at home.
- Good sleep routines are essential in times of heightened stress. Try to introduce good sleep hygiene routines before times of changes and transitions, by reducing screen time before bed, gradually introducing earlier bedtimes if needed, building their bedtime sleep routine into a visual calendar, etc.
- If your child is having difficulties going to sleep, they could read a book with dimmed lighting, use a medication app such as Calm or Pesky Gnats and practice deep breathing techniques.
- Be mindful of any possible sensory needs that your child may have and alter the physical environment in their bedroom to promote sleep, such as brightness and temperature of room.
- Physical exercise can play a role in establishing and maintaining good sleep for children at night.



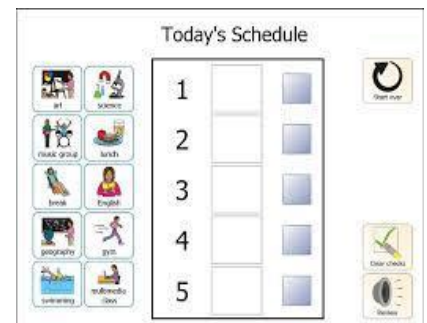
Using Visuals

Research has highlighted that in times of high stress and anticipation, that children benefit and may once again take comfort in these visual routine representations.



Visual Calendar

It is important that they see this calendar regularly, hang it on the fridge in the kitchen. Simply crossing days off the calendar may help them better understand and anticipate when the school year begins again. This is to help visually prepare them in advance which days will be different and introduce the idea of the different routine. Calendars can be made in a way that makes sense to the child, for example, a written calendar or a visual picture calendar with their preferred images and photos. It will be important to include activities your child enjoys and looks forward to on the calendar.



It is about reducing possible feelings of anxiety by making things as predictable and familiar, these are great resources especially if your child is a visual learner or prefers visual communication. Have a picture of home underneath the picture of school on a given day of the calendar. This reminds your child that the school day will not last forever and they will return home once school has ended.



Find online resources and information on the Northern Ireland's Autism Charity's website on using Visuals and Structure Routines at

<https://www.autismni.org/using-structure>.

Daily Check-in Board

Have a daily check-in to allow your child to know what is going to happen that day, for example, if there is a birthday on that day. Use a whiteboard and always keep this empty so that it is only used for any changes, nothing is on the board unless there is a change in the day. Start using the board with a simple change, for example going to the playground after school.

Try to encourage your child to check this board every day. You could use visuals on this board if this is easier for your child to understand. It is recommended that you gradually introduce changes in routines using the board and practice the easy changes first.



Uniforms



Have a chat with your child on what they wear to school before heading back. Make their uniform visible; for example, have it hanging on their wardrobe. Put on the uniform gradually over time before the return to school, for example, their jumper on one day, school shoes another.

Practice taking on and off their uniform, so they feel confident taking off their uniform independently if they need to take off their coat or jumper in school.

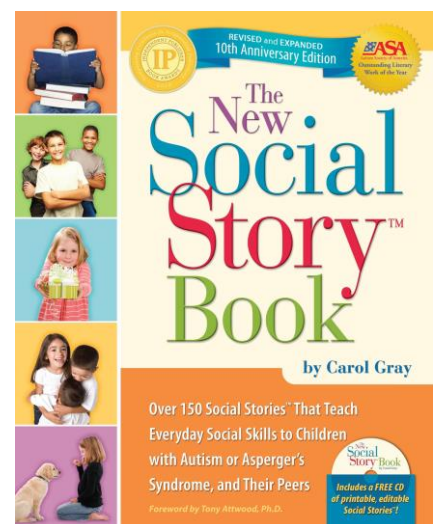
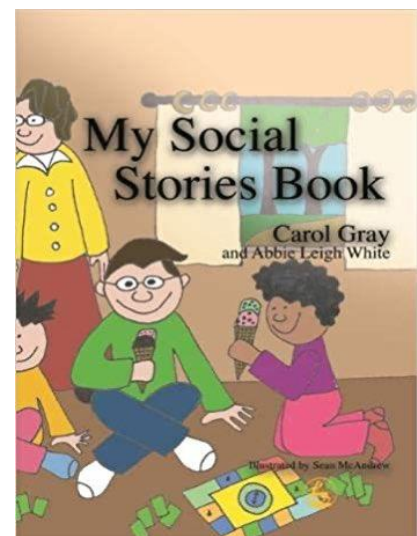
Social Stories

Social Stories can be used to help your child understand the world around them as it changes in response to COVID-19. They are stories that work best when they include lots of pictures and a language level which is appropriate for your child. You can create a book/folder of personalised Social Stories relating to things your child will need to know in relation to their transition back to school. It is key that you and your child read through these stories regularly. The Social Stories needed could include:

- Why children must go to school
- Why they need to wash their hands regularly in school
- New school routines
- Appropriate greetings post-COVID 19
- How we travel to school.

Here are some links to useful resources for creating social stories:

- Gray, C. (1994). Comic Strip Conversations. ISBN 1885477228.
- DVD and Workbook: Writing Social Stories with Carol Gray.
- Gray, C. & White, A. L. (2002). My Social Stories Book. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London. ISBN: 13-978-1-85302-950-9.
- Gray, C. (2000). The New Social Story Book: Illustrated Edition. Future Horizons, Inc.: Arlington, TX. ISBN: 1-885477-66-X.
- Baker, J. (2001). The Social Skills Picture Book: Teaching Play, Emotion and Communication to Children with Autism. Future Horizons, Inc.: Arlington, TX. ISBN: 1-885477-91-0.
- Ncse.ie. (2020). Retrieved 28 July 2020, from <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Supporting-children-and-young-people-with-ASD-during-the-Covid-19-pandemic-Social-Stories.pdf>.

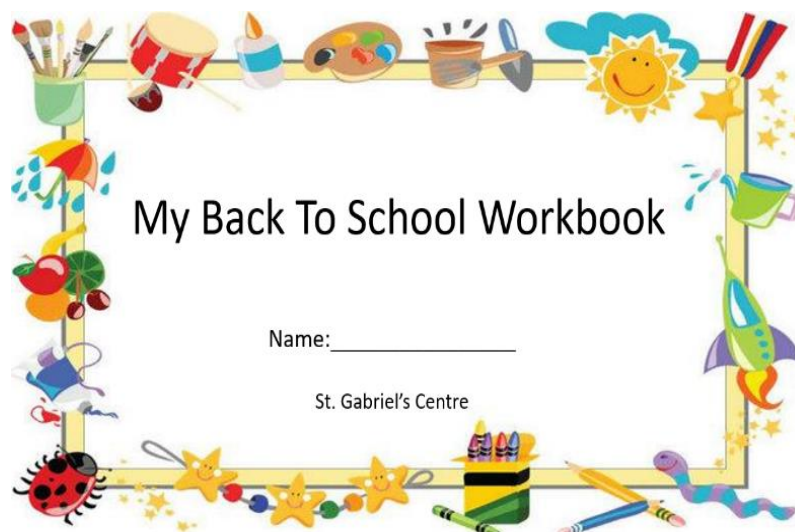


Transition Workbook

A 'Back to School Workbook' is provided with these resources. This workbook is tailored for children heading back to school; it is suitable for all ability levels and can easily be adapted to meet your child's needs and language capabilities.

Your child can complete this workbook before beginning their new school term. It highlights both the positive aspects and the changes associated with going back to school. It includes sections to fill in about their new school routine, new teacher, what they have missed about school, etc.

By filling it out it will give them ownership and control over the transition back to school, helping decrease unpredictability and possible feelings of anxiety over what to expect.

This is a worksheet page with a decorative border of colorful pencils. The main heading is "The things I missed about school are". Below this heading are three empty rectangular boxes for writing. Underneath each box is a numbered line: "1. _____", "2. _____", and "3. _____". At the bottom left of the page, there is a small copyright notice: "Back to School Workbook: St. Gabriel's Centre".

Top Transition Tips

- In the two weeks before the start of school term, begin the school routine with earlier bedtimes, preparing the school uniform, school lunches, etc.
- Visit the school's location before the term begins, drive the school route and remind them of the drop off routine.
- Be mindful of the importance of exercise, balanced diets and sleep during this time.
- Validate any worries that your child may have about returning to school –like any new routine it can be hard at first but soon it will be fun and enjoyable.
- For the first day back you could try to get there early so the classroom is quiet enough when your child arrives and is less daunting. Consider arranging something nice for after school so there is something to look forward to, for example, visit the playground.
- Due to the upheaval the routine back to school may bring, try to keep things calm, predictable and 'safe' for your child at home in the first few weeks back. Ensure they have a quiet place they can go to, to relax, without questions, siblings, etc.
- Tune into your child during this time, give a lot of reassurances and validation of different emotions experienced.
- If there is an opportunity to ask their teacher before returning about your child's schedule each day, then go through this when the child is feeling calm at home before the transition back to school.
- Remind your child about their friends from their class last year and that they will see their siblings in school too.

Emotional Regulation



What is Emotional Regulation?

Emotional regulation is explained and the benefits of supporting its development for children with special needs.

The Window of Tolerance

How it affects our everyday lives and looking at how parents can widen their children's window of tolerance during stressful times using different techniques listed below:

- **Relaxation Techniques**
- **Deep Breathing**
- **Calming Sequences**
- **Environmental Supports**
- **Break Options**
- **Emotion Coaching**
- **Physical Activity**

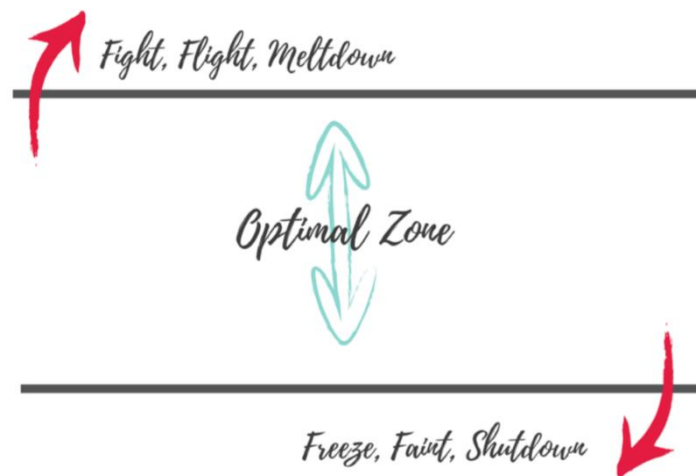
What is Emotional Regulation?



Emotional regulation is a child's ability to understand, recognise and regulate their emotions. Emotional regulation stems from self-regulation. The development of self-regulation is dependent on brain maturation – specific areas of the brain, including the cingulate cortex and areas in the prefrontal cortex are involved. For some children with developmental delays, changes in their brain may influence their ability to learn how to self-regulate. Every child is different; some will develop self-regulation and emotional regulation skills earlier than others. Sometimes, emotional regulation needs external teaching, environmental support, and a range of creative strategies.



The Window of Tolerance



The window of tolerance is a concept that represents our ability to manage in our everyday lives; we all need to stay within our window of tolerance to function successfully. The same can be said for children. There are things we can do to widen the window of tolerance and things we can do to keep within it. Both hyperarousal (flight, fight or meltdown zone) and hypoarousal (freeze, faint or shutdown zone) are a signal that we are not managing at that moment. Everyone, including children, tries to stay within the optimal zone.

There are many ways we can support children to stay in the middle. We can make the optimal zone bigger and wider by getting a good night's sleep, being in a calm, predictable environment, being in environments that do not overload our senses. When your child knows what to expect, the environment is predictable, gets a good night's sleep and good breakfast, they are much more able to manage. This is important to bear in mind when we are preparing our children for possible stressful and challenging transitions such as returning to school.

This Emotional Regulation section will focus on how we can make their Window of Tolerance bigger and the different techniques we can use to help your child to stay within it.

Relaxation Techniques

Why use relaxation techniques?

- Stress is the physiological and emotional reaction to psychological events.
- Fight, flight or freeze response.
- However, not all stress is bad.



Relaxation involves a distinct physiological state that is the distinct opposite of the way your body feels and reacts under stress and tension. In the relaxation state, heart rate and blood pressure drop, breathing rate lowers and muscle tension decreases. It is recommended that relaxation techniques could be used as a strategy for emotional regulation in your child's day to day lives.

These techniques can be incorporated into everyday routines and activities

- Deep breathing
- Music
- Solitude
- Mindfulness
- Relaxation Apps
- Establish a consistent, quiet and relaxing space
- Time spent outdoors in nature
- Looking at calming pictures
- Special time with caregiver

Deep Breathing

Sometimes when children are feeling overwhelmed and dysregulated, they may have difficulties calming down and catching their breath. Deep breathing increases the supply of oxygen to the brain and activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which fosters a feeling of calmness. Deep breathing techniques help children feel connected to their body. It can bring focus away from their worries and focus on their physical feelings.

How to teach Deep Breathing

- Start when your child is feeling regulated, calm and can concentrate
- Breathe in through the nose for 3 seconds, hold for 3 seconds and out for 3 seconds
- Use visual aids such as “Smell the Flower and Blow Out the Candles”
- Practice at bedtime and daily routines
- They can place hands on tummy



It is key that these breathing exercises are practiced regularly, when your child is feeling calm and ready to learn so that it is readily available during times of anger or upset.

Concrete Practices for Deep Breathing



Breathing Bubbles

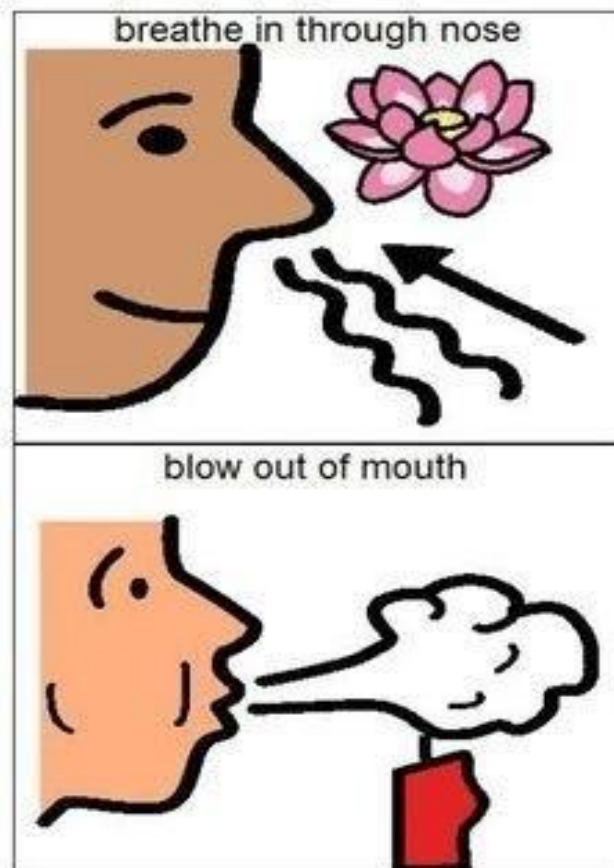
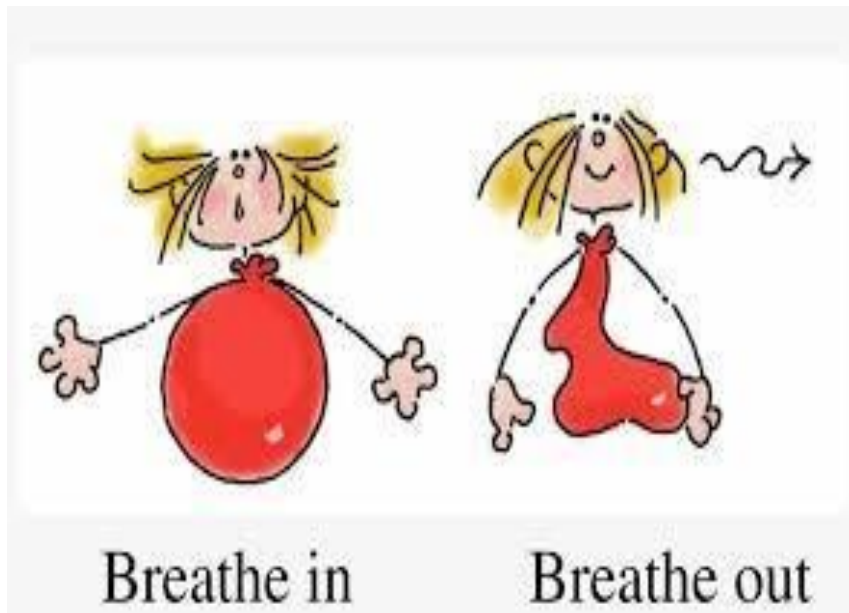


Malteser Football



Fire Breathing Dragon

Visual Representations









Calming Sequence

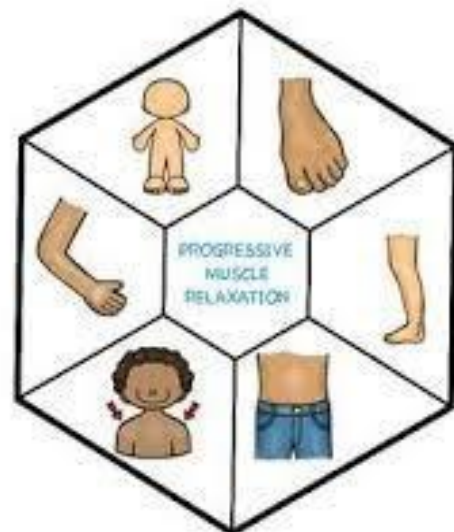
One type of calming sequence is Progressive Muscular Relaxation. PMR techniques teach one to be aware of varying degrees of muscle tension throughout the body. Through a series of exercises of tensing and relaxing various muscle groups, a deep state of relaxation is produced.

This calming sequence is learned and becomes part of habit, ingrained in memory. A simple calming sequence may be squeeze hands, rub head, hands on legs, 5 times and take deep breaths. Once these basic sequences of calming movements are practiced enough, it is easier to retrieve and use when the child is experiencing distress or big emotions.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

	Take 3 Deep Breaths
	Squeeze your foot for 5 seconds, Relax
	Squeeze your leg for 5 seconds, Relax
	Squeeze your stomach for 5 seconds, Relax
	Shrug your shoulders for 5 seconds, Relax
	Squeeze your arm & hand for 5 seconds, Relax
	Squeeze your whole body for 5 seconds, Relax
	Take 3 Deep Breaths

SQUEEZE, COUNT TO 5, RELAX



Relaxation Apps

Here is a list of relaxation and mindfulness apps that can be downloaded onto a smartphone or tablet. Now more than ever it is important that our children have tools that can be used to help process feelings, destress and get a good night's sleep. These apps can be used by your child or together with your child to promote emotional regulation, practice deep breathing and mindfulness throughout the day.

Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame

This app is for kids and caregivers to promote problem solving skills, self-control and planning. It is based on the idea that kids can learn in challenging situations they can take deep breathes, think of a plan and try problem-solving! Suitable for ages 2-5 years.



Calm App

This meditation app has resources like meditation guides, soothing music, nature images and bedtime stories. There's a Calm Kid's section – suitable for ages 3 and up.



Breathing Bubbles App

This app supports kids in their understanding of emotions and as an emotional regulation tool; it allows them to release worries and experience joyful emotions. Also incorporates activities for emotion labelling and regulation skills. Suitable for ages 5 and up.



Mindful Gnats App

This app teaches simple mindfulness and relaxation skills. It focuses on practicing skills to reduce stress and improve physical, cognitive and environmental awareness. Suitable for ages 4 and up.



Dreamy Kid

This meditation app provides healing activities, guided journeys, affirmations and structured meditations. It can help promote relaxation and meditations to support your child with their emotional development. Suitable for ages 7 and up.



Environmental Supports

A chill out area can be a calming strategy for your child. A chill out area can be easily created, a space for relaxation and solitude at home. This private space can be used if they need to 'cool down'. It can be a tent, a quiet corner in the house, they could build a fort, with chairs and sheets, filled with fluffy blankets, soft pillows, decorated with their favourite pictures or books, sensory toys.

Chill Out Corner Ideas



Soft blankets

Cushions

Pictures of family, friends

Fidget Spinners

Tent

Home-made fort

Playdough

Theraputty

Noise Cancelling Headphones

Relaxation Apps

Stress ball

Bubble wrap

Diary

Colouring Book

Cuddly toys

Weighted blankets

Books

Items relating to Special Interest

Bubbles

Sandbox



Break Options

Give your child opportunities and prompts for opt out and escape when they feel overwhelmed by using:

- Break cards and visual aids.
- Practice – allow children to practice asking for a break in school through the use of role play.
- Transparent boundaries accompany these breaks – a specific area, use of a visual countdown timer, etc.



Emotion Coaching

Name it to Tame it

- Talk to your child about their feelings
- Label your child's feelings with them
- Model how you label and manage your emotions



Use every day experiences to teach (label emotions when you recognize them, empathize, and console when necessary)

- "I understand how frustrating it is when..."
- "It is disappointing when we don't get to go..."
- "You seem very happy to go to..."
- "I wish we could always do everything we wished to. Would you like to do X or Y instead?"



Some children enjoy creating a playlist, poetry, drawing, that represent their feelings.

Physical Activity

Physical activity offers quick release of emotional energy

- Exercise, walk, run, trampoline, swing
- Sport (swimming, hurling, dance)
- Creative destruction (shred paper or crush cans into recycling bin)
- Constructive service (return books to library, help with household or classroom chores)



References

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Managing COVID-19 Specific Fears - Change Resource. (2020). Retrieved 05 August 2020, from <https://managing-change.middletonautism.com/strategies/managing-covid-19-specific-fears/>

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