

Coronavirus Q&A: Preparing children for life after the coronavirus outbreak

Q: My 4 year old only has a preliminary diagnosis of ASD, we are waiting for full reports etc, but he shows a definite PDA profile for a lot of things. He is pretty much loving being isolation, just his parents and him all day, no demands as such, there are small shutdowns and meltdowns, but nothing major. There's loads of advice for coping during the outbreak, but is there advice being prepped for once life resumes?

For some autistic children the lack of routine and structure in their days will be very difficult to manage and they may well become more dysregulated at this time – these children may be delighted when life returns to 'normal'. However, for some, particularly those with a PDA profile, being able to be a 'free spirit' and make choices about when they get up, eat, play and pursue their own interests, will be liberating and will help their anxiety levels to go down. Some children are very active, they love to be outdoors but some children prefer to be at home and very rarely leave the house.

There's a danger that when things do return to normal and they are expected to go back to school and face all the things they may have found stressful before, there will be understandable resistance. It's also hard because none of us knows exactly when this will all end.

It's probably a good idea to gently drop it in the conversation, or prepare social stories, about how this is only temporary and what is likely to happen once schools and outside areas are open again – not directly but just a regular reminder when things are calm.

Schools will also have a part to play in helping children to transition back into attending school and for some a phased return may be needed.

Once the more stringent restrictions are lifted, it might be an idea to have regular walks or drives past school, just to help children keep school in mind. Autistic children may find it harder to visualise what school and the usual daily routine looks like, so it may be helpful to make it more 'concrete' in this way.

Other ideas to try are:

- Trying to keep routine as similar as you can – both in terms of meal times and bedtimes, but also to try and keep up with those tasks that they are able to undertake
- Keep up with some 'transitions' however small – especially for a child who loves being at home or may become somewhat 'sofa bound'. Moving from room to room (maybe by playing hide and seek, or by 'looking for the cat', or by using a favoured object to encourage a change of scene) or into the garden or out for a walk/bike ride (maybe having a treasure hunt or a list of things to collect/look out for).

- As well as driving past school, maybe asking school to keep in touch via email or post or with virtual chats.
- When it comes to 're-entering' normal life, it may need small steps initially and focus on things that your child wants to do or is interested in (e.g. outings to their favourite place/café/park/shop or visits to friends), then build up to returning to school or nursery slowly (possibly just 'popping into the playground' first to say hello, then gradually building up the time spent back in school). Remember the basics of helpful approaches with a PDA profile – be flexible, negotiate and collaborate and remember to retain trust.

The PDA Society may be able to give more advice on preparing to return to normality when we all know when this will be and what form it will take.