**CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS AND COVID-19**

All children and young adults require support from caregivers during times of stress and uncertainty, such as those we are facing now with the spread of Covid-19. Coping with the unknown and navigating school closures, abrupt changes in routines, loss of connections with friends and family, and fear around contracting the virus – are burdens for all, and Funky Feet School of Dance and Performing Arts will play an important role in helping children and young adults understand the changes and process their related feelings.

Individuals with additional education needs may need extra support to adapt to these changes. These challenges may relate to comprehension, communication, difficulty understanding abstract language (e.g. social distancing). An insistence on sameness, and a greater likelihood of anxiety and depression.

Funky Feet School of Dance and Performing Arts recommend 6 support strategies to meet the unique needs of individuals during this period of uncertainty. They are listed below. These strategies are intended to be a menu or toolkit of ideas that may be helpful – teachers may want to use one idea at a time that might be useful. We must always involve the child in the decision-making process about what tools would be most helpful (if this is possible).

1 – Support Understanding

Children with additional education needs will have different levels of understanding about the Covid-19 virus, how it spread and how to reduce risk of exposure. We feel that most of the explaining of the virus will have been done at home during lockdown, however if necessary, here are some tips about how to explain the virus.

Funky Feet School of Dance and Performing Arts staff should try to describe the virus and current situation (e.g. the smaller sizes, social distancing) in **concrete language and terms**. Teachers should avoid flowery language e.g. “she is under the weather”. Though it may feel stark phrases like “we wash our hands to stop the virus getting inside our body” may be easier for individuals to understand.

We could also use a **social narrative**, a story that clarifies the situation e.g. personal space is good, because it protects us from germs.

Funky Feet School of Dance and Performing Arts will also provide **visual supports** if necessary, for children who find it tricky to understand and comprehend verbally. If you feel a child in your group would benefit from this, let the Site Manager know.

2 – Offer Opportunities for Expression

Children with additional education needs will likely have difficulty articulating how they are feeling about many unexpected changes. Funky Feet School of Dance and Performing Arts is an ideal place for children to express how they are feeling through play, discussion, listening to music and movement. It is important that we recognise that an increase in challenging behaviours might be an expression of anxiety or fear and consider if support strategies in place are adequate.

3 – Prioritise Coping and Calming Skills

Supporting individuals to learn coping, self-management and self-care skills is a priority during this time of uncertainty. These can include the following things:

* Strategically choose times of the day when the individual with additional education needs is calm and can initiate instructions to the group
* Create a concrete routine for the day which is clear and explained
* Ensure that the individual with additional education needs has access to calming activities e.g. colouring, reading, drawing.
* Exercise and physical activity are proven to reduce anxiety among those with additional education needs – therefore dance and movement games will really help them to cope with the unexpected changes.

4. Maintain Routines

Children with additional needs may cope best when daily routines are only minimally interrupted. This is tricky during the pandemic, but Funky Feet School of Dance and Performing Arts are in the privileged position of having an adaptable routine. Trying to keep a game to start the day, a communal register and a lengthy warm up will help to maintain previous routines knowns at Funky Feet School of Dance and Performing Arts

Having a visual schedule in the room (just drawn on a piece of paper) may help children re-integrate into a more rigid routine than they are used to at home.

5. Build New Routines

It is necessary we create new routines during this time, for instance the more regular washing of hands. These new routines can be built into an existing schedule but should be clear and delineated in order to help those children with additional education needs.

Ensuring activities are timed and having a visual countdown (e.g. fingers in the sky from 10 to 0) will help children process their timetable and routine.

When there is a more relaxed routine, such as during break times or a cool of period, it is important to offer choices of things to do during this time.

6. Foster Connections (From a Distance)

Individuals with additional education needs are more susceptible to social isolation and loneliness, and this may be worsened by quarantine conditions. Positive social support in important for everyone during this period. This might be helping these children integrate into groups of children to play games, or a member of staff to sit and play with them during the breaks.