

# PARENT CARERS TOGETHER



**Bournemouth Christchurch Poole**

## **Parent Reflections on their Child/Children's Return to Education**

As a mum of five children who attend three different educational settings, when the time came for them to return to school this September it was with an abundance of mixed emotions, normally I love nothing better than the return to normality after 6 weeks together, but this year it's been different.

I have had to take so many more things into consideration, like the obvious - they've been away from class for 6 months not 6 weeks! I've had to factor in new fears and anxieties as well as the usual apprehension in going into a new class. COVID-19 has dominated most of 2020 and it has now seeped into the subconscious of my children who deserve for these years to be the best in their lives!

With reluctance and tears (mine not the children's) off they went into their new normal and when they returned, the smiles and ease to which they had embraced all the new changes and challenges reassured me I was right to send them, what happens next we will see, but for now I am happy and they're in the safe keeping of the teachers.

*Robyn - BCP parent*

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Having spent the majority of COVID just the three of us at home, my husband, myself and our five-year-old son were ready for him to return to his specialist placement in BCP. As an only child, he was missing the interaction with his peers and he often was asking if he could go to such and such's house today? My husband and I have been working at home since March and trying to balance working from home and playing/educating our son has been stressful and emotionally tiring at times.

In the lead up to our son returning to his school, we referred to a number of the [top tips](#) the members of Parent Carers Together put together; my son is sensory and found nearly all the labels in his new underpants to be irritating him, so they were cut out. I bought his new uniform (because he has grown like a weed over lockdown) in plenty of time and ensured it was all washed to soften it somewhat.

We were lucky that his school offered a holiday club in August (two sessions for three hours each session) and our son was allocated both slots. With the holiday club being based at

the school, I could drive him there and back to familiarise him with the journey and the outside of the school.

The school sent us a booklet near the end of August with visuals of my son's new teacher and teaching assistants, his new classmates, photos of the front of the school, the path leading up to his new classroom and inside the classroom, including the important toy area. He does not respond well to change so to have this document to show him has been invaluable. When I first told him the new name of the class he was going to be in, he (as predicted) got very verbally angry with me and put his hands into little fists saying "I am not a Squirrel!" (name of class changed). Now when I ask him, he says the name of his new class quietly but with a smile. We viewed this document with him almost daily until school reopened.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> September, I took it upon myself to write an email to my son's new teacher with what I hope she found to be a useful guide to getting to know him. I included information about his speech, what he likes to play with, his friends at school, sensory needs, safety needs and his most often expressed feelings. I felt better for sending it to her even if she does not ever read it.

Two days before he returned to school, I started to show him his school jumper, pointing out its logo, reminding him of the school name and class he will be in. I periodically got the school jumper out over those two days to show him and to say, "in one day you will be going back to school and wearing your school uniform". Over the last few days I stamped his clothes with an ink name label and I attached a mini bottle of hand gel to his school bag.

Then 8<sup>th</sup> September came, his first day back at school and his first day in Year One.

He was awake at 5.20am and despite my best efforts, he would not go back to sleep. I hadn't slept well myself in the night, not sure if I was anxious or excited for his first day back.

Getting up early gave me plenty of time to let him settle into the morning and have breakfast. It should have also given time to get his teeth brushed and to help him put his uniform on but he was being silly and kept running away from me to hide under his duvet and generally make it more difficult for me to get him ready, this was a little stressful for me as I didn't know how bad the traffic would be up Ringwood Road. Apart from the traffic being a bit slow at times the actual journey in the car was fine.

We were a few minutes early, he didn't want to wait in the car, he wanted to go to the school. As parents were asked by the school in an email the day before to follow social distance, I made us stop by the yellow and black two metre line outside the front of the school.

My son is a runner and isn't good with standing still or waiting/stopping when asked so he wears a backpack with reins for his safety. To ensure he didn't run by other families, I sat on the concrete floor and got him to sit on my knee until the bell rang.

He saw his old teacher behind the metal gates, and he waved to her and he was chuffed she waved back. She came out to the families in his new class with his new teacher to introduce the new teacher to us and our kids. My son went into school without looking back.

Then as the day progressed, I checked my phone, but I didn't receive a call from school which is a good thing. I went to the school gates a few minutes before end of school day and waited for him to be escorted out. He smiled when he saw me and gave me the longest hug as I was given a brief overview of his day. He said he wanted to go home which we did and then it was an evening of him wanting to absorb himself in the tv watching his favourite programmes and then after an active half an hour of basketball hoops and bouncing on the trampoline it was bath, stories and bed and I didn't hear a peep from him from the rest of the evening.

For us as a family, preparing my son visually and emotionally for the return to school I believe helped him to have a good first day. We are fortunate in some ways that he is only five years old and has little understanding of COVID; he knows adults wear masks when going into a shop but he doesn't know why, he knows if he sneezes when we are out, I give him hand gel to use on his hands and he does so with little question as sadly this has become part of our new routine.

I know my reflection may be very positive compared to other parent's experiences, and I am sad about that but I am glad for my son that over the last six months of him being the only child at home with little interaction with other children, he was happy to be around his peers and settled back into school

*Beth - BCP Parent & Admin for Parent Carers Together.*

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Our family of five has found the return to school both exciting but equally challenging for a number of reasons. I have three children - all teenagers now and very different in terms of support needs. I found lockdown quite isolating as I was home with the children every day and my husband a keyworker was doing very long shifts - from 5am until gone 7.30pm some evenings.

Like a number of families with children with SEND we struggled with shop shelves being emptied at the start of the shutdown - we don't have anyone who needs to shield but it was tricky trying to get food as we didn't qualify for online priority slots and I couldn't take the kids and I couldn't leave my boys home together because they would fight! So it was a bit of a challenge.

My husband would go after work and come home empty handed and as all our children have different favourite foods - particular brands and flavours specifically rice, spaghetti and noodles, chocolate mousse and cakes with icing on, yoghurts, chicken nuggets, eggs and milk we had a few dodgy days where we had to be innovative and work with what we had.

We do have an allotment which was really helpful as we could grow our own fruit and salad and some veg too. We then traded some of our produce with friends and family - following the safe distancing and safe handling protocols to swap things like salad, rhubarb, raspberries etc for items we needed - pasta, toilet rolls, rice, flour, icing sugar etc.

During this time we tried to focus on home learning. Both my boys are very black and white around home and school learning and even though I have lots of experience working in education with SEND young people, 'Mum' is not a teacher! So again, we improvised and focused on learning life skills with maths and English and other learning added in a bit

sneakily eg maths, English, science, geography, geology, even some French! We read lots too - all of us and we cooked together and tried each other's successes and disasters. We even found a really old children's cookbook with great visuals which was perfect for my youngest son and he loved having a go at the toffee sweets and flapjack etc.

All three tried new things - we built a garden shed, painted fences, used power tools, had a go at tiling a wall (never again lol!), lots of gardening, lots of walking the dog (I actually think the dog got fed up and started trying to hide at one point lol!), baked and vegged on the sofa for movie nights and Netflix binges. We all connected and found a sense of peace with the closeness but separateness.

But we also had some struggles apart from the food.

My eldest son has missed being at his special school and seeing familiar faces and friends. The novelty of lockdown wore off after about two weeks and when his access to football and sports which help his sensory regulation were stopped, he really struggled, and his mental health suffered. This was exacerbated by him having serious side effects from the ADHD medication he was trialling. He struggled with his social communication skills and became isolated from friends.

He went off one day and didn't come home... it was probably one of the scariest moments of my life as a parent. I won't go into detail to respect his privacy, but it was definitely the worst part of lockdown etc. We are still supporting him now and he has enjoyed his return to school but his travel arrangements all changed with little notice and he has struggled with the changes and lengthy journeys and some of the changes at school have been unsettling.

He did get to go back into school for eight days in July as he was a Year 10 pupil and is due to take exams next year but he found it odd being the only pupil allowed in. He missed his peers and chatting to his classmates but enjoyed the time in.

We had to buy new uniform - he has shot up and outwards - all the cakes and spaghetti lol! So I had to try to find adult polo shirts as he is super tall for 15 and wash everything as he hates the chemical smells of new clothes and to make them softer due to sensory needs. We also struggled finding big enough school shoes - he is a size 12 and a half! (We had to go for smart black trainers in the end but thankfully his special school understand and make reasonable adjustments around uniform).

To prepare I asked both boys what foods they wanted in their lunch boxes when we went shopping so that they have their favourite things to eat as I know this will help them regulate better. If they are hungry they become 'hangry' and really struggle at school.

So far he is loving being back and he is being supported to focus on the minimum qualifications he needs to achieve to access the next stage of his learning. As his parents, we are sad that he can't do some of the other subjects he expressed an interest in, but we understand that time is limited and he has to focus on his English and maths and the subjects he is most confident in. I think we have to understand that it's difficult for our children and for schools at the moment so being flexible and supportive is important for everyone.

Our youngest son has blossomed during the break from school. He has enjoyed his time at home and has loved learning practical life skills. Again I tried to incorporate maths and English and other learning as part of it e.g. if we made a cake - maths would be weighing and measuring and if we were planting seeds etc we would be counting and estimating, discussing what the plants needed to thrive etc so learning was embedded but not obvious. I felt under pressure to ensure all my children didn't get too far behind but I was also trying to

do forum work during this time - lots of online meetings and feedback to write etc so it was about trying to find a balance.

I also started preparing for appeal/tribunal which was quite stressful as my initial request for my eldest son's EHCP reassessment was refused. Eventually it was agreed that it would be done but it was horrible gathering information, evidence and emailing backwards and forwards as lockdown began.

The thing that I found difficult was feeling isolated and lots of parents with SEND children messaging me asking for help too and I was trying to signpost them when I was struggling myself and my mental health was quite badly affected. I did go through a stage where, like other parents, I felt a bit of a failure to my kids and to my husband who was coming home shattered every evening and to the parents who contacted me as they were desperately in need of help too.

I started to use meditation and yoga to help and then realised that being able to help other parents actually helped me to focus and forget my own anxiety and it gave me a sense of purpose. It also enables me to connect with other parents and make new friends in some cases.

We shared tips and information enabling us to support our children and ourselves better and I am really grateful for that experience. I learnt a lot about myself as a parent and Mum and also about me as a person in my own right. I think this helped me prepare my youngest for school too because I had stopped listening and respecting his wishes. Caught up in the daily routines of life I had failed to see just how much my youngest son was struggling with his school anxiety before lockdown. He had just received his formal diagnosis a few months before, so when the return to school became definite, we agreed not to talk about school until he was ready.

He started asking questions about a week before. I discretely got uniform ready and removed labels and washed new items ready etc. We then had a chat during a dog walk about 'the plan' and we agreed to draw a heart on each other's hand to help with anxiety so we could feel connected during the day. We linked the start of school to his birthday and used it to focus on the fact that his birthday was the same week as going back to school and used that to manage some of the anxiety as he loves his birthday and getting presents etc.

However, he went in for two days okay(ish) and he then had a blip on his birthday and struggled with the tracksuit bottoms and trainers we had bought for PE days which he had to wear into school. We finally got in late due to sensory issues - about 20 mins late. He, and his siblings, have all struggled with getting to sleep, he needs enough sleep to then be able to get up in the morning. He then struggles with the transitions, from getting out of bed, to getting dressed, to breakfast and getting to school. I can visibly see the anxiety increasing as we drive... music helps and we sing on our way to school!

To help, we popped into school to meet his teacher and look at where he would sit the day before they started back - I did think he wouldn't go in and he kept threatening not to, but he did and he got to ask lots of questions which helped. We also got to choose what his break card would be... he decided on a puffer fish lol! He has a great sense of humour and everyone agreed that blowing up like an angry puffer fish which looks spiky and cross is a good visual to use if you need a sensory break!

Routines are important so I have to be super organised to support them as much as I can (very difficult for me as executive functioning is something I really struggle with as I am autistic and ADD), so we operate on a low anxiety environment to ensure a calm and happy household. They are encouraged to be as independent as possible but things like socks and

shoes are always an issue - no matter how independent and what age - so I help them. I would rather support than let something so small as struggling to get the laces done up or the shoe on lead to a meltdown. I try to remember how anxious they already and constantly plan ahead.

Some days are good, some days we have blips and things take a bit longer, but so far their return to school is looking quite positive.

My daughter is loving the fact she's now at college. She specifically chose college because she needed a change of environment. She feels that college offers her an opportunity to grow and develop more as an adult without such stringent behaviour policies and uniform restrictions and she likes the independence it gives her as she now has an opportunity to try to find her first ever part-time job.

She needed some support with the interviews by phone, submitting the applications and preparing initially and having to use public transport - we don't live on a direct bus route and as she has anxiety around using four buses a day I am supporting by giving her a lift, as again, it just helps relieve one aspect of her anxiety while she gets used to things.

The key thing about the return to school I have found is that communication is so important - whether it's with the schools, the college, your children, between parents.

My boys don't like to talk about feelings face to face so we Snapchat and What's App one another to 'talk'.

It's also okay to not feel okay about them going back. I miss my children so much. I'm still seeing how things go with my youngest and how he copes etc as he has asked to be home educated. Each of our children is an individual and all we can do as parents is our best. It's helping having my daughter home on certain days so I do have some company. Things have completely changed in many aspects and our new normal is quite different due to Covid - some things good and some things not so good but as parents we are all really good at adapting and rising to the challenge. I'm really proud of how far I have come and I think all parents should be - we have had to adapt, develop strategies and support our children as best we can through quite a difficult time.

*Nikki-BCP Parent & Co-Chair for Parent Carers Together*

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First/second week

So, I woke this morning around 4:45. The big one (the one whom everyone struggled to place, as his needs were so high. The council were full of what they could offer him!) woke as normal at 7:00. He was a bloody pro, and had managed college (specialist, ASC) for a week already. The cause of my IBS/multiple condition-flared, fibromyalgia stuff was still asleep. She managed until 06:30 when her Darth Vader alarm clock went off. That was it, she was on alert! She hasn't been in school for over a year, what the heck am I thinking? I don't have the health, confidence, energy to get her in there.

Nevertheless, I got the big one into a taxi and the smaller one into the car. 45-minute journey, which would be incomprehensible and impossible for the small one in a mini bus filled with other stressed children, we got there (which is what the council has offered – from 7:40!)

The difference, between mainstream, and specialist were evident the minute we got there! . A teacher came up to us, dressed in a fluorescent vest in readiness for the country road, whilst the small one sat in the car terrified by the very thought of entering an educational placement after over a year of what I can only describe as pure hell, and slightly hyperventilated into her facemask – covid fear very real. The teacher mouthed to me whether she should stay or go? The small one and I were gobsmacked! They understood this? They understood school anxiety and wouldn't force anything. This was new! Maybe we were on a whole new path...

The small one (who isn't actually that small) managed to get out of the car, and go in for over an hour after a year missing school, her fears and anxieties preventing her from even entering a school environment. This was huge! The big one (the one whom academically should be the concern) was coping amazingly. The smaller one was coping... and that was enough for now. Maybe I could too?!

*Sarah- BCP Parent & Steering Group Member of Parent Carers Together*

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