

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE HELPFUL



The Autism Centre for Education and Research at the University of Birmingham have been talking to parents who have children on the autism spectrum about their experiences during lockdown. We surveyed 300 parents and interviewed some in detail.

The aim of this summary of our findings is to help inform teachers and make recommendations for practice. We have also produced videos of parents talking about their experiences and their hopes for the future. These can be found on the [University of Birmingham YouTube Channel](#).

THE GOOD

- **81% of parents** said they received ongoing contact from school during lockdown.
- Many families saw the benefits of lockdown being that they could **spend more time together** and live at a slower pace.
- Some parents **enjoyed working with their children** and watching how they learn.
- Some children with marked levels of anxiety before lockdown were **less anxious** at home.



"The 1:1 attention at home and regular encouragement meant he became more confident about his learning."

THE BAD

- **63% missed going to school** – particularly seeing their peers, teachers and the routine.
- Of those parents who provided home education, **37% said they received no materials** from school
- **83% did not receive learning strategies** specifically designed for their child.
- Some parents found it **hard to motivate their children**, with 51% saying energy levels were lower and 42% reporting worse sleep.
- Some **children became more anxious** because of uncertainty around the pandemic and the thought of returning to school.



"The school did get in touch but it was random. I would have preferred more regular contact and more structured calls."

"Transition is our biggest worry... They are expecting a highly anxious autistic child to simply walk through the school gate in September with hundreds of other kids."

When considering the suggestions below, remember that all autistic children are different and so you need to work with them and their parents to find out what is likely to help.

COMMUNICATION



- Ask if parents are willing to produce a document about their child's experiences during lockdown.
- Some children may have become used to a new style of learning during lockdown and so find out what may have worked.
- Provide timetables in advance and make sure changes are clearly communicated to the child and their parent.
- Be positive as much as possible – e.g. about the child's schoolwork or the impact of future disruptions.

STRESS AND ANXIETY



- Conduct a sensory audit of the school (see resource section below).
- Consider the use of a "safe space" the child can go to
- Produce simple to follow rules about the safety procedures at school and use visual cues to help communicate these to all pupils
- Note that some autistic children can get very fixated with rules and making sure everyone is following them.
- See the resource section below for a guide on how families can manage anxiety. This also has important messages on managing our own stress at this time.

FAMILIARITY



- Consider a familiar teacher or LSA regularly checking in with the child to see how they are getting on.
- If they have friends or familiar peers, make sure that contact is maintained or they are part of the same bubble.
- Consider sending videos or pictures home of the school and classroom so the family can prepare for the return.
- With consent, the parent may be willing to share pictures of the home learning environment during lockdown.
- Try to stick to familiar routines and spaces when the child returns to school.

"The school provided a clear picture of what would happen and his routine. He was in a small group with a known teacher."

FLEXIBILITY



- A staggered return to school may help.
- Try not to apply too much academic pressure on the return.
- That said, some children are eager to get back to their studies.
- Some children enjoyed the freedom of physically moving during their home learning. Find out what they did, how often and for how long.
- Consider allowing the child to have sensory toys (e.g. a fidget spinner) on their desk.

"I'm worried as his sensory processing difficulties mean that he isn't able to follow the strict hand hygiene guidelines."



Parents were very appreciative of the support schools provided during lockdown and understand the pressures everyone was under. They ask that for future lockdowns there is regular and scheduled communication, that learning is differentiated for their child and that pastoral support is maintained.

Autism Education Trust Covid-19 Information Centre:

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/covid-19-information-centre/>

Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER-University of Birmingham) Covid-19 resources:

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/acer/vlogs.aspx>

How to help families manage anxiety:

<https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources-and-downloads/files/tips-for-families-on-managing-health-anxiety-and-self-isolation-ambitious-about-autism.pdf>

Conduct a sensory audit:

<https://www.aetraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/37.1-Sensory-audit-tool-for-environments.pdf>