



Back-to-school tips

Autistic teenager [Siena Castellon](#), author of *The spectrum girl's survival guide: how to grow up awesome and autistic*, gives her top tips for teenage girls on returning to school after lockdown

Months of online learning have made returning to school after lockdown a daunting experience, especially as no-one knew what kind of school environment we would be returning to. Autistic girls face additional challenges that make returning to school more difficult. Below is advice that addresses some of the concerns you may have and that I hope will help ease you or your child's transition back to school.

Returning to school after lockdown

One of the drawbacks of an exceptionally

long break from school is that it makes returning to the hustle and bustle even more challenging than usual. Being sheltered from the outside world is likely to have decreased our tolerance for noise, crowds, smells and bright lights drastically.

The best way to mentally prepare yourself for the sensory overloads caused by returning to the school environment is to acknowledge that it will take some time to build up your sensory tolerances.

Developing healthy friendships

As a teenage autistic girl, I often struggled to develop healthy friendships at school. I was overly eager to have friends and tended to believe what I was told, so I often became friends with people who took advantage of me. These friendships started off well, but gradually descended into abusive relationships. For example,

one so-called friend expected me to do her homework and lend her money, but refused to be seen with me at school.

You should focus on having true friendships with people who value and respect you. Remember that actions speak louder than words. If you are friends with someone who makes you feel bad about yourself, or who takes advantage of you, don't be afraid to walk away. You deserve to be friends with people who are kind, supportive and wish the best for you.

Asking for help

One of the areas I really struggled with in school was asking for help. My focus was on staying under the radar. The idea of approaching a teacher for help and bringing unnecessary attention to myself terrified me. In hindsight, however, I could have prevented some situations from escalating if I had asked for help sooner. For example, we were given a group assignment in geography. The members of my team refused to participate, so I did the entire project on my own. Although the project got an A*, our teacher gave us a zero/fail for group work. If I were in this situation again, I would ask my group to contribute. If repeated requests failed, I would ask the teacher for advice on how to handle the situation.

If, like me, you are reluctant to ask for help, try asking what you would say to a friend who asked for your advice. We often give better advice to others than ourselves.



Siena Castellon is a 17-year-old neurodiversity advocate, who is autistic, dyslexic, dyspraxic and has ADHD. When she was 13, Siena created www.qlmentoring.com, a website that supports students with special educational needs (SEN). Siena is also the bestselling author of *The spectrum girl's survival guide: how to grow up awesome and autistic*.

Read more [@QLMentoring](https://twitter.com/QLMentoring)

Competition

We have two copies of *The spectrum girl's survival guide: how to grow up awesome and autistic* to give away to members, and Siena is going to sign them for the winners.

For a chance of winning, email your details to YourAutismMag@nas.org.uk by 15 October, quoting 'Spectrum Girl'. The winners will be announced in the next issue.



Asking for help is not a weakness - it's a sign of strength and maturity.

Managing your mental health

When my mental health is suffering, everything else goes downhill too. My sensory sensitivities skyrocket, my sleep pattern gets disrupted, my appetite is affected and I become distanced from the people closest to me. To avoid this, I try to be conscious of my mental health.

When I notice that my anxiety levels are increasing, I try to identify the cause and practise self-care. For example, during lockdown, I found that social media became very dark and negative, and was causing me stress and anxiety. So, I took a break from social media and limited the time I spent reading and watching the news. It really helped.

One of the factors that may affect your mental health in the months to come is the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Although it's hard, I think the best way to cope is to recognise that, for now, we will have to accept that uncertainty is a way of life, and it's OK if it takes us longer to adapt to new situations.