

SEND, COVID-19 and Trauma-Informed Practice

Impact of COVID-19 The global pandemic presents great challenges to all of us. For more on this see documents 3, 5, 6, 8 and 9). It is likely we could experience further adversity, loss or traumatic stress as a result of feeling unsafe, trapped, powerless or lacking in connection to others during this period of time. However, if we have SEND or a member of our family has SEND, then the coronavirus will have potentially thrown up even more complex challenges that educators can aim to support with. If we have SEND we experience all of the same worries and doubts as everyone else about the situation, but with additional challenges. Of course, it can be unhelpful to lump every person with SEND into one category as there is such a vast number of differing needs covered by this term. Every individual has unique needs that will require a personalised response as the impacts of COVID-19 will have been different for each of us. Despite this, we can generalise that certain themes may be common in terms of the more profound impacts.

The closure of mainstream schools for young people with SEND, the crisis driven news cycle and the social distancing restrictions may have created extreme anxiety. For example, if one of our children or young people has an ASD then the persistent changes that have taken place with little time for preparation or expectation may have caused them distress. Neither loved ones nor educators will have been able to predict these changes and there remain many unknowns and unanswered questions. Additionally, we may not have been able to adequately explain to children and young people on the spectrum why their normal routines have been disrupted. Routine is critically important to many children and young people with SEND in order to help them manage daily anxiety. The immediate disruption to these often well-established routines will have had a significant impact. It may also be that we have difficulty helping those with SEND to understand what the virus is and why certain measures such as handwashing and social distancing or 'lockdown' are necessary. This being said, some of our other children and young people may have felt a weight lifted by the absence of school which was a source of anxiety for them.

There may have been challenges in transferring things children and young people have learned at school into their home environment for home schooling to take place. We may have children or young people with OCD that find the experience very anxiety-inducing. We may have to work with them to support them in controlling how frequently and for how long they wash their hands. On the other hand those with sensory difficulties may find regular hand-washing extremely uncomfortable and we may have to work hard to reduce their anxiety around the necessity of this. For those with co-ordination difficulties or problems with balance, hand-washing may also present a challenge that they may need our support for. It may be that some of our children and young people on the spectrum become fixated on the news cycle and the virus as a special interest topic even if this creates further anxiety (see ideas on page 2).

If some of our young people have ADHD then they could find the increase in unstructured time very difficult to cope with, raising their anxiety and stress levels. We may have found it difficult to encourage them to obey the restrictions that have been in place and may have seen a rise in dysregulated behaviours. If any of our children and young people benefit from carers then the virus may have prevented carers from visiting, if they have had to self-isolate for example. This could also raise anxiety levels.

These impacts will also have fallen on parents/carers who will have had to work hard to support their children with these anxieties and these disruptions to their routines. This is at the same time that they are wrestling with their own fears and anxieties about the situation. For example, what do you do if your child on the spectrum only eats one particular brand of a food and the shops have run out of it? Our children and their families may need a good deal of practical and emotional support from us as educators.

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Supporting children with SEND and their families The support we aim to provide will of course depend upon the exact needs of each child and their family. We should strive to ensure that the family and the child are included in any discussions about exactly what support looks like so it can be personalised. What follows is not an exhaustive list and aims to provide a starting point for educators to assist families.

It is likely that many parents/carers will have had their own anxieties about their ability to home school while mainstream educational settings have been closed. It is possible that when children and young people with SEND return their parents/carers will worry about their progress. Educators may wish to signpost families to the sources of support mentioned in this guide, either for use while educational settings are closed or for extra catch-up support once educational settings re-open. Pre-teaching will assist transition back into school.

- **Hand Washing:** A good starting point for helping children with SEND to transfer learning from home to school environments and vice versa is to use consistent messaging around hand washing for example. If both settings use the same social stories, videos or resources then this will create greater recognition. A good place to start on hand-washing if appropriate for the age and needs of the child/young person is the [Washy Washy Clean Video](#).
- **Learning Resources:** There are a vast variety of learning resources available to parents/carers that educators can signpost families to. These include the [BBC bitesize page](#) which has resources for those with dyspraxia and videos with Makaton and British Sign Language content, among many others. There are also free printable resources available [here](#). For more resources or advice for families with specific needs see the resources section at the end of this guide.

Anxiety Whilst there may be some of our children and young people with SEND who have felt less anxious during 'lockdown' there are others who will have found the pandemic experience extremely anxiety-inducing for many of the reasons outlined on the previous page. Just as we should be providing emotional regulation strategies and support to all of our children and young people experiencing anxiety, so we should provide this support to those with SEND. There may be some children with SEND who struggle to develop emotional intelligence and so their usual anxieties may be exacerbated. See document 9 for strategies that can be used such as regulate, relate, reason. Play and other enjoyable activities are extremely important in helping our children and young people to cope with any anxiety they may experience. Using grounding and breathing techniques, mindfulness, play and physical movement to 'upregulate' or 'downregulate' as necessary will help to bring us back into our optimal zones of arousal on our window of tolerance (see document 1.a). This helps us to cope with our anxieties.

Autistic Spectrum Disorders Those children and young people on the spectrum may have found the pandemic experience acutely challenging. Parents/carers are very likely to be well-practised in supporting their children with any difficulties they may encounter through the course of daily life. They are likely to have already found successful strategies to cope with the 'lockdown' experience. However, in the event that this is not the case, we can act to support families and ensure that we also support children's well being for as long as mainstream settings remain closed or indeed once schools return. An excellent place to start is the Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health's podcast on supporting those on the spectrum, which can be listened to [here](#). Many of the ideas in the podcast are summarised below.

Social Stories or comic strip conversations are also excellent ways to ensure our children on the spectrum understand what is happening with the virus and why this may have caused changes to routines. The National Autistic Society has produced one that incorporates the child's special interest subject and can be personalised. This is available [here](#). See also some other excellent stories from Jackie Rogers on anxiety [here](#) and from Carol Gray [here](#). To personalise social stories, see [here](#) and [here](#). Scheduling can also be an effective tool for those on the spectrum, when precise parameters are adhered to. If visual timetables are produced daily then this can respond to ever changing events. Similarly, timetables that include allocated worry time or allocated time to discuss the pandemic can reduce the amount of time taken up with any fixations that have developed or allow a child to possibly forget about a worry by the time allocated worry time occurs, reducing anxiety.

Sensory Environments Children with differing types of SEND (including SEMH) could benefit if we provide sensory environments for them to act as a way to ground in the present moment and reduce anxiety. If these resources are used at regular intervals throughout the day when children are calm, then it will help them to associate the activity with feelings of calm. Children are then more likely to resort to this method if they feel dysregulated to reduce anxiety. It may be that we already have these within our educational setting or can look to create them for when the children return. However, if resourcing or space is a problem then it is possible to develop sensory corners or even a bag or basket of sensory items that can be stored in every classroom. These bags or baskets can be developed in conjunction with the SEND cohort of our settings to contain numerous items that can help in grounding children and young people. Similarly, schools could signpost parents/carers to links on how to develop their own at home to help their children. See some examples: <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/in-the-home/environment.aspx>. Again, ideally similar resources are used at home as at school.

SEND and trauma Our children and young people with SEND are unfortunately statistically more likely to suffer adversity or trauma in a variety of ways. This includes more likelihood of experiencing physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and bullying¹. Our children and young people with SEND are also 6 times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers or experience an unsuccessful transition between educational settings². Depending on the nature of their condition, our children and young people with SEND may be acutely vulnerable. It is therefore extremely important to recognise this and for us to be pro-active in ensuring that these children are a priority for us and our educational settings during the pandemic as increased anxiety is very likely. We should ensure we have adequate provision for the well being of our children with SEND when schooling resumes that accounts for any additional adversity and trauma that may have been experienced by this cohort in particular.

Resources All of the resources below are extremely useful, either for educators or for educators to signpost families to.

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zh9v382>—BBC Bitesize SEND page
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxlQn7KaCNU>—Washy Washy Clean Video
- <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/in-the-home/environment.aspx>—Info on sensory environments
- <https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/tips.aspx> - ASD and COVID-19
- <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/blog/coronavirus-and-support-for-deaf-children-information-for-families/> - Resources for families with a deaf member
- <https://www.rnib.org.uk/coronavirus>—Royal National Institute for the Blind and COVID-19
- <https://dyslexia-assist.org.uk/for-parents/> - Dyslexia Assist
- <https://inclusiveteach.com/free-printable-sen-teaching-resources/> - Free SEND resources
- <https://www.acamh.org/app/uploads/2020/03/Freddy-school-and-the-corona-virus.pdf>—Customisable social story for parents/carers of children and young people with an ASD.
- <https://www.acamh.org/app/uploads/2020/03/When-anxiety-feels-overwhelming-2.pdf>—Social Story for parents/carers/educators of children with an ASD about anxiety.
- <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf>—Carol Gray social story about COVID-19
- https://www.acamh.org/podcasts/coronavirus-autism-a-parents-guide/?utm_source=Subscriber&utm_campaign=0401ae5288-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_12_02_03_10_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f59ca1eb20-0401ae5288-119372361—An excellent podcast discussion on ASD and COVID-19
- https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/blackburn/directory/files/1_issue_50_-_special_edition_-_march_2020_1.pdf - This contains an absolute wealth of links to resources that can be accessed for those with SEND

Miscellaneous Additional considerations for our children and young people with SEND:

- SEMH: Our children and young people with Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties are likely to have their needs misunderstood and may not always receive the most support compared with other types of SEND. It is important to be mindful of these children at this particular time and upon their transition back into schooling when settings return.
- Female presentation of ASD: It may be that both our boys and girls (and those that identify as trans or non-binary) exhibit no obvious signs of anxiety if they are on the spectrum. However, this may be a likely trait in female presentation of ASD. Despite this, we should give them the choice and opportunity to discuss their emotions in relation to the pandemic. They may need additional support with socialising. The Curly Hair Project have lots of great resources for girls with ASD.
- Disclosures: Children and young people with SEND are unfortunately more likely to experience bullying than their peers. This can mean they are likely to experience unwanted or suicidal thoughts and may disclose these to us. Staff should be vigilant in looking for signs of this, be prepared for additional disclosure and be quick to refer to mental health professionals where there is any doubt.

References

1. Miller, D. and Brown, J., 2014, 'We have the right to be safe: protecting disabled children from abuse', NSPCC, available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/right-safe-disabled-children-abuse-report.pdf>
2. *The Timpson Review of School Exclusion*, 2019, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf