Tips for Returning Back to School After a Break

For lots of children and young people the thought of going back to school can be an exciting one, but it can also conjure up feelings of fear and anxiety. This is particularly the case for those who are autistic for many reasons, including the following:

- Change in routine
- Different environment: teachers, classmates, transportation etc
- Sensory differences
- Self-esteem
- The unknown – not knowing the who, what, why, where and when of situations

With the support of your child's school, you can help to plan for the year ahead in the following ways:

Get the school to provide:

- Photos of the staff
- Photos / videos of the exterior and interior of the school
- Map of the school
- Visual timetable
- Plan of what will happen on the first day
- Important information like 'Escort name' 'when to collect uniform' 'etc.

Ask the school:

- Can they provide a quiet space for your child/young person to go if required
- Can they be in a class with a familiar staff member
- Can they be in class with a familiar friend
- Do they have all the information they need to best support them
- To talk to staff about the person's special interests, and how to use these as a way to interact on the first day back. Talking about their interests will help create a sense of safety.
- Is there a motivator that could be used in school to get the person back on the first day.

Other things that you may consider at home are:

- Try and get answers to questions before school closes, so that you are able to focus more on the task of supporting the child or young person back into school (like dinner money costs, transport questions).
- Use familiar items like a pencil case / school bag. To you an old pen that no longer works may seem useless, but it could bring about familiarity and a sense of safety.
- Airing out new equipment. Lots of new items can smell quite strong, such as sticky labels on books, names on clothes with permanent markers etc. For people who have sensory sensitivities this can cause difficulties.
- New clothes can be washed a few times before, so they don't smell or feel new.
- New shoes. Try to get the new shoes worn in before school - we all know how uncomfortable a new pair of shoes can feel.
- Try and get back into a routine before starting school (e.g. going to bed slightly earlier each night).
- Use a calendar or visual schedule to count down the days left before it's time to return to school.
- Use a visual story to explain what will happen before, during and after school.
- Prepare for the 'how did you spend your holidays' question – encourage writing down or the drawing of pictures of all the things you did in the summer. This can then be taken into school as a prompt and could help reduce the anxiety of having to answer a question with a multitude of possible answers.
- Create a 'problem solving plan'. Discuss all the possible worries relating to going back to school and come up with a list of actions that could be done if these occur. Pass this to the school staff on the first day back.
- Keep things as calm and relaxed as possible on the run up to the first day – for example, no unexpected changes at home, decorating projects or visits to unfamiliar places.
- Encourage the child or young person to help lay out their school uniform or to contribute to making their packed lunch. This may help them to prepare for the school day ahead.
- Identify a 'security' or 'transition' item that your child could take with them. This is usually something they like or get comfort from and helps them feel better. For example, a blob of blue tac, a ribbon, or their favourite teddy bear.

- Consider sensory needs and prepare a bag ready with objects (e.g. ear defenders, stress balls, smelly tubs, chewy sweets, fidget toys).