

Me2 Club Activity Provider Guidance for COVID-19 Lockdown Transition

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly disrupted everyone's lives. Clearly, while its effects varied considerably for different people and groups, abundant research shows that populations including disabled and neurodivergent young people were disproportionately affected.

As dire as it was, the COVID-19 pandemic has done us some service in raising awareness of the challenges these vulnerable groups face routinely, even without the extra challenges of lockdown. The sense of disconnection, loneliness and isolation experienced so keenly throughout the wider community as a consequence of the lockdown is, sadly, something this group deals with on a day-to-day basis.

In addition to coming to terms with the same trials we all faced during this period - missing our friends and family, dealing with the fear of an unknown virus and sometimes even coping with the loss of a loved one – COVID-19 has had a special and lasting impact for children with additional needs and their families.

For many, there have been cognitive struggles understanding the situation and the measures that we have had to take as a response. For others, the changes to routine have been destabilising. Across the board there has been a loss of independence and the opportunity to practice social skills - an essential focus for this group. And while many people have had no problem adapting to the shift to online media, this had posed a huge obstacle for many young people in this category.

During this period, children with an additional need and their families received even less support than usual. The consequential interruption of behavioural and educational interventions which often drive positive change has had an impact that, in some instances, will have effects lasting much longer than the duration of the lockdown. And it goes without saying that caregivers of children and young people with additional needs experienced significantly higher levels of stress and anxiety compared with to caregivers of typically developing children.

Emerging from lockdown there is a strong requirement to recognise the specific challenges children with additional needs and their families have faced during this period, understand how it may manifest during the transition back to "normal" day to day life and respond to those factors inclusively as part of the provision of mainstream activities.

The purpose of this briefing document is to help prepare activity providers for the transition out of lockdown and provide some simple coping mechanisms to help returning children settle back in.

Returning children with additional needs: what to be aware of

You may find that upon return from the lockdown, new behaviours have surfaced in some children who previously seemed more settled. Being able to cope with change depends on understanding why something is happening, what the underlying social rules are and having the coping strategies to overcome anxiety when things change unexpectedly. Some children may not have the communication skills and social understanding to easily do this. Others may experience stress and anxiety when even small changes in routine occur.

We suggest preparing for an increase in challenging behaviours in some returning children, which could be triggered or exacerbated by factors such as:

- Change to routine
- Processes being 'different' (due to e.g. social distancing, one way systems and so on)
- Unfamiliar leaders or other children
- New COVID-19 related practices (e.g. wearing masks or other PPE, using hand sanitiser etc. NB. this last point can especially affect children with sensory sensitivities)

What behaviours you might see

You should expect to see an increase in behavioral changes in some returning children. Be aware that while some young people will clearly communicate what they are experiencing, others may not recognise or communicate they're feeling anxious and show their anxiety in behavioural changes instead.

Behaviours to look out for include:

- Regression from previous progress (whether behavioural or communicative)
- Becoming more easily overwhelmed
- More or new anxious behaviours
- More shy and withdrawn behaviours
- Participants may be heightened, more emotional or more sensitive than usual
- Children may appear disruptive (not concentrating on a task or repeatedly talking to others)
- Increased dependence
- Increased sensory needs
- Intensifications in behavioural inflexibility/rigidity

How you can help

As we move away from lockdown towards some degree of normality, children with additional needs will need support to manage these changes. It is important to understand that withdrawn behaviours can be just as challenging to handle as disruptive ones, and it is as important to re-engage a withdrawn young person as it is to help support one that is distracting others.

When responding to this situation it is important to recognise that a one size fits all approach doesn't work. Activity providers will need to be sensitive and responsive to the specific needs of each child and respond accordingly.

During this transition period we suggest activity leaders aim to:

- Give extra time and be patient with children who are struggling to deal with the return to activities or transitions between smaller activities.
- Give plenty of reassurance.
- Provide clear and frequent communication.
- Be prepared to give a bit of extra support to children who didn't necessarily need it before.
- Give children the opportunity to express their fears and concerns.
- Try to use vocabulary that mirrors what is used by the child e.g. 'germs' instead of 'virus'

To assist with the adoption of these suggestions, we encourage a number of tools and techniques – the following examples may be helpful:

- Consider movement breaks (e.g. time for children to stretch, move around and have a change of environment), and incorporate more frequent breaks in activities that require sustained concentration e.g. reading and writing tasks.
- Keep instructions concise and clear and set expectations for the session at the beginning e.g. what will they be doing/working on during the session.
- Use quiet methods for gaining attention from the group, avoiding loud noises such as whistles/shouting (e.g. putting hands in the air)
- Picture boards
Display a board with the photographs and name of any new activity leaders to help them familiarise themselves
- Break card
Give children a card they can flash if they need to remove themselves for a short space of time. It is useful to clarify where your child should go at such times and make sure that your child knows this.

How we can help

At Me2 Club, our objective is to support activity providers in overcoming any problems you have helping children of all abilities to fully join and get the most out of your leisure activities. We welcome and encourage you to reach out if you are experiencing any difficulties or noticing any issues we may be able to support you through.