



2. Preparing for Inclusive Education

2.5 Preparing the school community

Introduction

Preparing all those in the school community – staff, students, the child or young person with a spinal cord injury and their families – is vital. The child and family's life has changed profoundly and the school community will need to adjust to welcome them with sensitivity and warmth. How this is done depends on the school, its culture and, most importantly, the involvement of the child and their family.

Back Up understands that a spinal cord injury can be devastating, but we believe it should not prevent anyone from getting the most out of life. While it is most certainly a traumatic change in the life of the child or young person and those around them, it does not necessarily lead to pessimistic ends. Research and those in the field suggest a very different picture:

“**At Stoke Mandeville, we have a strong research and clinical background, and from that are able to say that most people adjust and cope really well in the long term and do go on to do really well and get back to school and education and create relationships. This is a really important message to get across. It's not the norm that people with spinal cord injury have long-term psychological trauma and difficulty. It's more normal to cope and make adjustments.**

Zoe Chevalier, Clinical Psychologist, Stoke Mandeville Spinal Cord Injury Centre

When preparing the school community for welcoming a child or young person with a spinal cord injury, a realistic recognition of the changes they've undergone should be balanced with a message of positivity and examples of others who have coped in similar situations. This must, of course, be handled sensitively as the child or young person may not be immediately ready to openly discuss these issues but a message of hope and optimism is an important one for the community to have at its heart.

Whole school

Developing an inclusive school culture at a whole-school level is vitally important – not only for the child or young person with a spinal cord injury but for all students in the community. The expectation should be that the student will be included in all aspects of school life. The question is how to make that happen. School culture and attitudes are paramount at seeing this expectation made real.



If the whole school ethos is about meeting emotional and social needs then it doesn't matter so much about where your legs are.

Head Teacher, Primary School

Top tips for schools

- 1** Creating the facility to **link with schools** which have already gone through a process of inclusion is vitally important. Back Up's schools and family inclusion service can provide this link.
- 2** Linking in with school/authority based **inclusion personnel** to feed into already established strategies and processes, is key, for maximum impact. Advisory support teachers are good places to start.
- 3** **Including issues of diversity, equality and inclusion into the curriculum**, school events and displays. Promoting positive images of disability and diversity within the school.

4 Ensuring that the **student is involved and consents** to how their situation is described and discussed with staff and other students. Any preparatory work with staff and students should be communicated to the child or young person so they are aware of what the school community has been told before they go back to school.

5 Involvement of an adult with a spinal cord injury is key, preferably at a similar injury level to the young person being included. Back Up can arrange for a spinal cord injured school advocate to visit the young person and the school. We can also provide peer mentoring for longer term support.

6 Accessing disability equality training and support – training for teachers, support staff and all people who work in schools on disability awareness and equality.

Before your student returns to school

1 Identify ways to maintain contact and involvement of the student while they are in hospital. This could include:

- visits by teachers, teaching assistants or students
- letters or cards from students, the whole class or the school
- liaising with the hospital teaching staff so the student can receive and keep up to date with school work
- creative methods for keeping the child involved in school activities (eg, through video or other media)

2 Communicate with the whole staff about the situation and return of the student. This preparatory work may not need to go into great detail about the spinal cord injury but could discuss how the student will get around, what requirements they may have or equipment they use. It is important to emphasise that they remain the same person and should be accepted as such.

3 Ensure that the student is involved and consents to how their situation is described and discussed with staff and other students. Any preparatory work with staff and students should be communicated to the child or young person so they are aware of what the school community has been told before they go back to school.

4 Resourcing adjustments, such as physical adaptations to the school, before the student returns to school can enable a smooth transition. See section 2.5 'preparing the school' for further information.

5 Begin raising awareness through talking to students and peers about disability. This can link with the PSHE programme. Assemblies are a good tool to raise awareness. However it is good to not draw too much attention to the child or young person. People who are wheelchair users discussing their own lives, can answer from first-hand experiences.



The wheelchair and the fact that they can't move their legs is not their biggest problem... it's social acceptance and being seen as a person and not as a person in a wheelchair.

Head Teacher, Primary School



My advice is to talk to the student, don't feel bad or embarrassed or shy about talking to them about their spinal cord injury. This might seem like a little thing but it can make a huge difference to the student. Asking them what they want is so important.

Ben, aged 17

One primary school Head Teacher spoke to all the children personally about wheelchair use and had read a 'Topsy and Tim' book about a girl in a wheelchair to each class before Elizabeth started at the school. Although Elizabeth was starting at primary school rather than returning after being in hospital, the Head Teacher prepared the school for Elizabeth's arrival, and this was highly valued by her family, who saw this as very helpful for the transition to primary school.*

Staff

Depending on when they were originally trained and their previous experience, teachers and staff may have a huge variation in knowledge and skills related to inclusion of children with different requirements.

Staff may need training and information around the health requirements of children and young people with SCI who are returning to school. Liaising with health care professionals to provide training on specific issues (e.g. tracheotomy use) may help staff feel more confident and know what to expect.

Training that may be useful or appropriate for staff include:

- disability equality
- wheelchair training so staff know what is safe and unsafe
- manual handling
- possible medical issues that arise
- working with PA's
- adapting curriculum and teaching strategies

While children and young people with spinal cord injuries are not necessarily any more prone to medical emergencies than their peers, there are some related medical issues that all school staff should know about. See section 2.2 'knowing what to expect' for further information.

Students and peers

Recognise the importance of friendships and social acceptance in the child's inclusion into school. Other children and young people with spinal cord injuries have reported how having close friends or support to re-establish friendships aided them in returning to school.



I was really shy to talk to everyone... but people encouraged me to make friends.

David, age 13

Advice

1 How you prepare other students at the school may depend on a number of factors and should be done in collaboration with the child or young person returning to school and their family. Some may prefer to have a full school assembly while others may wish to meet with a small group of friends or work with small groups.

2 Talking sensitively to the friends or year groups of the returning pupil can help prepare students for what to expect and avoid or prevent awkward or difficult situations.

3 Other organisations can help plan and facilitate a student's return to school. Contact Back Up's schools and family inclusion service on 0208 875 1805 or the medical team at the spinal injury unit, to find out how they can help.

Resources

- Blueprint guide '[Going Back to School: Supporting Young People Returning to School with Spinal Cord Injury: A Guide for Schools](#)'
- [Altogether Better](#) – information pack on inclusion of disabled children and young people. The relevant section is on staff training and using PA's and learning assistants (pp32-34)
- [Support Assistants and ICT](#) – a guide from Becta

*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 to the Back-Up Trust.