



FASD: Returning to School After COVID Lockdown

Dear Teacher,

This has been an unprecedented time and I am sure that there have been lots of preparations put in place to enable the successful return of children back to school. Children with FASD experience many obstacles to their wellbeing in everyday life and with the additional experience of COVID there has been a lot for them to handle. Pupils' experiences of the lockdown period will have been very varied. In general, the beginning of the lockdown was a time when children coped very well but increasingly many of our families are reporting increasingly problematic behaviour due to anxieties. Children with additional needs such as FASD will likely require considerable amounts of pastoral care and nurture to transition them back into the learning environment and learning may have to take a back seat initially.

Practical Preparation

- Have you had contact with them during the lockdown? Do they know you as their teacher? Have they met their support assistant for the coming year?
- Have you given them a virtual tour and explained what education will look like on their return?
- Have you provided them with social stories to help them prepare?
- Have you done a risk assessment?
- Are they able to come in before the whole school arrive back?
- Have you adjusted the week as going from nothing to full time could be exhausting for them?
- Have you made visual timetables and laminated them for their desk so that they can be wiped over during routine cleaning of their work station?
- Do they need to have an EHCP review booked in so that any changes can be swiftly addressed?

Support at School

Children with FASD have impairments across numerous brain domains and functions. Their unique impairments and strengths will influence how well they can manage the changes in their learning environment. Some examples may include:

- **Neuro Anatomy** – The structure and/or wiring of the brain can be very different in people with FASD so what neurotypical children take for granted, children with FASD will have to put in additional cognitive effort to achieve. Cognitive fatigue in children with FASD is common.
- **Academic Achievement** – They struggle to retain information. Due to the gap in school attendance, existing knowledge will not necessarily be there for recall. You may have to go back a number of steps and repeat and check understanding before progressing forwards.
- **Memory Deficits** - Have you documented the new rules in a visual format? They will need to be prompted and reminded over and over again about the changes that are in place.
- **Executive Functioning** – Cause and effect thinking, logic and insight of their actions is under-developed. Even if they can recite the rules, enacting those rules is another matter entirely.
- **Motor Skills** – Gross and fine motor skills, balance, core muscle tone, hypermobility, and hand-eye coordination can be impaired and it is not uncommon for our children to struggle with sitting still and writing down information due to those issues. If they haven't picked up a pencil for some time then this may be quite an obstacle and technology may be preferable to ease them back into the process.

- **Abstract Concepts** – People with FASD can struggle with maths, time and money concepts so understanding changes to the timetable and different break times for different bubbles and numbers allowed in certain groups etc will need guidance regularly.
- **Attention** – It takes a lot of effort for our young people to focus and they have not been in group settings for a long time so the impact of all the extra people in one space will make it harder for them to filter out extra environmental data and noise even if they are in smaller class sizes. Think about where they are positioned in a classroom and how to aid attention.
- **Sensory Sensitivities** – One of the biggest drivers of behaviour is the sensory world of the person with FASD. They often need movement breaks and fidget items and monitoring of noise, light and temperature. Don't underestimate the impact of new school uniforms on their bodies after wearing comfortable clothes for months. Hand washing can be difficult so try and use odour free sanitisers and cleaning products. They will likely touch everything, put things in their mouth, pick at things and hug people so whilst you can reinforce rules, they will unintentionally break them and you may need to positively manage that. Face coverings are unlikely to work with their sensory needs and many will be used to having an exemption about having to wear them. That exemption should be upheld by schools.
- **Social Communication** – Our children are very friendly and pro-social. They seek out friendships but their underpinning dysmaturity and lack of social understanding means that they can misunderstand others, or inadvertently irritate peers, or prefer to play with younger children. Consider how to meet their social needs if their bubble does not allow them time to play with peers they have a positive relationship with. Also consider that their existing skills may have waned with the lack of social contact with other children and they may need to relearn some of those fundamental skills.
- **Affect Regulation** – Children with FASD often struggle to regulate their emotions and anxieties can be very high. Whilst some will hold everything together in school and release those emotions after school, others will demonstrate this dysregulation in the school day. If they were able to regulate themselves, they would, so please see any actions as something that they can't manage rather than something they choose to do on purpose. The key in this situation is to help them regain regulation and this often comes from another adult helping them to regulate. Does your voice, tone, volume, physical stance, non-verbal actions show calm? This is not a time to enact consequences. Consequences rarely work for this population and proactive strategies will work much better than a detention or exclusion ever could.
- **Mental Health** – Many children with FASD have had disrupted attachments and trauma from experiences of coming through the care system or being adopted or other early life experiences. When you add in the recent trauma of COVID then some will struggle to feel secure. They have had extended periods of uninterrupted contact with their parent or caregiver so no longer being with them may cause them to revert to earlier patterns of behaviour. Consider attachment-based actions such as support to leave their family on a morning and reassurance through the day and transition toys and items that may help them settle. Talking therapy is less likely to work than musical or drama or art therapy. If working with a class about experiences in COVID then do so creatively so that those with FASD who struggle with insight into their feelings can use a different method to engage.

We know that you will use your best endeavours to help our children reengage with school and learning. Should you require any further information or resources about FASD then there are free resources on our website or contact the office for further information on 07743 380163.

Maria Catterick, FASD Network UK, Email fadnetwork@mail.com Web: www.fasdnetwork.org