

Planning for Transition back to school during the Covid-19 Pandemic A focus on psychological wellbeing

Guidance for Head Teachers and Senior Leaders in Schools and Early Years Settings

This guidance sets out principles to be considered by senior leadership teams in schools and Early Years Settings when planning for the return of children and young people as part of any phased return this summer term.

Introduction

Children and young people can find the transition between year groups or changing school unsettling and stressful. It is likely, therefore, that many children and young people will experience similar feelings when they return to school as lockdown is lifted. At this time, your staff and the parents and carers of children in your setting, will also be anxious about their own and their children's safety when there is not yet a vaccine to protect them from infection, or an effective treatment for the disease.

The purpose of this guidance is to provide advice on how schools and settings can support their children and young people, their families and their staff in making this transition so that they feel psychologically safe as well as physically safe. Relationships will be crucial to this because the relationship you have with your staff, your parents, and your children and young people is key for a successful transition process when there is still uncertainty on how the pandemic crisis will be resolved locally, nationally and internationally. The relationships that staff already have with their pupils and with parents and carers will start the process of creating a climate for learning in different times. This will help children to re-connect with each other which, in turn, creates greater resilience in our children to adapt and keep learning.

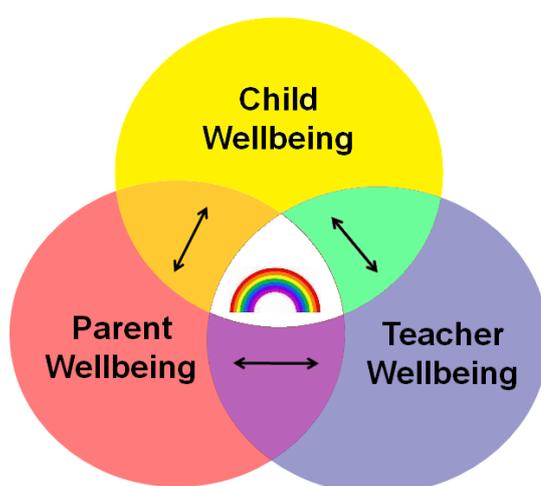
There is an acknowledgement in all of us that whilst we have all shared a common experience, we will have had different versions of this event, different impacts on our lives, different gains and different losses. What is common for all of us working in education is that our role as educators is relationship-based. Therefore, the advice within this document uses our strengths in relationships as the starting point for thinking about welcoming our children back into our schools.

This presentation by Professor Barry Carpenter, on, what he is calling, the Recovery Curriculum is worth viewing. Professor Carpenter has been in education for 40 years as a head teacher, inspector and DfE advisor on complex learning difficulties and disabilities. His presentation can be viewed here (The LearningShared Podcast: Ep 1 A Recovery Curriculum):

<https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

Planning for successful transition

As always, the transition process begins well before the day that children and young people enter the school or setting for the first time. In fact, one might think of three transition processes running alongside each other, the first for staff, the second for parents/carers and the third for children and young people. In each case, the same issues will apply. For children and young people to feel safe, staff and families need to feel safe. The work that you are doing to provide emotional comfort and support will be needed by all those returning to school and in the re-establishment of relationships. Lastly, it is perhaps also helpful to think about the interrelationships between the wellbeing of these individuals, or groups. The overlapping sections of this diagram (where the wellbeing of each individual or group meet) highlights the importance of parents and teachers managing their emotional needs so that they can, in turn, manage the emotional needs of the children and young people. It also highlights the importance of, for example: clear and calm communication; quality of interactions; and community engagement.



Many Headteachers and leaders will already be working through the areas listed below. This guidance is to provide a point of reference so that leaders can consider all these dimensions in making appropriate plans.

Five key principles have been found to support recovery following a significant incident.

- **A sense of safety:** It is important that children families and staff can feel safe in the school environment and on the journey to school, so it will be important to let everyone know what arrangements are in place to keep everyone safe.
- **A sense of calm:** People are likely to experience a range of emotions both pleasant and unpleasant. They may need reassurance that these are normal reactions and support to help them manage their emotions and return to a state of calm.
- **A sense of self- and collective- efficacy:** People need to feel they have some control over what is happening to them and that their actions and those of the groups they belong to (family, school, etc) will lead to positive outcomes.
- **Social connectedness:** It is important that adults, children and young people feel they belong and have a social network that can support them within the educational setting.
- **Promoting hope:** Whilst things may feel difficult now, it is important that adults, children and young people think that things will get better and work out in future. They need to be provided with reassurance that eventually they will feel positive again.

Creating a sense of safety

Many children, young people, parents, carers and staff will be feeling anxious about the transition back to school after the social distancing regulations are relaxed and will be worried about being near others. A recent survey of primary school children found that a fifth were afraid to leave their house because of Covid-19. It will therefore be important to provide containment for children, young people, parents and staff with these anxieties.

Many secondary schools are preparing virtual tours of the school for the children who will be starting in Year 7.

To help create an environment where children, young people and staff feel safe and able to regulate their emotions, before they return it will be important to:

- Give a clear message that your overriding priority is to keep everyone safe
- Provide clear information about the strategies you plan to put in place to keep everyone safe.
- Be clear about when lessons and meetings are going to happen, how classrooms and activities will be organised, how break times, lunch times and access to toilets will be managed, etc.
- Make sure everyone knows who they can go to, be with and talk to in school
- Offer staff and families the opportunity to express their worries so that their concerns can be validated and addressed. Contacting families or having virtual meetings can give an idea about what these are. The sense of co-production will also help them to have a sense of control and increase their confidence in the arrangements.
- For children and young people, offer virtual meetings with class teachers/form tutors or virtual question and answer sessions
- Label and acknowledge feelings you may have yourself. It is important that you feel in control and able to communicate a sense of confidence in your ability to cope for staff to feel safe and secure. Seek support from colleagues, or services such as Educational Psychology.
- Identify who may require extra support at transition (e.g. especially those with special educational needs and disabilities, in the care of the local authority, subject to CIN or CP Plans or children who have previously experienced emotionally based school avoidance) and consider how their specific needs can be met.
- Signpost parents to resources they can use at home with their children.

Promoting a sense of calm

For children and young people returning to the same school/setting, the school that they will return to may be quite different from the one they knew before the lockdown. Some staff may not be there, they may be recovering from the virus, or a colleague may have sadly died. Children and staff may have experienced the death of others dear to them, such as family or friends. Routines may be different, new rules may be in place, the

structure of the school day may be altered. In some ways their experience may be like that of children and young people transferring to a new school or setting. Most members of the school community, staff, children and parents will experience emotional dysregulation in some way and at some times when under stress. They may experience:

- A loss of attachment to familiar people, friends, the environment and objects within that environment
- Confusion in how to be in an environment that is less predictable
- A perceived loss of control
- A feeling of being de-skilled
- Uncertainty about the future

It will be helpful to normalise some of these feelings, and to acknowledge that in this context it is okay to not be okay. For staff and parents in particular, it will be helpful to promote resilience through accepting a diversity of reactions, including a diversity of useful things to do and ways to be. For many children, simply being back in school will be therapeutic, with the consistency of school life being containing for young people. For others, being in school means leaving their place of safety at home, or leaving vulnerable family members without support, and their anxiety may be heightened. Whatever their circumstances, it will take time for children to re-establish and re-learn routines and expectations in schools. It will be important to respond to what children have learnt, not what we expect them to have learnt and what they may have forgotten. An attachment (emotional/relational) informed approach by key adults in school will also ensure that provision is appropriate for those children whose attachments may have been 'disrupted', so are not secure.

- Focus on re-establishing relationships between staff and pupils. Give time to welcoming children back, offer kindness and comfort and listen to their thoughts, feelings and ideas, so that they can feel safe and trust staff to meet their needs through planned activities as well as incidental means.
- Establish or re-establish routines to provide predictability and stability
- Provide emotional containment through acknowledging behaviours as a form of communication and 'wondering aloud' to translate behaviours into a language that can be understood and a need that can then be met.
- For younger children especially, permitting the use of transitional objects (a comforter or other object that enables a child to manage separation from a parent or caregiver) can help them to maintain an emotional connection to someone who cares about them and so feel safer.
- In addition to having a calm classroom, teaching children and young people strategies to self-calm is useful and conducive to creating a positive learning atmosphere. Make use of emotion regulation strategies such as Mindfulness and Zones of Regulation.
- Keep everyone involved and included – give them a voice, ask them what you can do to help.
- Check in regularly with staff and encourage staff to check in regularly with children and young people.

- Provide additional pastoral care for those who require it, either individually or in small groups. This might include opportunities to leave the classroom if they become overwhelmed or having access to an identified adult who they can go to if they want to talk or distraction activities if they are not able to talk.
- Find ways to describe children experiencing difficulties that demonstrate understanding of their needs and positive regard.

Promoting self- and collective- efficacy

During the Covid-19 pandemic, adults, children and young people may feel a lack of control over what has happened to them and may doubt the impact their actions can have. It is therefore important that their sense of self-efficacy is developed on their return to the educational setting. Some examples of how this can be facilitated are

- Provide adults, children and young people with responsibilities such as specific jobs or tasks to help manage the school's social distancing strategies.
- Work with children and young people to set targets and goals for themselves.
- Help children and young people to recognise and regulate their emotions to help them feel they are in control of and can manage any unpleasant feelings they may experience.
- Help children and young people to recall times when they have coped with change in the past and help them to think about how they can apply those strategies in different situations. Useful resources include 'Steps to my Goal' or 'Exploring Solutions to Difficult Situations'.
- Create a sense of belonging within the school and the classroom or tutor group through active involvement in planning and implementing strategies to keep everyone safe and the use of communal language such as 'our school' or 'our project'.
- Give feedback on how everyone's thoughts and ideas have shaped decision-making in managing the running of the school in the new environment.

Promoting social connectedness

Facilitating a sense of connectedness and belonging to the school, to colleagues and peers, will be crucial during this period. It will enable staff and pupils to feel that they are genuinely cared about, wanted, listened to and supported and will positively impact on their engagement, achievement and emotional wellbeing. Many people are likely to have been in contact via social media, however, most will have experienced a range of losses including close contact with friends, school-based and recreational activities and connections with many other people.

- Peer support programmes offer staff, children and young people opportunities to reach out to each other and facilitate connections e.g. buddy and befriending schemes can help staff support each other and can support children to build friendships and support networks.

- Tutor or circle times can promote a collective understanding of 'how to support each other' and opportunities for small acts of kindness
- For some children and young people, it may be beneficial to assign 'key adults' to help support them, to establish trust and rapport and promote a feeling of safety and being supported through this transitional period.
- Staff too, may welcome support, for example, through a mentoring programme or a 'buddy'.
- Relational approaches that are supportive rather than punitive would benefit both staff and pupils' understanding of emotions and possible causes for challenging behaviour. This could include the use of 'Restorative Approaches'
- Well-supported staff members, through having their own relational needs met, will be able to harness their internal resources to support children to develop and maintain their own attachments and relationships.

Promoting a sense of hope

Recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity like no other to engage the whole school in thinking about our values, what really matters to us now, and how we have changed as a result of our experience: what have we learned? Is it a time to go back to old ways or a time for growth and new possibilities? Some studies have shown that almost 90% of people report at least one aspect of post-traumatic growth after a stressful experience. If we can harness this 'adversarial growth' through careful preparation and planning as outlined above, it will enable adult, children and young people to emerge from this highly challenging life experience with increased emotional strength and resilience, a heightened sense of appreciation and improved personal relationships.

A webinar will be available via the Young Harrow Foundation, on Tuesday 9th June 10am, to accompany this guidance. The EPS presentations will be related to, but different to this guidance document, looking at the resilience of children and school staff, and the interrelationship between child wellbeing, parent wellbeing, and staff wellbeing. [Click here to register through Eventbrite](#)

A range of links to wellbeing resources (for children, parents, and teachers) are provided within the materials we have previously shared:

www.harrow.gov.uk/childwellbeing and www.harrow.gov.uk/lookingafterourselves

Some further resources:

- NHS information and guidance for mindfulness, with some useful links for adults. Click [here](#)
- Good Thinking Skills is London's digital mental wellbeing service provides support along with free wellbeing apps available to Londoners. Click [here](#)
- Information and resources linked to the MindUp programme, developed for families to use at home. Click [here](#)
- Calming breathing and stretching exercises for children based on yoga. Click [here](#)
- Understanding anxiety- a child friendly video explaining how the brain works. Click [here](#)
- Five ways to help children heal when schools reopen. Click [here](#)

Harrow Educational Psychology Service 15/05/20. With thanks also to Lambeth and Greenwich Educational Psychology Services for sharing ideas and resources.

