

NAIT Key Messages for Staying at Home Language and Conversational Partner Guidance

Introduction

Language and conversational partners usually communicate with words in sentences. They may have difficulty understanding the ways their daily routines have changed and in making changes to usual activities. At times of unpredictability, individuals may experience increased anxiety, reduced ability to focus attention and to communicate with others. Families can take actions which help individuals to feel safe and calm and to enjoy time at home.

For families who are also adjusting, please remember this does not mean scheduling every moment and there is no 'right' way to respond to the new need to stay home. These are some ideas or 'key messages' which are commonly helpful for language and conversational partners. These will suit some families some of the time and might be helpful to you.

Key Messages

1. Maintain routines
2. Create new routines
3. Plan movement breaks
4. Provide an individual Safe Space
5. Find what motivates
6. Listen to your child
7. Use visual supports
8. Everything in life is learning

1. Maintain routines

Knowing what is going to happen, and when, is generally reassuring and calming. Establishing and maintaining clear, dependable, reliable routines will help your child to feel that they can trust the world around them. All children and young people benefit from knowing that they can trust the people around them to be predictable.

Maintaining familiar routines, particularly at times of transition or change, is important.

It can be helpful to maintain routines around:

- Getting up
- Getting ready for the day, e.g. showering/ washing, getting dressed, breakfast, cleaning teeth, etc.
- Snack and lunch time
- Bath time
- Bed time

Be sure to maintain different routines on weekdays and at the weekend. Hopefully this will support a smooth transition when the time comes to return to school.

2. Create new routines

When children are spending unusually extended periods of time at home, the usual home routines typical of weekends and holidays may not be sustainable. You will need to create a new, if temporary, 'normal'.

You may wish to create new routines around:

- Doing exercise, taking movement or sensory breaks
- Watching TV, YouTube or films online
- Playing on a tablet or computer

- Helping with jobs around the house
- Communicating with friends and family members outwith the home
- Completing tasks from school (where appropriate)

Where possible, introduce changes gradually. Spoken communication is fleeting and can be difficult to recall. Providing a clear schedule in visual form, such as a visual timetable using symbols, allows a child or young person time to process the information and provides a more permanent point of reference.

For older children and young people who can independently read and write, you may wish to use a calendar, white board, 'to do' list or App to plan and communicate the structure of their day.

Remember to include everyday self-care elements in any daily schedule. The structure of the school day provides natural prompts for toilet, eating and drinking. Without these, even very independent young people may need to be reminded to take breaks, to eat, drink and use the toilet.

Home VSP Visual Timetables and a 'How to Guide' are free to download at:

<https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources>

3. Plan movement breaks

A movement break (sometimes called a sensory break) is a planned activity that is different from what you have just been doing. They are predictable and desirable; they have a clear start and finish.

Movement breaks are activities used to provide sensory input through joints and muscles that is intense enough to calm those children who are over-excited, or to alert children who are feeling sleepy. The same activity can be effective for both.

Movement breaks can:

- be timetabled across the day (e.g. every half hour) or happen at regular times (e.g. just before mealtimes or before reading a story)
- help to regulate a child before a less preferred activity (e.g. getting dressed or cleaning teeth)
- provide an opportunity to step away from an activity and return (e.g. watching movie clips on a tablet)
- support transition between two activities (e.g. computer game – movement break – lunch)
- be adapted to suit a child's interests or motivations e.g. include a favourite song or character
- require no equipment
- be fun!

Movement breaks work best when they are planned at regular intervals across the day. Providing predictable and engaging movement opportunities can help a child to retain a calm and regulated state and to avoid getting to a point where they are bored, frustrated or distressed.

A NAIT Guide to Movement Breaks at Home is free to download at:

<https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources>

4. Provide an individual Safe Space

A Safe Space is a place in your home where your child can choose to go when they are beginning to feel overwhelmed or need time and space to regulate themselves.

Safe Spaces should be:

- Readily accessible to the child so that they can go safely and independently when they need to

- Available whenever they are needed by the child, for as long as they are needed
- Specific to them; not used by anyone else

It could be:

- A pop up tent, if a child likes to feel enclosed
- A cloth over a table
- A corner of the room with cushions or a bean bag
- A space between two chairs or sofas
- A quiet corner of a less frequently used room in the house
- A space containing things you know will help them to calm down – you might involve your child in planning this

When your child chooses to go to their Safe Space, everyone else in the house should try not to talk to them but to give them time and space, unless they are unsafe. Ideally they should choose to come back out whenever they feel ready.

A NAIT Guide to Safe Spaces at Home is free to download at:

<https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources>

5. Find what motivates

We all need motivation or 'drive' to start and keep going with activities and routines. This is not as a reward for tolerating something you find unpleasant, but rather just doing something because you like it. We are motivated when things are enjoyable and have meaning for us. Often, the process of the activity and not the outcome that matters, for example the stirring of cake mix might be more motivating than eating the cake once it is baked. Other people might not see the point or reason that something motivates us. Autistic people may seem less motivated by social activities and people, however parents and carers can adapt play opportunities and social experiences by finding shared interests and fun. As parents or carers you can help your child by understanding what motivates them and offering motivating experiences.

Think about

- a balance of motivating things to do alone and things to do with other people
- sensory preferences give ideas about what is motivating
- the amount of different activities to offer. Some children are motivated by doing one activity for a long time and it is not helpful to keep changing the activity. Others need variety and short bursts.
- new and familiar experiences – this affects how long they might be motivating for
- organising the space, so there are some things available (a limited choice) and other things they need to ask for or things they will be offered
- finding quick ways to put some things out of sight (e.g. in a finished box)
- some activities at home which need planning (e.g. baking or painting) and some activities which can be always possible (e.g. doing headstands, singing a favourite song)
- creating social routines (e.g. a song you always sing when getting dressed)

6. Listen to your child

Some individuals do not respond well to questions and are more likely to express their thoughts and feelings or to share their experiences and concerns when we create opportunities for them to express themselves in their own way and in their own time. You can:

- Keep your own language clear and simple
- Model sharing your own thoughts, feelings, experiences at calm, quiet times
- Be aware that they might not find it easy to understand or explain their thoughts or actions

- Be responsive when they do express themselves, so that they feel you listened to them and believed them
- Remember that what they tell you is ‘their truth’ and it reflects their perspective
- Comment rather than questioning (e.g. when I was your age, I didn’t like ...; or sometimes changes like not going to school can be hard)
- Notice their actions and comment in the moment (e.g. don’t ask ‘why did you throw the remote?’ but say ‘oh dear, that looked annoying’)

Some children and young people are more likely to talk when you’re doing something calm, mundane or routine (e.g. in the car, in the bath, playing Lego, drawing). It can be helpful to create times for this.

Other children and young people talk a lot and it is ok to set some boundaries (e.g. you might say, ‘I’m happy to talk about hoovers for 5 minutes and then I’d like to talk about’). If they ask repetitive questions, visual supports can be helpful to redirect them to something else they can do.

7. Use visual supports

Visual supports can be:

- objects, photographs, symbols or written words
- printed and laminated for regular use or can be hand written on a white board, paper or a post it
- used with Velcro on the back for easy attachment and removal, although this is not compulsory
- used alongside other supports or interventions
- used in schools and nurseries and at home in any room in the house, depending on what is useful (e.g. a wash hands support could be in the bathroom, a countdown chart on the fridge to refer to daily)
- portable for use outside home (e.g. in the car or when going shopping)

Home visual supports matched to the child’s stage and current needs can help to:

- reduce anxiety
- increase predictability and desirability of day to day experiences
- support understanding and expressive communication
- support positive social routines and interaction with others
- support successful transitions and help prepare for change

A Home VSP How to Guide explaining how to use these is free to download at:

<https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources>

8. Everything in life is learning

When spending extended periods of time at home, the priority for all children, but particularly important for autistic children, is that they are supported to feel calm, well regulated and able to trust the people around them to respond in predictable ways. The best approach to ‘home learning’ will be one which is tailored to the individual child’s needs and preferences.

Perhaps informed by previous experiences of homework, some parents will be aware that their child has a strong sense that school work happens at school and not at home. For these children, it is important not to push them to make the switch. However well prepared and resourced, it will not be possible to completely replicate the school experience. Whilst ensuring familiarity and continuity of task and materials can be supportive, be prepared for your child still finding small changes too different to cope with. Home is not school.

Encouraging and pushing children to engage in learning activities when they are feeling stressed may actually increase their level of anxiety. For all of us, learning only happens when we feel calm, comfortable and ready to learn.

Other children may have a strong desire to maintain the routine of their school day and may benefit from a very structured approach, completing familiar school tasks, having predictable breaks, lunchtime and a clear end to the 'school learning' part of their day.

A typical school day consists of many elements, from structured written tasks to play, songs, stories, movement, discussion, experimenting, creating, carrying out routines and responsibilities and, importantly, free time. Everything in the school day is constitutes learning. Learning at home can take a similar approach. Everything that already happens at home is learning.

Learning at home can include:

- Playing – this supports the development of language and communication as well as developing a child's understanding of the world around them. It can take many forms, e.g. building with blocks, completing puzzles, water play, dressing up, pretend play, board games, digging in the garden, chasing and hiding games, ball games, playing on a tablet
- Singing and playing action games (e.g. 5 Little Monkeys, Simon Says)
- Listening to music
- Sharing a story and/ or, if appropriate, reading independently
- Movement activities
- Drawing, painting or model making
- Baking
- Gardening
- Looking at nature (e.g. identifying leaves, counting insects, spotting birds, etc.)
- Watching a TV programme, film or YouTube clip related to your child's interests
- Talking about things that interest your child
- Phoning, messaging or using FaceTime/ WhatsApp/ Zoom etc. to speak with a friend or relative
- Helping with household tasks (e.g. making their bed, sorting laundry into light and dark or children's and adults', setting the table for dinner, loading the dishwasher)
- Free time – allowing your child space to relax, reflect and be with their own thoughts