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Residential trips - how to prepare a child with SEN

How can parents prepare their children for school trips away? Annie Makoff investigates.

School trips can be valuable extracurricular experiences: a way of cementing classroom learning whilst building social skills. Residential trips, in particular, help to encourage a sense of independence. But the sudden change in routine and unfamiliar surroundings can be daunting for children with SEN.

'Good preparation is key to a rewarding and successful experience,' says Jane Friswell, CEO at the National Association for Special Educational Needs (Nasen). 'Change can be difficult, which may lead to high anxiety and, possibly, challenging behaviour.'

Friswell suggests compiling a booklet with pictures of the destination and scheduled activities to help familiarise your child.

'But be careful if your child's understanding is very literal,' she warns. 'They may be upset if the holiday is not the same as the pictures in the book.'

Online tools

Making use of Google and its various tools can help. It's something that Medway-based Claire Ryan is doing with her nine-year-old son to help prepare him for a school trip to the Isle of Wight.

'My son has ASD, Tourette's Syndrome and dyspraxia,' she says. 'He was extremely anxious about the prospect of the trip, especially because he had never heard of some of the planned activities, like abseiling. Using Google to look at images of the activity helped to settle some of his concerns.'

Visiting the destination virtually using Google Street View or Google Earth can also be invaluable.

Prepare the adults

Parent Stephen Winters suggests preparing an 'All About Me' sheet, so unfamiliar adults can see at a glance how the child likes to be approached and what their needs are. These sheets can also inform them of warning signs if the child is becoming distressed and how best to reassure and calm them,' he adds.

Ifield special school in Gravesend regularly takes its students on residential trips away. 'Parents should make staff aware of any routines a child has, particularly at night and mealtimes,' headteacher Pam Jones OBE advises.

Get organised

Winters suggests bagging up clothes for each day of the trip. With the right planning, they can reflect the activities the child will be doing. This, he says, will help reduce unnecessary anxiety over which clothes to wear and where to find them.

Children with dyslexia may also find this helpful, particularly if they struggle with organisational skills and time management. Visual aids such as pictorial schedules with daily activity lists can help orientate and give a sense of control.

Reasonable adjustments

Bed wetting can be an issue and it's often exacerbated by anxiety. Winters suggests using a decorator's sheet big enough to cover a mattress, whilst Ryan recommends disposable bedtime pants which can be put on discreetly in a toilet cubicle.

For Ryan, it's also about ensuring reasonable adjustments are made, especially when it comes to food. As Ryan's son has sensory issues around food, she plans to send his food with him. 'Venues suitable for children with SEN must make reasonable adjustments, and allowing for issues around food is a reasonable adjustment, so don't feel awkward asking if it's appropriate for your child,' she advises.

Familiarisation visits

Sometimes, though, it isn't always possible to make reasonable adjustments for every venue. That's when familiarisation visits can help.

It was one of the approaches mainstream Selkirk High School in Scotland took to help prepare a class of boys with SEN for a German trip. They visited Edinburgh airport and met boarding and security staff ahead of the trip, so the boys would know what to expect on the day. Priority boarding was also arranged.

'As well as a familiarisation visit to the airport, we provided clear details of the entire schedule,' says learning support teacher Sheila Sapkota. 'We studied the German language and we ensured that staff on the trip were well-known to them. The boys did really well. They talked to strangers and took part in all the activities. Despite the new experiences such as using the plane, train and rollercoaster, they took everything in their stride.'

Tips for parents

- Organise familiarisation visits or carry out virtual visits online
- Create visual stories of planned activities
- Encourage your child to bring a transition object: something familiar and comforting from home
- Use a calendar to count down the weeks or days left until the trip
- Arrange times you and your child can contact each other during the trip
- Talk to the school about your child's individual needs, whether it is dietary, emotional or practical.

In summary, the best plan for a successful trip is 'ensuring that everyone is prepared and the child feels comfortable in surroundings which are as familiar as possible,' according to Dr Judith Brown, head of knowledge and expertise at the National Autistic Society. 'Breaks in routine and sensory overload can be extremely challenging, particularly for children with autism, but preparation can make all the difference.'

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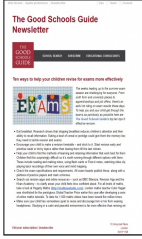
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