



2. Preparing for Inclusive Education

2.4 Preparing and welcoming the student

Introduction

Returning to school after facing any trauma can be difficult. For children and young people who have experienced a spinal cord injury, re-integrating can be particularly difficult. They will likely be dealing with significant physical, emotional, and familial changes outside the school. Facing their peers and their previous educational experience as a non-disabled student can be extremely challenging. A positive, warm, sensitive and hopeful welcome can make a huge difference to how successfully that child or young person re-enters the school community.

Child or young person returning to school

“ **When I went back to school I was nervous because I didn't know how people would react to me being in a wheelchair. It was bad because of the anxiety, and the depression I got. It was just so bad, I found it really hard even getting in the car let alone going into the school itself. But the school was really supportive. They never forced me to do anything; they let me take it at my own pace.**

Ben, 17

Children and young people with spinal cord injuries have said they cope much better with returning school if they are properly prepared.

Proper preparation and support of young people before returning has also been connected with students being able to attend school full-time immediately rather than a gradual part-time entry. Preparations they identified as being useful included:

1 Visiting the school before returning – possibly with a parent or an occupational therapist. The visits re-establish relationships with staff and students and allow the student to practice moving around the school and using new equipment as required.

2 Attending a meeting at the school with professionals and their parents – Meetings could involve hospital-based professionals, parents, school staff and the child/young person. The meeting could cover the child's requirements, school responses to those requirements and an assessment of the physical environment. Importantly, these meetings should involve the child and consider their ideas and perspectives on their needs and how to address them. See section 2.3 'knowing who to involve' for more information

3 Remember children and young people who have a spinal cord injury may be reluctant to return to school or engage with anything that reminds them of their impairment. Offering emotional or psychological support, as well as being sensitive to their situation, are some strategies to address this. See section 3.4 'different areas of support' for more information

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Make sure everything's in place before the young person returns, and make sure the school fully understands about having a student there with a spinal cord injury.

Ben, 17

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Ask the person in the wheelchair what they want to do and what they think about things instead of asking the parents all the time

Julie, 18*

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It was a bit weird. A lot of the class, I didn't even recognise them. Their personalities had changed and they were different

Tim, 10

A 2008 study by the Institute of Education explored the school lives of children and young people with a spinal cord injury. Most students in the study obtained their injury in childhood or adolescence, meaning they had to return to the school they had previously attended. For many, 'this was a difficult and sometimes traumatic event.' One student in the study returned to school just before his GCSE's and felt 'uncomfortable', 'out of place' and like 'everyone was watching him'.



It was really good at first, although I was a bit shaken and a bit nervous at first about going in; I hadn't yet got used to how to handle my body and that.

Ian, 16

1 Many found the return to school full of mixed emotions. While it was good to see friends again, 'at the same time it was a difficult transition'.

2 Students felt different and reported seeing their classmates as different too.

3 They reported feeling nervous about how to handle their bodies.

4 Students also reported that they did not want to be treated differently just because they had been spinally injured. However, some felt that attitudes towards them had changed.



Strange and then happy. At first they treated me a bit differently but I said to them just treat me as normal. They kept asking 'do you need this, do you need that?' but I said, 'no, I can do it myself'.

Janine, 17



I remember the dinner lady – before she was always having a go at me and then when I came back in a wheelchair she was all sorry for me, which I don't want, some people are like that... I don't want to be treated differently from other people.

Ali, 15

Strategies that can help welcoming the student back to school

1 Visits from teachers or friends can make it easier to cope with returning to school. See section 2.3 for more strategies on keeping in touch with students in hospital.

2 Discuss with the child or young person what kind of welcome they would like, if any. Some may want a formal assembly where they (or someone they choose) can provide information about what happened to them and what adjustments need to be made for them. Others may prefer the school community is informed but just want a small Q&A session with friends to discuss what happened. Some may not want any recognition of their experience. The most important thing is that they are comfortable and involved at how they are welcomed back to school.

3 Consider a buddy system and pair up the child or young person with a friend or another student of their choice who can accompany them back to school on the first day and who understands the issues and what adjustments they need.

4 Ensure all school staff are aware of the return of the student and how to welcome them sensitively and in a non-patronising way. It is also important that all staff are trained in recognising relevant medical issues, such as autonomic dysreflexia. For more information on this, see section 2.3

5 Promote and display positive role models and ideas of disability within the school. Make sure this is done in a sensitive way that illustrates the successful, varied, fulfilling and ordinary lives that disabled people have.*

Resources to link to or include

- Blueprint guide 'Going Back to School: Supporting Young People Returning to School with Spinal Cord Injury: A Guide for Schools'

*Taken from:

Knight, A, Petrie, P, Potts, P and Zuurmond, M. (2008) The school lives of children and young people with a spinal cord injury. Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. Report for Back Up

“ I was extremely scared about going back to school. I just didn't like the idea of going back. I had known the school as an abled bodied point of view. I had no idea what it was going to be like going back to school being in a wheelchair. I had to find different ways of getting about, different ways of doing subjects. It was quite interesting, but it was quite scary, not knowing what people were thinking and how I was going to get to the toilet, things like that.

Danielle O'Connor, 16