

Managing anxiety about going out during COVID-19

Supporting your child with additional needs

Why people might feel anxious about going out

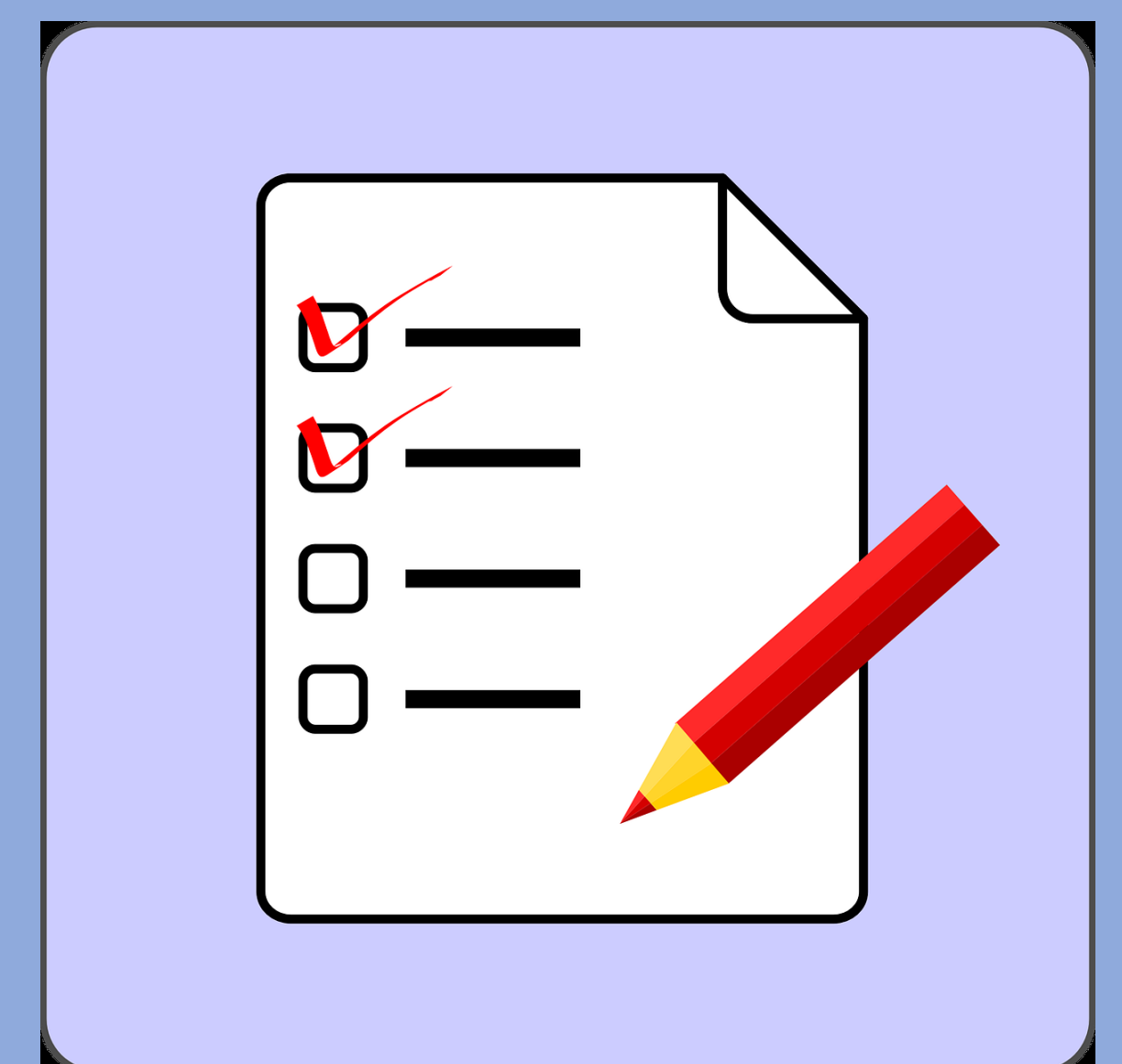
When we've been so used to staying in the house and only seeing people we live with, it is **normal to experience some anxiety** about returning to activities we did before lockdown. These might include seeing other people or spending more time in busy places.

For children with additional needs, there might be other things that make coming out of lockdown difficult. **Changes in routine** can be particularly hard. Children may **struggle to understand changes in the rules** about what we are allowed to do now. For some children, lockdown also meant they were having to **do less of the activities they usually find stressful**, such as interacting with other people. Some children might also be fearful about **becoming ill with the virus or passing it on** to loved ones.

Think Routine

It is likely that your usual daily routine changed a lot during lockdown. Now is a good time to introduce a new routine to help your child get ready for life returning more to normal.

- Introduce time outside into your daily routine. This might be spending time in the garden, having a walk in your local area, or going to the park.
- Talk about the plan for the next day beforehand – where you will be going, what you will be doing and how long for.
- Make sure to include time for activities your child finds calming or relaxing each day.



Think Rules

- Reassure your child you are doing what is in your control and following the rules to keep yourselves safe:
 - Keeping **2 metres** away from people you do not live with
 - **Washing your hands** for 20 seconds when returning home
 - **Wearing a mask** (if possible, and where necessary)
- Check the Government website for the latest guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>



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Think Sensory

For many people lockdown has been relatively quiet and isolated. Going back into shops, traffic, transport, and school might lead to **sensory overload** – feeling overwhelmed by sights, sounds or smells.

Plan with your child what they can do to help with specific sensory sensitivities when out and about. Make sure you take these items with you. For example, headphones or ear defenders might be helpful for coping with noise.



Think Gradual

The thought of returning to all pre-lockdown activities straight away may feel overwhelming. This is completely understandable. Try to start small and build up gradually instead.



- Start by thinking about what your child is already doing and **how they can do more of it**. For example, they might already be going to the park once a week – you could increase this to going several times a week, or vary which park you go to.
- To begin with, try to choose **less busy times and places** to go until your child gets more used to being out and about again.
- Encourage your child to do something which **helps them to feel relaxed** before going out. This might be taking some calm breaths or squeezing a stress ball.
- It may be very difficult for your child at first, but each time they go out **it will get easier** – stick with it!
- **Acknowledge and reward progress**, however small.

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Think Visuals

Visual supports can be useful for improving understanding as they make communication more concrete and consistent than verbal communication.

- **Visual timetables** which show the child what they will be doing and in what order can help them know what to expect and reduce their anxiety.
- **Social stories** include information about particular situations and explain what to expect and why. This can help reduce uncertainty and anxiety. For example, you may wish to use a social story to explain the current social distancing guidelines.



Think You!

It is also natural that *you* may be feeling anxious about returning to pre-lockdown activities.

- Think about what usually helps when you are worried.
- **Normalise your child's feelings** by talking about your own feelings and what helps you.
- It will help your child to feel more confident if you **appear calm**, even if you are not feeling calm. Think about your posture, facial expression and tone of voice.



Further information

Sheffield Children's Hospital COVID-19 resources:

<https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/patients-and-parents/coronavirus-resources-for-children-and-families/>

National Autistic Society – guidance and helpline for parents, young people and staff:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/helpful-resources.aspx>