

NAIT Homework Guidance

Context

It is common for parents of autistic learners to report that homework is a source of stress and anxiety for children, young people and their families. There are a number of possible reasons for this and they are likely to be different for each individual learner. It is therefore important that school staff seek to understand the individual, their needs, preferences, understanding and context in order to create an effective homework plan. This is particularly important in the context of a return to school during COVID-19.

NAIT Key Messages for Returning to School include:

1. Ensure adjustments are anticipatory
2. Listen to parents
3. Provide predictability
4. Use visual supports

(Further information about Key Messages can be found at www.thirdspace.scot/nait)

This guidance has been developed in consultation with the autism community including: autistic people, parents of autistic individuals, professionals from health, education and third sector. It is intended to help school staff and partners apply good practice.

Who?

This guidance has been written for teachers supporting autistic learners, and those with related needs, in primary, secondary and specialist settings. It is recognised that each of these settings is likely to include:

- Social Partners: have fewer than 10 meaningful words
- Language Partners: use phrase speech
- Conversational Partners: communicate in sentences across several turns

Homework expectations will vary significantly according to a child or young person's school stage and developmental level.

What is homework?

Homework has many definitions and interpretations. It can be:

- A task with a due date
- A project that can be undertaken in a style and to a depth of the individual's choice (e.g. design and make, create a presentation)
- A range of suggested activities that a learner and their family can choose a number from, or indeed, whether or not they engage in them over a period of time (e.g. weekly or monthly)
- A consolidation task to practice skills or reinforce learning
- A revision task
- An assessment

There are mixed views on the value of homework. Already, schools across Scotland approach homework in a range of ways. Any approach is likely to be enhanced by clear communication and tailored expectations.

Some children and young people might view 'homework' as different from doing work at home during COVID-19. It is important to be aware that language can be confusing, therefore be consistent where possible.

Homework for Social and Language Partners

These children and young people are likely to be working at Early Level of Curriculum for Excellence. Homework is likely to include:

- sharing stories
- sorting and matching
- play based activities

Creating a routine with a clear and predictable start and finish will support families to have an enjoyable experience of homework.

Homework for Conversational Partners

Homework for Conversational Partners is more likely to reflect the full list above. It is still important to have a clear and predictable start and finish; some learners may benefit from using schedules, to-do lists and timers. For some it is important to limit the amount of time they spend, whether or not they finish (e.g. 20 minute limit. Parent/ carer can sign to state time was met, even if work not completed).

For each child/ young person there needs to be consistency and coordination across teachers and subjects to ensure expectations are realistic.

How?

Planning

This guidance does not seek to duplicate or add to existing paperwork. Our aim is support teachers to use an 'autism lens' within existing Getting it right child planning protocols.

Teachers can plan for:

- Amount
- Duration
- How recorded
- Clear instructions
- A clear start and finish

Home-school communication is more likely to be successful if you set clear expectations and endeavour to meet with them. Once a system is in place, plan for regular review - how is the child/young person and parents/carers finding this? Do you need to adapt?

Communicating

Rather than verbal instructions, which can be hard to retain, instructions should be shared in writing/ visually with both child/ young person and with parents/ carers.

In addition, it will be important to take account of:

- Home language
- Parent/ carer literacy
- Any accessibility issues (e.g. parent/ carer visual impairment)
- Family access to the internet/ devices

Choice making is difficult, often this can make expectations seem unclear.

Support and organisation

With limited time for communication with learners and their parents, it can be tempting to provide homework in terms of bigger pieces of work to be carried out over a longer period of time. For many autistic learners, such tasks can be overwhelming, so much so that it becomes hard to get started. Teachers can help by:

- Chunking tasks
- Allocating a suggested time to each section
- Offering a timetable with the task spread across the period of time
- Placing a time limit on the entire task (especially important with open ended tasks as some children/young people will find it hard to create an end point)

Predictability and Desirability

Knowing what is going to happen and when is reassuring. When we see a point to a task and understand the reason it has to be done, it is more likely to be motivating. It is important to make sure that learners know:

- When homework will be allocated
- When it is due back
- How they are to approach it (e.g. in sections or all at once)
- Whether it is to be completed independently or with support
- How they are to record their work
- What they will need to do this (e.g. equipment, materials)
- How long they are expected to spend on it
- What they should do if they have a problem
- What to do if they have not completed the homework on time
- How they should submit the work to the teacher

Why do we need to think about homework?

It is widely recognised that homework can be a source of stress and distress for many autistic children and young people and their parents/carers. There are many possible reasons, including:

- Physical and mental exhaustion at the end of the school day
- Overwhelmed by the sensory demands of school
- Unexpected changes to routine across the day
- A tendency towards compartmentalised thinking. (e.g. I do work at school. I relax at home)
- Challenges with organisation and planning

Living with COVID-19 and Blended Learning:

In the current circumstances the way children and young people think about doing work at home may have changed for some but not for all. Some:

- will have found new ways of working at home
- will have learned in a range of ways that have not included formal teaching and learning
- won't have worked at home at all

More than ever, there is a need to take an individualised approach and to tailor our expectations to the needs of each learner.

Reflective questions:

Whatever our individual views on homework, if we are going to put this in place for autistic learners, we need to approach the task with the right mindset.

We could ask ourselves:

- Teachers could consider that if a child or young person is already contending with the transitions within a 'blended learning model', is there value in having homework in addition to this?
- Have we listened to the child or young person and their parent/ carer?
- Have we made the reasonable adjustments required?

Where is homework done?

Prior to COVID-19, many schools offered Homework Clubs at lunchtime or at the end of the school day. Since the increase in online classes and virtual lessons, some learners report that having a virtual homework club or shared online work time can be helpful. This comprises a group of children, linked through an online platform, who can be individually working on a task, with a teacher present, not necessarily talking to the class, but responding to queries as they arise.

Things to consider

Families commonly report that, even with huge amounts of effort, homework can be a source of family stress and conflict. Given that a state of dysregulation or distress does not usually lend itself to meaningful learning, we have to ask ourselves whether homework is the right thing for all learners.

If a learner and their family report that homework is enjoyable and valuable, then continue with regular review. If however, despite your best efforts, reports of stress and distress continue you may wish to ask, 'Does it really matter?'