

NAIT Key Messages for Staying at Home Social Partner Guidance

Introduction

Social partners communicate without words or with only a few words or phrases. It may not be possible for family members to explain in a way they will understand, why their daily routines have changed, why they can and can't do some things as expected. Instead of using words to explain, families can use our own actions to make the 'here and now' feel safe, calm and fun.

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 social 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. Use objects as visual supports
5. Play their way
6. Be a responsive partner
7. 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 to start the day, e.g. showering or washing, dressing, breakfast, cleaning teeth, etc.
- Snack and lunch times
- Movement and sensory breaks
- Bath time
- Story times
- Bedtime

It can also be helpful to maintain familiar social routines around play, songs, rhymes, games and everyday interactions. Does your child like to:

- Sing the last word of particular songs or rhymes?
- Join in actions to some songs and rhymes?
- Sing a 'going to the toilet' song?
- Play repetitive clapping games?
- Add 'go' to the end of 'Ready, steady...'

Communicate with school staff to find out how your child enjoys interacting with staff and peers during the school day.

Be sure to maintain different routines on weekdays and at the weekend. Hopefully this will help to 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:

- Play
- Songs and rhymes
- Action games
- Craft activities, e.g. drawing, painting, play dough
- Helping to prepare snack or lunch
- Personal care, e.g. hand washing
- Outdoor time, e.g. playing in the garden, going for a walk
- Movement breaks
- Helping with jobs around the house, e.g. wiping the table after lunch

Using objects as visual supports (see below) can support your child or young person to predict when these things are going to happen.

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. Use objects as visual supports

Social partners are developing awareness that one thing can represent another meaning – for example that your coat signifies that it's time to go out. They may not yet recognise photos or symbols and instead we can use objects as visual supports. These can be used to help individuals to make a choice, understand or remember what is happening now or where they are going and to understand when something is 'finished'.

A Home VSP How to Guide explaining how to use these is free to download at:
<https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources>

5. Play their way

Social Partners usually enjoy sensory and physical play, or social play with key familiar people. You can:

- Notice what they enjoy and provide more of this type of play
- Play with objects (e.g. posting things, lining things up, music makers, throwing beanbags into a bucket, play with water, sand, chalk) or play without objects (e.g. chase games, somersaults)
- Consider the sensory opportunities in play activities – you can watch a helpful video to explain sensory preferences here: <https://bit.ly/2Jj7XNN>
- Watch what they do and imitate sounds and actions
- Create play routines, such as action song games, peek-a-boo or tickle games
- Provide opportunity for repetition in play
- Join them in what they are interested in right now so they don't have to shift attention focus to your interest

Out of sight can be out of mind at this stage, so think about what is visible and accessible because these are the things they are likely to want to do.

6. Be a responsive partner

Having a responsive person around you is very motivating. We can do this by:

- observing our partner's actions and 'listening' to the messages they send
- waiting and giving the time they need to take a turn
- interpreting their actions, which may be intended as communication or may not and responding based on what we interpret they mean (e.g. if they laugh and smile at a song, sing it again)
- keeping our language simple and modelling key words that they could copy
- adapting our communication and expectations in familiar or unfamiliar situations
- offer choices from two objects and respond when they make a choice
- being at their eye level, so they can notice that we are interested and waiting to respond to them

There are more good ideas here <http://www.hanen.org/Helpful-Info/Autism-Corner.aspx>

7. 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.

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.

A typical school day consists of many elements, from structured tasks to play, songs, stories, movement and carrying out routines of daily life. 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 take many forms, including:

- Playing (e.g. with sensory toys, shape sorters, puppets, building with blocks, doing puzzles, water play, dressing up, digging in the garden, peekaboo, chasing and hiding games)
- Singing and playing action games (e.g. Row your Boat, The Wheels on the Bus)
- Listening to music
- Sharing a story
- Movement activities
- Drawing and painting
- Baking
- Watching TV programmes or YouTube clips
- Using FaceTime/ WhatsApp/ Zoom, etc. to interact with a friend or relative
- Helping with household tasks (e.g. wiping the table, sweeping the floor)
- Free time – time to relax, doing whatever is calming for them