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EDUCATION

Tips for Easing Back into School for Students with SEN

during COVID-19

Back to school tips

The transition back to school can be challenging for students with SEN and their parents at the best of times.Now that we are returning to school under COVID-19, it can be even more difficult. The good news is that there are many things you can do to support your children going back to school.

Due to their unpredictable nature, transitions in general, can be very difficult for our children with special educational needs.

There's a good chance that your child is unusually anxious about returning to school.

Does your child have special educational needs such as ADHD, autism, mood disorders, anxiety or other needs? Does your child have other issues such as bullying, or other school stressors? It is recommended that schools work with parents and healthcare providers to ensure that adequate support will be in place in the classroom to help with special needs. Every child and situation is unique.

We offer some tips that may be helpful as the school year gets underway.

Routine, structure and communication

Talk about routines. You might say: “Hey guys, with COVID-19, you’ve had a lot more screen time than usual, but now that school is starting up again, we’re going to get back into our old routine… "

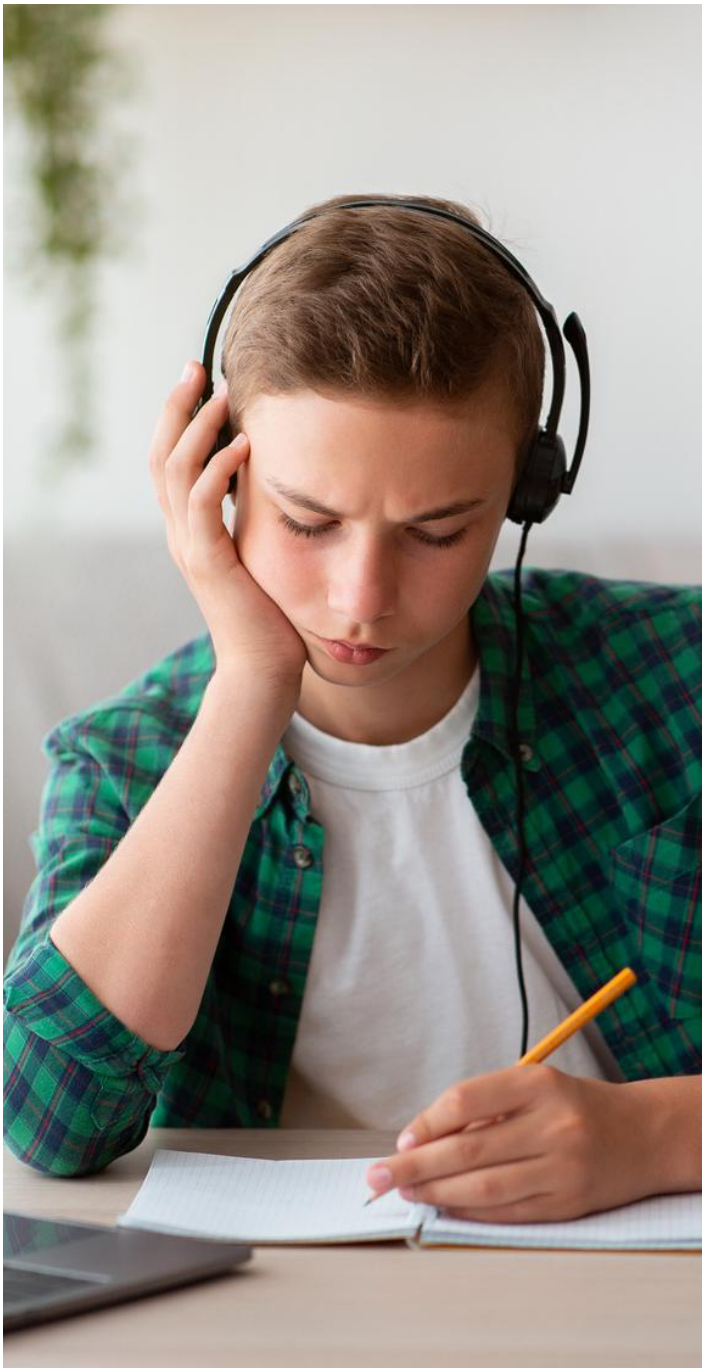
Set a bedtime (and/or wake up time) and move it closer to what it should be for the school term.

Set a screen curfew (a “downtime” after which point there are no screens). For example 7-8 p.m. for younger children and 8:30-9:30 p.m. for teens.

Ask about routines to continue. “What new COVID-19 routines would people like to continue during the school year? For example, regular family walks after dinner; family dance night, etc.

Write down the new COVID-19 school-year schedule, for example:

7:00 a.m. - Wake up
8:00 a.m. - Leave for school
8:40 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. - School
3:45 p.m. - Arrive home, wash hands
4 - 5:30 p.m. - Homework time
6 - 7:00 p.m. - Family dinner
7 - 8:30 p.m. - Free time (non-educational electronics only allowed on Fridays and Saturdays)
8:30 p.m. - Screen time finished, bedtime routine
10:00 p.m. - Lights out



Ease your child's worries

Does your child seem to have excessive fears and anxiety about COVID-19? COVID-19 restrictions (such as restricting parents from entering the school) may lead your child to feel more isolated.

• Ask about their fears, and try to reassure or problem solve. Ask: "What worries you the most?"

• Validate and accept your child's feelings about the situation. You might say: "I can see why you might be feeling (insert your child's feelings here) about this."

• If they are sad, validate the sadness: "I can see you are feeling sad and it's ok to be upset."

•Check in with your children about how the day went. If your child isn't ready to talk, then ask them later when they are ready. You might ask: "How did your day go?" "How did it go with wearing your mask and keeping away from people and all that?" "What was hard, what was easy?"

• Continue to encourage your child to stay social with their friends and peers. Ideally this involves face-to-face connections outside, as per COVID-19 social distancing.

Normalise mask-wearing

Some children will be able to wear masks easily but others may have a harder time. Consider the following exposure and desensitisation strategies

• Are you buying a new mask? Try giving your child some of the newer child-friendly designs to choose from or get them to help decorate a pre-made mask. Are you making a mask? Let your child choose the material.

• Create an exposure hierarchy to understand your child's fears. From least scary to most scary it might be: seeing others wear a mask, seeing a mask, touching a mask, putting on a mask for short periods of time and putting on a mask for longer periods of time.

• Teach distraction strategies like distracting with music, videos, video games to help pass the time while wearing a mask.

• Practice calming strategies such as deep breathing, going outside or going for a walk.

• Consider motivating kids to get used to wearing a mask by pairing it with something they enjoy, like allowing video game time (within your limits) while wearing their mask. Does your child still have struggles with mask wearing, despite your best efforts?

Consider seeing your health-care provider to see if there might be other options, including seeing if your child may have a valid medical exemption.

Importance of physical activity

According to the NHS, children and teenagers between 5 and 18 years old should exercise at least 60 minutes every day. During COVID-19, it has perhaps become more imperative than ever before to keep your child engaged in physical activities that they enjoy in order to boost their mood as well as their immunity.

• Few activities are as rewarding and active as gardening. Don't worry about how big (or small) the garden is, as there are many ways gardening can work for you, from window boxes or small patches to larger areas.

• If the weather dictates you stay indoors, have a dance party. The blessing of being locked down in 2020 was the wonderful technology at our fingertips. There are plenty of available online organised dance parties for children of all ages using apps such as FaceTime to Zoom, Houseparty and WhatsApp. Keeping movement fun and engaging is key.

•Bear in mind that sports are not necessarily a synonym of exhausting exercise requiring high skills. It can simply be a gentle and playful experience for your child in a person-centred approach. One of our tutors, for example, has begun providing karate in the park to a student with SEN.

Read more on our blog about Physical Activities for Children During Lockdown and Learning through Sport.

Finding and using a tutor at this time, face-to-face or online

Has your child fallen behind with school-work during lockdown? Is he or she experiencing difficulty with distraction or simply needs more one-to-one attention? A carefully matched, experienced tutor can help alleviate some of the stress for you and your child.

If you are unable to help with your child's school-work or homework, it may be worth trying outside help before subject complexity increases. If tuition is provided holistically, it can also address self-esteem and self-limiting beliefs.

If using a tutoring agency to find a SEN tutor, check their SEN credentials and whether this is a focus area. Tutoring is an unregulated industry. Anyone can therefore become a tutor, regardless of qualifications, experience or competence. While a parent may find a great tutor on their own, individual tutors cannot process background checks (enhanced DBS checks).

Online tutoring is another convenient option at this time and is often more affordable than in-person tuition. It allows education to continue when in-person tuition is difficult for whatever reason.

Careful consideration is needed in finding the best tutor for your child, especially when they have additional needs. Find more tips on how to select the best tutor for your child on by seeing our blog Tips for finding the best tutor near you.

Need more support?

If your child needs additional support, a tutor could help them to get back on track with their schooling this term. Bright Heart offers a free consultation with a free trial lesson with a carefully matched and experienced tutor.

Contact us

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Whether your child has gone back to school in person or is continuing with online learning, we offer additional educational support both face to face and online. Speak to us today.