

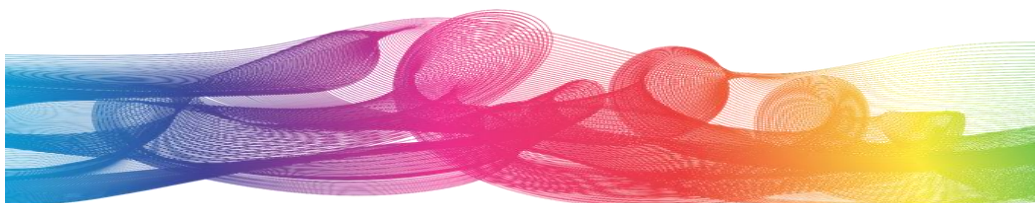
Preparing neurodiverse children and young people for the return to school

This guide for parents has been written by psychologists within Education and Health services alongside an autism advisor. The team works across Ayrshire and have experience working with neurodiverse children and young people.

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If you have an electronic version of the guide, you can click on the sections above and you will be taken to that section. At the top of each page there is a [“Return to contents”](#) link you can click to come back to this page.



Note: where we refer to “child” in this guide we are talking about children and young people who are school aged.

Top ten tips

1. Take time to check in with how you are feeling – do you need to make some time for self-care?
2. Which family or friends could you connect with who could provide emotional or practical support to you and your child?
3. Be prepared for some understandable change in behaviour from your child around the time they return to school.
4. Think about things that have helped your child stay calm before and try to build these into the day.
5. Plan when it could be helpful to start talking about the return to school. Some children may benefit from a lot of preparation others may benefit from very little.
6. Use countdowns to help your child understand when they will return to school.
7. If your child understands visuals and social stories consider using them to explain what going back to school may look like.
8. Talk about the good things about returning to school.
9. If your child’s sleep routine has changed during lockdown try to start adjusting it by 15 minute per week over the summer.
10. **Keep summer fun!**

Remember you are the expert on your child. When reading these strategies, you should think about if it would be something your child would understand and enjoy. If not, it may be that the strategy needs to be adapted to meet your child’s needs.

Introduction to this guide for parents and carers

Understandably many parents and carers have questions about how to support their child back to school. The change and disruption we have all had to embrace has left some people feeling anxious and worried.

In the first section of this guide we will discuss your emotional wellbeing and how to manage some normal anxieties. In the second section we will think about frequently asked questions related to the return to school. Finally, in the third section we will think about strategies to support your child with the transition back to school.

Please feel free to only look at the sections you feel are relevant to you.

We are aware that Government guidance is being updated regularly. Schools across Ayrshire may have different plans on how they re-open. This guide has been designed to cover topics which may be relevant to consider for your child. Think about the changes you are aware of for your child's school and if the strategies discussed could help them understand the changes they may experience.

You may already have specific support for you or your child's emotional wellbeing. If this is the case, we recommend that you continue to follow the advice of the clinician you are working with.

Section 1: Taking time for your emotional wellbeing

The Scottish Government announced plans for pupils to return to school in August. We are aware that some schools may reopen using a “blended model”, which means that children and young people may attend school part of the week and remain at home for other parts of the week. For other schools pupils may be able to return to school full time.

It is understandable to experience anxiety about your child returning to school after lockdown. As our schools and communities start to re-open

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again and there are more people around, this may understandably impact on how safe we feel.

With the changes ahead, you may have many questions about the future. You might notice feelings of anxiety when thinking about your child returning to school and this is understandable. Some anxiety can be helpful. It can help keep us alert when we must remember to follow guidelines, such as hand washing and keeping a safe distance.

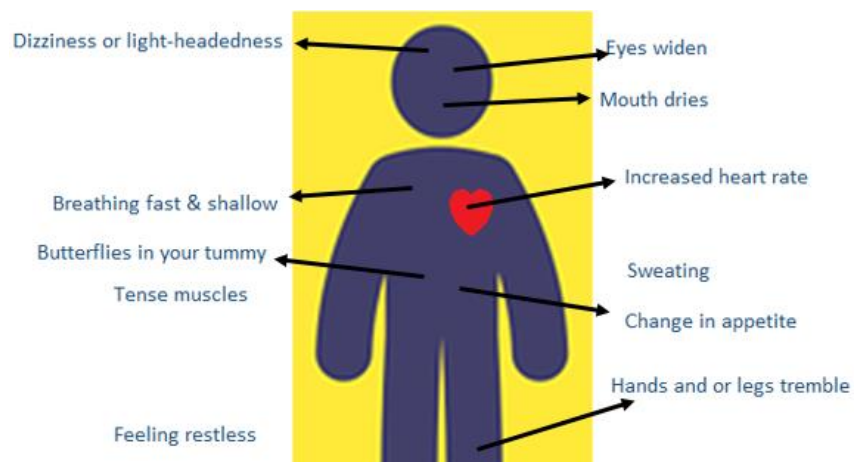
However, sometimes we have anxiety which is unhelpful and drains our time and energy.

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense, or afraid. Anxiety can be triggered when stressful things are about to happen. It can be triggered when we think about things that have happened in the past, or when we have thoughts of what could happen in the future.

When we believe there is danger, our brain triggers the release of chemicals (hormones) in our body which can be helpful in new situations to keep us alert and ready to respond to danger. This response is often referred to as the 'fight-flight-freeze response'.

The fight-flight-freeze response is an automatic response that allows your body to prepare for action, either to confront danger, run away from it, or it can sometimes cause you to freeze. These hormones create changes in our bodies such as:



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The fight-flight-freeze changes in our body can be useful when in physical danger or psychological danger, for example our thoughts.

The fight-flight-freeze response happens automatically, but it is not always accurate. Sometimes our thoughts can make our body respond in this way. When we experience anxiety, our body is doing a lot more work than normal, so it is understandable that we feel more tired. We may have changes in our appetite or on how well we sleep.

Below are some strategies to help us think about what we can do when we feel anxious. Some people find it helpful to practice these each day when they are feeling calm. Doing this can make it easier to use these skills when feeling anxious.

Relaxation Strategies

- Some people benefit from taking 10 deep slow breaths before they re-engage in whatever activity is going on around them.
- Some people enjoy online relaxation strategies such as:
 - Guided deep breathing practices.
 - Guided practices to help us think about pleasant images.
 - Mindful meditation.



The length of these practices can vary from one minute to one hour so it is important to find one that you can fit into your normal daily routine as this may make it more likely that you will use it.

Being aware of your thoughts



It is natural for us to have many thoughts or images in our mind trying to predict what the future may hold. At times this can lead to feelings of anxiety. It can be important for us to remember that predictions are not facts.

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Sometimes it can be helpful for us to notice when we are making predictions. Our responses to predictions can keep unhelpful thoughts and feelings going, or they can promote more balanced thoughts.

If we notice that we are making predictions, we should respond kindly to ourselves. This is a normal thing we all do. We can ask ourselves:

- “Do I need to do something, or get more information about that prediction to feel better about it?”

OR

- “Can I sit with the feeling of anxiety it brings until it passes”.

Sometimes if we are going to sit with uncomfortable feelings it can be helpful to practice mindful breathing. You can find many mindful breathing practices online.

Getting support from people you are close to



While it is important to recognise and manage anxiety during these difficult times sometimes speaking with those that you trust and understand your situation can be helpful.

For some people it can be difficult to talk about your worries. Remember it is normal to share your concerns with others you trust and doing so may help them too.

If you cannot speak to someone you know about your emotional wellbeing or if doing so has not been helpful, there are many helplines you could try, some of them are listed below.

Recommended helplines:

- **Anxiety UK** – Charity providing support if you have been diagnosed with an anxiety condition.
Phone: 03444 775 774 (Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 10pm;
Saturday to Sunday, 10am to 8pm)
Website: www.anxietyuk.org.uk

 - **Mental Health Foundation** – Provides information and support for anyone with mental health problems or learning disabilities.
Website: www.mentalhealth.org.uk

 - **Mind** – Promotes the views and needs of people with mental health problems.
Phone: 0300 123 3393 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm)
Website: www.mind.org.uk

 - **Cruise Bereavement Care**- Support for people who are experiencing grief and loss.
Phone:08444779400 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

 - **Samaritans** – Confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.
Phone: 116 123 (free 24-hour helpline)
Website: www.samaritans.org.uk
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Section 2: Frequently asked questions about the return to school

This section offers some answers to questions parents and carers may have about their children going back to school. It includes some strategies to consider and information on where to find more help.

Parent Club Scotland is a Scottish Government website. It has a frequently asked questions section that is updated when relevant new information becomes available. To see the up to date information you can visit: <https://www.parentclub.scot/articles/reopening-schools-faqs>

1. What guidance will schools follow when they reopen?



The Scottish Government has set up a team to issue guidance on what the return to school will look like for all schools in Scotland.

Schools may follow the guidance slightly different across Ayrshire depending on the classroom size, the number of pupils and needs of the pupils in the class. If you have specific questions or concerns about the safety measures it could be helpful to write them down and speak to staff within the school when the opportunity comes.

2. My child found it difficult to do schoolwork from home. How will they catch up when back at school?

Many families found it difficult to do schoolwork with their children. If you are worried that your child will need help to catch up with work missed during lockdown, it may be helpful to speak to your child's teacher or guidance teacher.

If your child is worried about this, it may be helpful to:

- Acknowledge that it is OK and normal to feel worried about this.
- Remind them that getting help in these circumstances is normal.

- Remind them that other pupils have also been out of school and staff will be helping all pupils on the work they found tricky.
 - Discuss that it is safe to tell their teacher that they found work difficult. It could be helpful to work with your child to develop a plan on a way to share this information.
 - Help them to think about the tasks they have done well while being at home. That could have been helping around the house, learning a new skill or some schoolwork managed to do.
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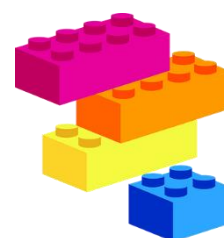
3. I am worried about how my child will cope with “blended learning”.

We know that guidance about what the return to school may look like for children across Ayrshire will vary depending on your child’s school. Not all schools will use the blended learning model.

If your child’s school has informed you that they will be using the blended learning model and if your child copes better when they know plans in advance, a visual timetable could be helpful to show them when they will be at school or at home. See the “using visual prompts” guidance in section three.

4. My child appears to be really missing school, what can I do over the summer holidays?

If your child is missing school and they are asking questions about when they will return, it may be helpful to have visual countdowns such as blocks or Lego bricks. Each day that passes you can remove a brick, and this may help to them to understand how long it is until they return to school.



They could draw a picture or make something that they could share with their teacher or classmates when they go back to school. This may help them feel more connected to school while they are unable to be there.

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If you are struggling for ideas of what to do over the summer holidays there are many home activity ideas that can be found online.

5. My child has been told to shield. Can they return to school?

If your child has been asked to shield or if you are doing so because you feel it is safest for your child, you must check the Scottish Government website for the most up to date information.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-shielding/>

If you still have worries or questions after visiting the website, you could contact your child's physical health team to discuss your concerns.

6. If I have been told to shield, can my child return to school?

For the most up to date information and advice on shielding, go to the Scottish government website.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-shielding/>

If you still have worries or questions after reading this, it may be best to contact your physical health team to discuss your concerns.

7. I am concerned as my child is going to secondary school.

It is normal for children to have worries about going to a new school. It is also normal for parents to notice an emotional response as their children move from primary to secondary school. If you are noticing this emotional response it could be helpful to talk to someone close to you about this.

If your child is worried about going to secondary school, it could be helpful to find out what your child is worried about. It may be that strategies need to be adapted to match your child's communication skills. Some children can describe their worries, while others find this difficult. It can be helpful to pick a time when your child is calm and you

both have time to think about what could help. It may be helpful to start by asking: “Why are they feeling worried?” “What do they think will happen when they go?” “What could be the worst thing that could happen?”

There could be many responses to these questions. They may not know what the classroom will look like. They may worry about meeting new people and making new friends. They may worry about having new teachers. Or they could be worried about the schoolwork.

It could be helpful to:

- Share that it is normal to feel worried about this.
- Ask them to think about a time when they got through something they were worried about and it worked out well. For example, when they made a new friend, or tried a new activity and enjoyed it. They could look at photos of this time or draw a picture of it.

Depending on what the worry is, it could be helpful to:

- Look online and see if there are photos of the building and classrooms you could look at. You could walk or drive past the building with your child to get used to how it looks.
 - It could be helpful to make a plan of who your child will see when they go back to school, such as friends or older pupils they may know.
 - Remind your child that we all find some things difficult, but we all have things we are good at. Remind them of the things they are good at.
 - Think about people you know within the school. Is there anyone who could be a good “buddy” to help your child settle?
-

8. My child is saying that they do not want to go to school or do not like school?

There can be many reasons that children say they do not want to go to school. It can be helpful to think about what those reasons might be.

If your child can communicate verbally or through signs, it could be helpful to ask questions such as: “why don’t you want to go back to school?” “Is there something that is worrying you?” “What could be the worst thing about going back to school?”

There could be many responses to these questions, such as:

- Have they fallen out with a friend and are worried about seeing them at school?
- Have they had lots of fun activities at home that they may not get to play with or do at school?
- Are they worried about the amount of work at school?
- Are they worried about leaving parents, brothers and sisters or pets?

It is important to understand and acknowledge that these are real worries. It is important that while we acknowledge them, we also think about ways we can support children to return to school.

- If your child can talk about their worries you may find it helpful to work through our booklet “Worries about going back to school” with them.
- If there is a worry specific to school such as a fall out with a friend or worries about work, it could be helpful to talk to your child about this when they are calm and help them think of a plan of what they could do to help them be less worried. For example, can they practice how to say something to a teacher or could they practice



what they could say to friends if they have had a fall out? It may be helpful to role play this or come up with a script to help your child plan what they might say. Remind them of how good they will feel if they overcome this worry.

If your child does not want to attend school because they do not want to leave someone or something at home during the day, it could be helpful to think about why this is.

- Is it due to worry about having to leave a favourite activity at home?
- Are they worried about people they leave at home?



In these cases, it could help them to:

- Show them where their favourite activity will be while they are in school and make a visual timetable to show them when they can do it when they return from school. More information about visual timetables is in section three.
 - If they are worrying about you or someone else in the house, it could be useful to tell or show them what you are going to be doing that day and when they will see you again. If your child struggles to understand time, you can use other common events that they are familiar with like mealtimes or school bells. This will help them know that you are OK without them and when they will see you again.
-

Section 3: How can I prepare my child for going back to school?

Below are some strategies you could try to help prepare your child for going back to school. Not all the strategies will be helpful for every child. You are the expert on your child and their communication skills, and you will know which strategies may be helpful for your child.

Look out for changes in behaviour

All behaviour is communication. Some children may have a change in their behaviour due to being worried or excited for going back to school. It can be helpful to remember that these changes in behaviour, while they may be stressful to deal with, it is your child communicating something.

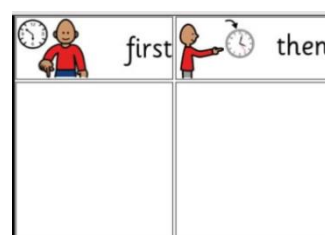
If you expect a change in behaviour then it can be easier to cope with when it happens. It may also give time to plan some strategies that may be helpful.

If you notice signs of distress from your child, think of calming strategies you already use or know of:

- Can you encourage them to take deep breaths?
- Does exercise or fresh air help them to calm?
- Do they have access to a calm space?

Can they access sensory calming materials such as soft blankets, things they like the smell of or toys they can squeeze or pull?

When we are unable to remove the cause of distress (a trigger) we should think about what support a child needs to cope with it. For example, some children may need support to make their



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surroundings more predictable, some may need support to talk about their emotions and some may need support to move onto another activity if they become fixed on their worries. Based on your child's individual skills, your child might need support to cope with distressing triggers that we are unable to remove.

Sleep routine

We know that many children with neurodevelopmental conditions can have different needs around sleep.

Many children and young people have had changes to their sleep routine during lockdown. It could be helpful to reintroduce a sleep routine on the weeks leading up to the school going back and this may need to start now.



If your child is sleeping longer on mornings or not going to sleep until late at night, it is recommended to shift sleep by 15- 20-minutes each day. For example, waking children 15-20 minutes earlier in the morning and then starting the bedtime routine 15-20 minutes earlier the following night can help to start this process. Keeping that routine for one week before making another timing shift can help your child adapt to the new routine.

Label Emotions

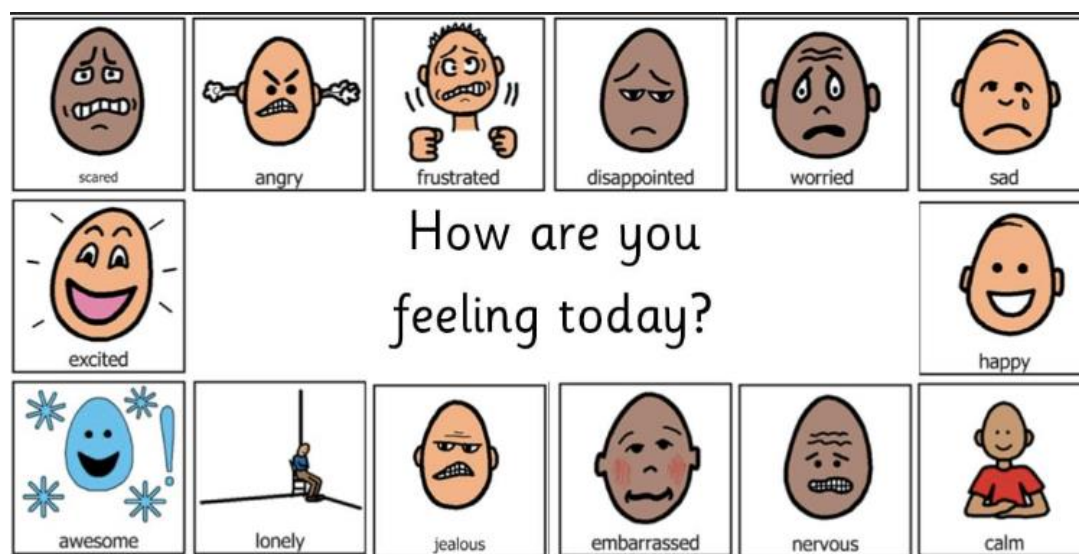
Your child may express feelings of worry through words or behaviour. Many children may need support to understand their emotions.

By labelling emotions, we can help children recognise how their body feels when we feel different emotions.

For some children we may label emotions through picture systems or using characters or toys. For others it may be through spoken words.

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Think about the skills your child has and what might be helpful to help them to recognise their feelings.



Use visual prompts

It may be helpful to have visual reminders of school. In the week or a few days before going back to school it could be helpful to:

- Hang a uniform/jumper on a door.
- Drive or walk past the school.
- Use a countdown for example with blocks



and removing one each day as the return gets closer or ticking days off on a calendar.

If your child copes better when they know about plans in advance, a visual timetable could be helpful to show them when they will be at school or at home. You could print or draw a timetable and put it somewhere easy for them to see for example, on their bedroom wall or on the fridge. You can support your child by using this to remind and assure them of what is happening that day or week. Here is an example of what that might look like:

$$\begin{array}{r} 4 \\ +2 \\ \hline 6 \end{array}$$

What will my school week look like?

😊

	Su (M) T W Th F S Monday	Su M (T) W Th F S Tuesday	Su M T (W) Th F S Wednesday	Su M T W (Th) F S Thursday	Su M T W Th (F) S Friday
AM morning	$\begin{array}{r} 4 \\ +2 \\ \hline 6 \end{array}$ school	$\begin{array}{r} 4 \\ +2 \\ \hline 6 \end{array}$ school	 home learning	 home learning	 home learning
PM afternoon	$\begin{array}{r} 4 \\ +2 \\ \hline 6 \end{array}$ school	$\begin{array}{r} 4 \\ +2 \\ \hline 6 \end{array}$ school	 home learning	 home learning	 home learning

Made with Boardmaker and PCS by NLC Communication Friendly @SchoolsNlc

There are lots of visual timetable ideas that can be found and printed from NLC Communications. They can be found here:

- <https://www.facebook.com/SchoolsNlc>
- <https://twitter.com/SchoolsNlc>
- <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/glowblogs/communicationfriendlyenvironments/>

Talk or show your child about what they will be able to do

It can be helpful to remind your child of the positive things they may get to do again. Such as:

- Seeing their teachers and friends.
- Taking part in enjoyable activities such as their favourite subject or games.

Some children will find it helpful to talk about this. Others may find it easier to look at signs or pictures that can help them understand what they will be able to do when they go back to school.

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







I can

 smile at someone	 sing with someone	 message someone
 say hi	 talk on the phone	 write a letter
 wave	 text someone	 draw something for someone

Hand washing

Hand washing is an essential way for us to stop the spreading of COVID-19. We know that some children with sensory sensitivities may find this difficult. Some children may need extra motivation to wash their hands. Some ideas to help children wash their hands could be to:

- Use online videos or music with music.
- Being able to sing or listen to songs while they do it.
- Using soap that has a smell that your child likes or finding a soap with no smell.
- Use visual prompts.

 The Hand Washing Song		
	I turn the tap on and I wet my hands	
	Add some soap then rub, rub, rub.	
	I wash my fingers and my thumbs,	
	and between them too.	
	I wash my palms and the backs of my hands.	
	to help to make them clean.	
	I wash my palms and the backs of my hands.	
	and then I rinse them off.	

Social stories

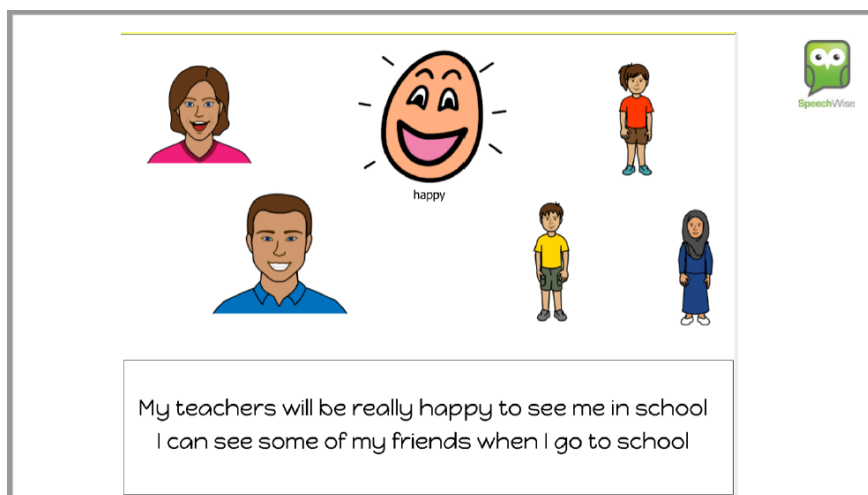
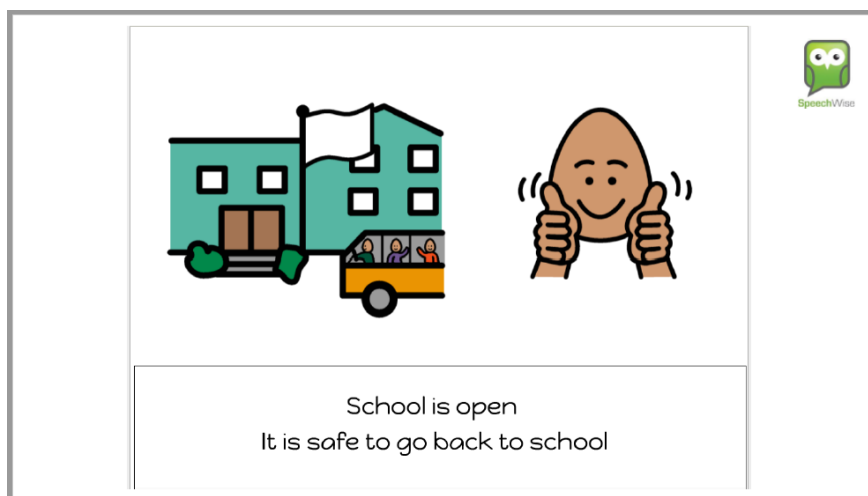
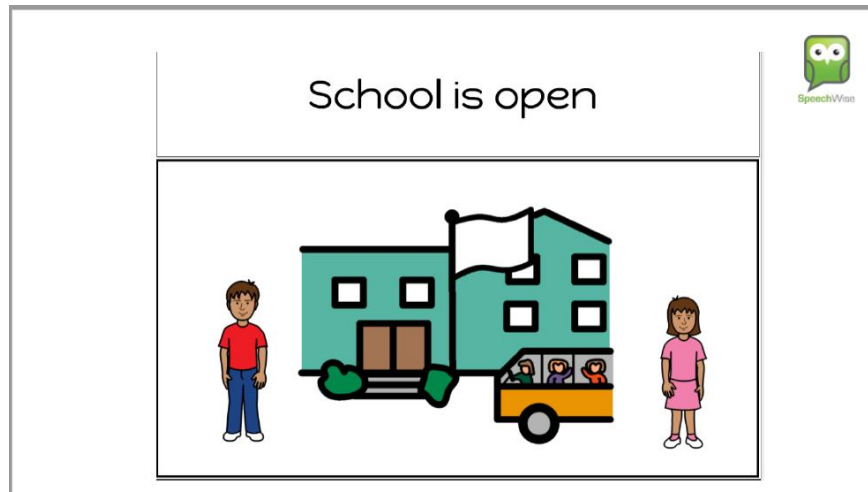
Some children may be confused by the changes in rules and the return to school. Social stories can be a helpful way to explain these changes.


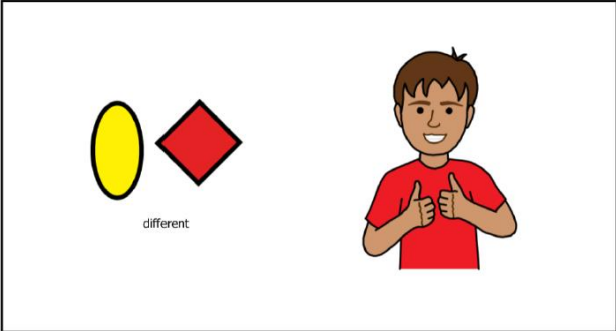
A social story is a short story that explains what will happen in a specific situation. The story is made with pictures and written words.

Once you have a social story it can be helpful to read the story with your child at a time when they are relaxed.

Some children may only need to hear the story once while some may need to hear the story multiple times.


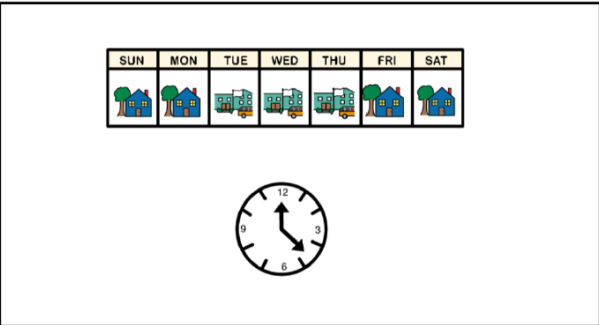
Below is an example of a story that could be helpful. This story includes an explanation of blended learning and social distancing. Your child may not need to know these rules, this will depend on your child's school plan. Many Covid-19 social stories are being shared online, you may be able to find one that matches your child's return to school plan.




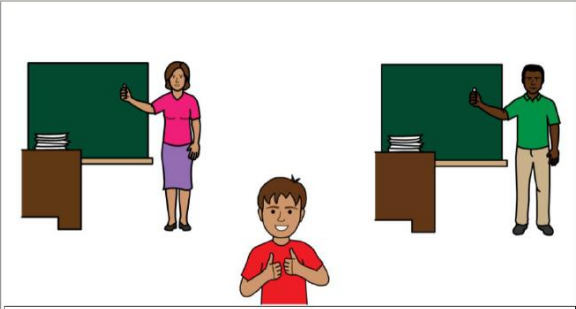


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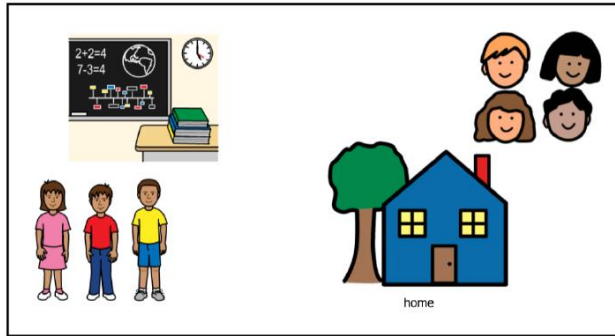
School is a little different
This is ok



Some days I will come to school
Some days I will stay at home
School might start and finish at a different time



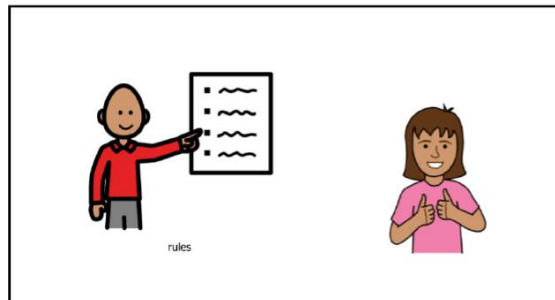
I might be in a different room
I might have a different teacher
This is ok
A grown-up will tell me where I need to go



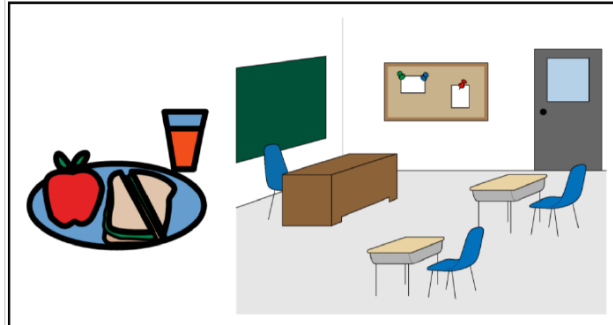
Some of my friends are staying at home
Some of my friends are coming to school



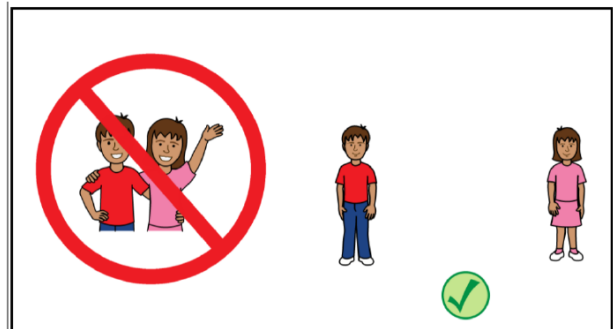
I will do fun things when I am in school and can make
lots of new friends.



There are some new rules in school
This is ok
My teachers will help me understand the new rules




At lunch time I will eat in my classroom



I should try not to stand close to my friends
I should try not to touch my friends or my teachers
I can wave to my friends and I can talk to them



It is still very important to have clean hands



SpeechWise

I need to wash my hands A LOT so I don't get sick



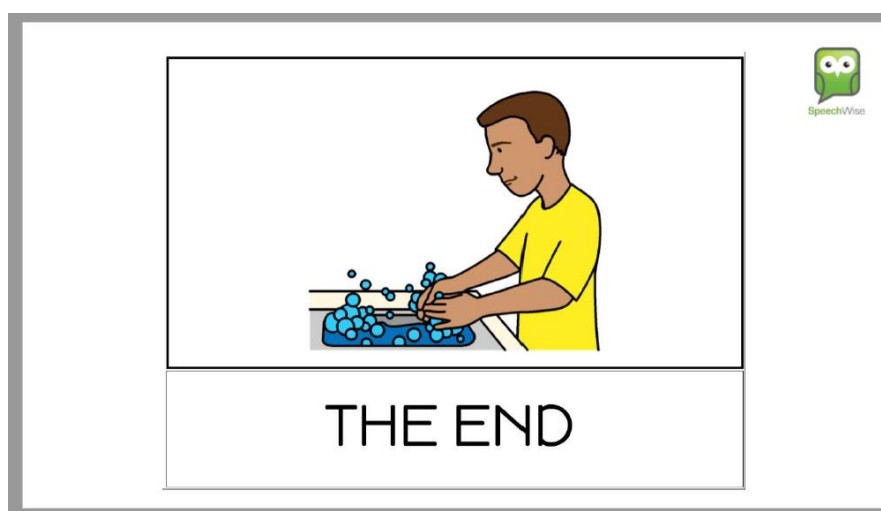
SpeechWise

I will be safe, happy and healthy at school!



SpeechWise

Everyone will be proud of me for coming to school and being happy.



We would like to thank NLC Communication Friendly for allowing us to use their images and providing accessible information for the people we work with.
