**Supporting children’s sensory systems and anxiety when returning to school**

Everyone’s sensory systems do not remain static and change throughout the day depending on our emotional and physical states. We process sensory sensations differently and so will have different reactions to the environments and states we are in. Therefore, we need to be alert to different needs and where possible create an environment that will support differing sensory needs.

Most of our reactions to sensory input are instinctive, we don’t think about them, we just react. For instance, we move that hair, that is tickling off our face or we chew the end of a pen to stay alert in a meeting.

Our emotions and sensory system are interlinked so when our emotions are heightened our sensory system is also heightened and we may react differently to sensory input that we can normally cope with. For instance, if we are tired or unwell, we become more aware off bright lights and loud noises or find that little tag on the back of our shirt is suddenly irritating.

Many of our children returning to school will be feeling anxious and therefore have heightened sensory systems. Their heightened senses will mean they will have difficulty processing this information and an increased reaction to the sensory environment they find themselves in. This can then increase anxiety.

There maybe some simple adjustments that can be made to help.

To maintain a healthy sensory system most children need at least 4-5 hours of movement every day. Children whose sensory system is having difficulties processing may require more. Building in more, movement at least on initial return to school would help children feel less anxious and more settled.

* Where possible encourage families to walk to school.
* Build in more/regular breaks in the playground and encourage movement that involves using big muscles.
* Introduce movement breaks in the class. For example teach actions to songs/tunes that are popular.

When asked to sit children should be able to put their feet flat on the floor when their back is touching the back of their chair. Their desk should be about elbow height. If possible allow children to stand at their desks for some activities.

Try to minimise clutter and visual displays. Be aware of noise levels and have regular quieter times. Consider turning lights and IT equipment off for periods of time each day.

To further decrease anxiety make expectations and routines clear. Use visual support such as visual timetables to reassure children of the expectations and order of the day. Where possible prepare children if there are going to be changes.