

# Supporting children with JIA in school

## JUVENILE IDIOPATHIC ARTHRITIS

This resource draws together the latest evidence on ways to support children who have Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis (JIA). It has been created by academics at the University of Bath and the University of Stirling for teachers and teaching assistants/learning support assistants who support a primary school age child with JIA. This resource gives an overview of JIA, how it happens, and what impact it has on children. This resource also makes recommendations for the ways that school staff can go about supporting young children in schools who are diagnosed with JIA.

### WHAT IS JIA?

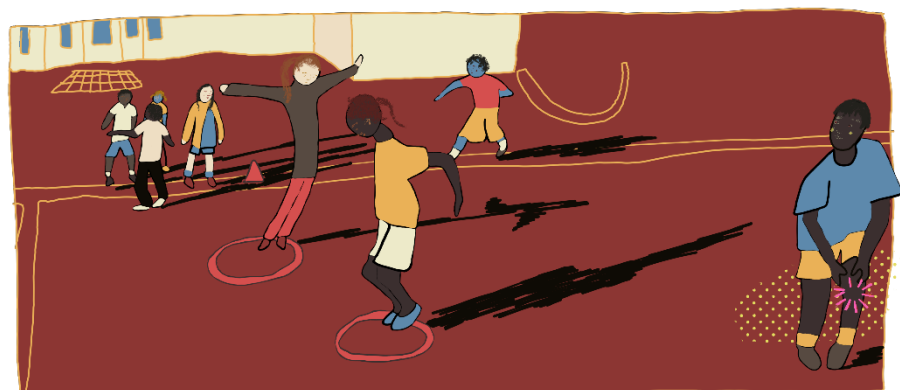
Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis (JIA) is a rheumatic condition that affects the joints in children and young people. JIA is the most common childhood rheumatic disease, affecting around 1 in 1,000 children and young people in the UK. Children with JIA often experience pain and stiffness in their joints (e.g., knees, ankles, wrists). JIA is a variable condition, meaning that how it affects children can change from day to day but also across the day.

In JIA, the body's immune system attacks its own tissues, creating inflammation in the joints. JIA causes pain and stiffness in the joints, as well as other symptoms like feeling very tired. The joints can swell and change shape. For some children, JIA can also affect their eye sight. On some days, children with JIA may feel little pain or stiffness, whereas on other days they may experience severe pain. Symptoms of JIA may become worse if the child is feeling stressed or the weather is too cold or too hot. The exact cause of JIA is unknown.

### WHAT IMPACT DOES JIA HAVE ON CHILDREN?

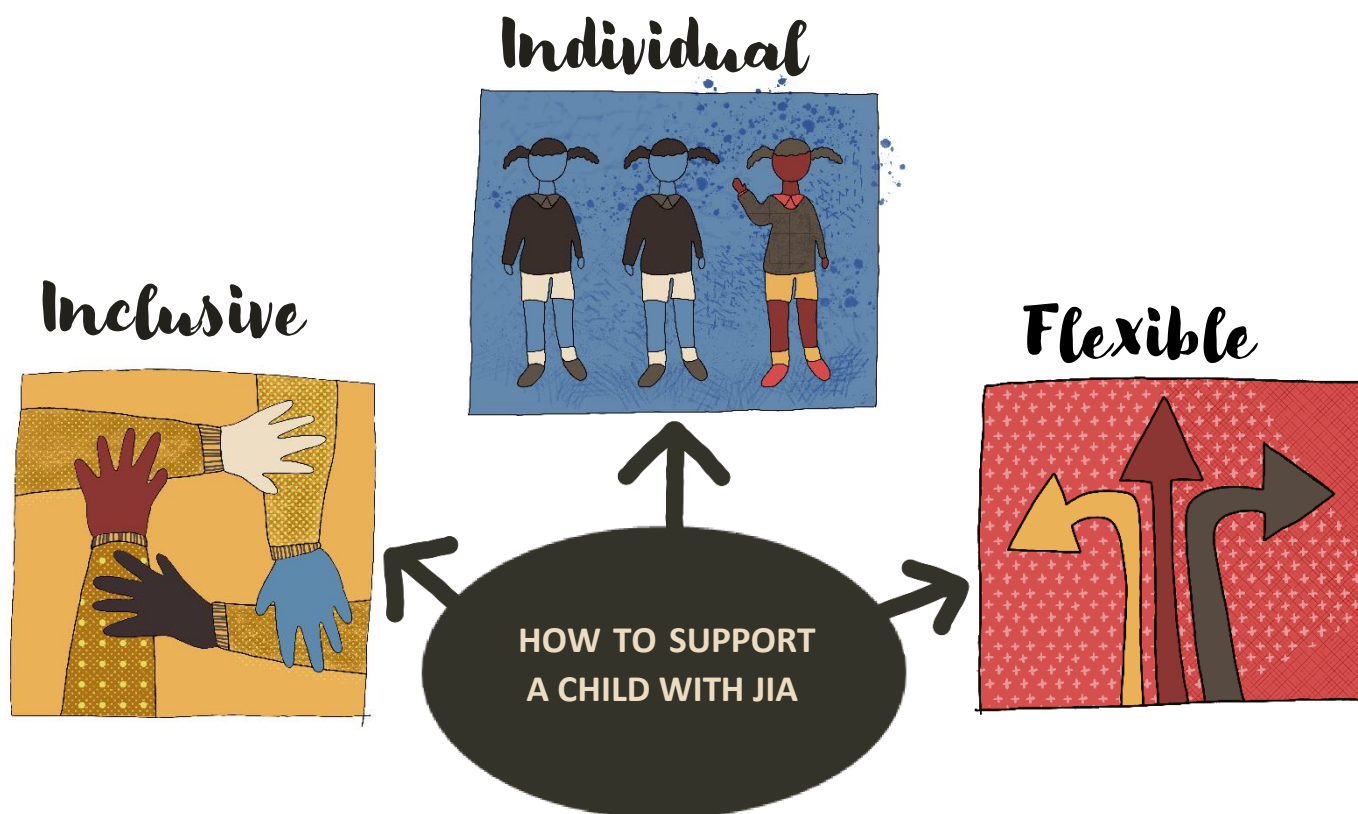
Children with JIA attend frequent medical appointments and often see many specialists (e.g., physiotherapists, clinical nurse specialists, rheumatologists). The aim of treatment is to keep the JIA under control and this may involve the child having to inject treatments at home and/or having frequent blood tests. This can all be very tiring for children and result in additional absences from school due to lots of medical appointments. It's important to think about how best to support children with work missed due to medical appointments and procedures.

When the joints are stiff and painful, it can be difficult for children to take part in activities requiring motor skills, such as PE lessons and writing. For some children, sitting for long periods can be painful, which can affect children's ability to concentrate. When the JIA symptoms are really bad, some children might find it difficult to make the journey to school, actively participate in school related activities, or read information if JIA has affected their eye sight. It is vitally important for teaching staff to know how to support children with JIA while they are in school.



# How can school staff support a child with JIA in school?

We have suggested some strategies that may be useful...



## TOOLS

### Assess pain



Work **with** the child to assess their pain in school. You can use a traffic light card system: Create 3 coloured cards to represent different levels of pain (e.g. red = bad pain, orange = some pain, and green = little or no pain). At different points in the school day, ask the child to choose a card to reflect how much pain they are feeling at that time. This will help you to make adjustments to make the child more comfortable.

### Use aids



You can use writing aids like pencil grips to help children who find writing difficult. Other aids include laptops or using scribes. The child's Occupational Therapist or clinical team can provide help with choosing aids.

## ACTIVITIES

### Sitting activities



Reduce class carpet time if possible. Provide chairs for carpet time for all children where feasible. Taking active breaks from sitting activities can help children with JIA and keep them moving. This could include asking children to give out worksheets or items in class.

### Indoor play



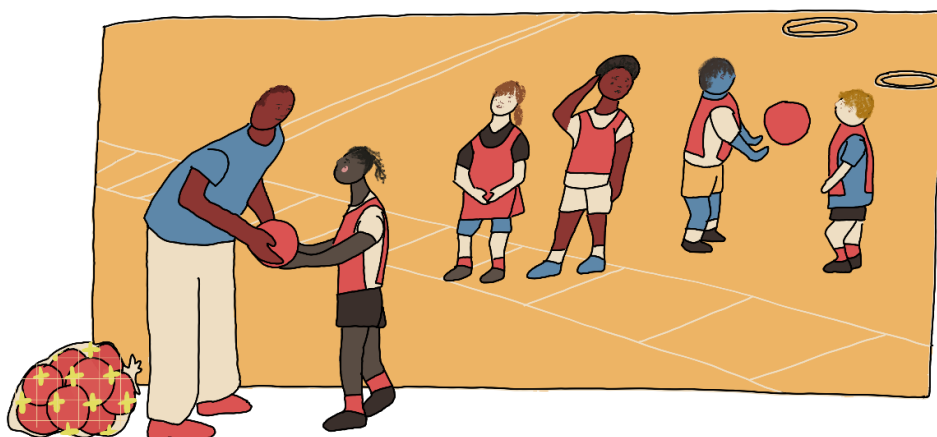
Where indoor play is absolutely required due to temperatures affecting the child's JIA, encourage the child to choose a friend/friends to accompany them. Where possible, intersperse inside time with outside time.

### Breaks



Physical activity is important for children with JIA. Provide regular rest breaks during physical activities to help the child remain involved in the full session.

## APPROACH



### Inclusion

Ensure that class activities can be completed by all children including the child with JIA. Doing this ensures that JIA does not become a barrier to participating in class. This might mean adapting plans for physical activities to ensure the child with JIA can complete them too, e.g., choosing different sized balls that are suitable for the child with JIA.

## Communicate

Talk regularly with the child's parent(s)/carer(s) **and the child** about the child's specific needs. Communication is critical. JIA can affect each child differently and each day is different. Children and parents are the real experts on what the child needs. Be mindful about how much extra work (e.g. homework) is given to the child outside of class as 'simply' attending and engaging across a school day can be tiring for some children.



## Where to look for more information...

- × JIA at National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS): A charity website with many resources about JIA.  
<https://jia.org.uk/>
- × CCAA, Kids With Arthritis: A charity which provides information about JIA for children and their families as well as family support weekends.  
<https://www.ccaa.org.uk/>
- × Scottish Network for Arthritis in Children (SNAC): A charity providing information about living with JIA for children and families.  
<https://www.snac.uk.com/>
- × Versus Arthritis: A charity for children and adults with arthritis. Provides a helpline and information on managing arthritis.  
<https://www.versusarthritis.org/>
- × Juvenile Arthritis Research (JAR): A parent-led charity involved in research, awareness, and support for JIA.  
<https://www.jarproject.org/>

This leaflet was developed from findings of a study funded by the Bath Institute for Rheumatic Diseases (BIRD) which examined the experiences of teaching staff who support a child with JIA within school.

For further information about this study please contact:  
Dr Abbie Jordan ([a.l.jordan@bath.ac.uk](mailto:a.l.jordan@bath.ac.uk))  
Dr Line Caes ([line.caes@stir.ac.uk](mailto:line.caes@stir.ac.uk))



ILLUSTRATIONS BY DR VANESSA LLOYD-ESENKAYA