

Helping Children and Young People to Successfully Return to School A Guide for Parents / Carers

COVID-19 has brought many challenges and changes to all our lives. The extended school closures significantly changed the daily lives of children and families and resulted in all children experiencing some form of loss. Loss is experienced in many ways and reflects individual experiences of what has changed. They may have lost, or feel they have lost:

- Routine and structure
- Friendships and relationships
- Opportunities
- Freedom

This loss can sometimes result in feelings of anxiety. Schools are now re-opening and school life is likely to look quite different. Many children and parents will welcome the return, however for some it may be a cause of anxiety. In order to support children back to school it is important that we are aware of this sense of loss they have experienced and the fears and anxieties they may have about returning to school.

Some children may return to school knowing of someone who has died, and some may have lost a significant person in their life. The Educational Psychology Service in Angus has provided guidance for schools to support children and young people who have experienced bereavement. If your child has suffered a bereavement, please inform your school as soon as it is possible to do so. You and your child may also find the support provided on the [Child Bereavement UK](#) and [Winston's Wish](#) websites helpful.

During these difficult times we will all be experiencing a range of emotions. Some of these will be quite strong and may last for a while, or they may come and go. The key thing to remember is that these feelings are normal in times of difficulty. In such situations children and young people may have the following psychological responses (Psychological First Aid, NES, 2020):

4 – 6 years of age:

- Start clinging to parents or other adults
- Regress to younger behaviour such as thumb-sucking
- Stop talking
- Become inactive or hyperactive, and struggle to concentrate
- Feel irritable
- Stop playing or start playing repetitive games
- Feel anxious and worry that bad things are going to happen
- Changes in their sleep and eating patterns, including nightmares
- At times take on adult roles
- Become easily confused
- May misunderstand what has happened and 'fill in the blanks'

7 – 12 years of age:

- Feel and behave confused
- Withdraw from social contact
- Talk about the event in a repetitive manner
- Feel and express fear
- Have impaired memory, concentration and attention
- Experience sleep and appetite disturbances
- Show aggression, irritability or restlessness
- Experience physical symptoms related to emotional stress
- Be concerned about other affected people
- Experience self-blame and guilt feelings

13 – 18 years of age:

- Show excessive concern for others
- Experience a change in outlook – major shifts in their view of the world, accompanied by a sense of hopelessness about the present and the future
- Appear self-absorbed and show self-pity
- Grieve intensely
- Change their relationships with other people
- Become defiant of authorities and parents
- Take risks and engage in self-destructive behaviour
- Engage in avoidant or aggressive behaviour

The following ideas may help all family members deal with feelings of anxiety and/or low mood during the return to school.

Daily Structure

- Maintain or re-establish routines – in the last week of holidays start to get your child ready for the return to school by reestablishing bedtime and morning routines.

Basic wellbeing factors

- Our body clocks like when we do the same things at a similar time every day, such as eating meals, going to bed at night and getting up in the morning. It is important to maintain this or to reestablish this for children.
- We should try to have some form of basic exercise every day, choosing something enjoyable (e.g. walking), and do it for as long as you can to experience the benefit from it.
- Parents/carers should model self-care so that children see examples of how they should be looking after themselves.

Social activity

- Connecting with others is important whilst social distancing measures are in place, and peer relationships are particularly important for most young people. It is therefore important to help teenagers re-establish or maintain their social networks.
- Feelings of anxiety will have an impact on productivity, focus and interest levels, so reduced interest in socialising and difficulty focusing on work shouldn't necessarily give reason to be overly concerned.

5 Key Principles

It is important to focus on what emotional support is needed by those returning to school. Research has identified **5 key principles** that support recovery following a disaster or serious incident (Hobfoll et al., 2007).

A sense of safety

It is important that children feel safe upon their return to school, both physically and emotionally. Many children will have become used to being around their parents or carers a lot and will be anxious and scared about leaving them. If your child is feeling this way; try not to worry. Although it might be difficult at first, most children will be fine as they return to the routine of school. Remember that when children successfully do something difficult or scary, it builds their confidence and resilience.

What you can do:

- Talk to your child about their return to school and any worries they might have. Validate and normalise your child's feelings (e.g. "It's ok to be scared. Let's think about what we can do to help you feel better") rather than dismiss them (e.g. "Don't worry, you'll be fine"). You can help your child think of ways to manage their worries using the Mental Health Foundation's [Time for Us](#) pack or the resources on the [Family Links Website](#).
- We feel safe when things are predictable for us. Talk to your child about the routine they were once so familiar with; how they get to school, what happens when they get there, who they'll see, what happens in their classroom etc. This will help remind them what to expect.
- Make yourself available as much as you can. Create space for talking together, e.g. during a walk or drive or doing something together like baking or crafts. There is often less pressure to talk in these circumstances than when sitting face to face. Children often choose to talk about something at times we don't expect, so try to keep open to their initiatives.
- Your child's school may have released some information about the new term so check the usual communication channels and share as much as you can with your child.
- If you can, take a walk or drive past the school or look at photographs to re-familiarise your child with the school environment.

A sense of calm

Anxiety is our body's natural reaction to perceived danger, focusing our attention and giving us a rush of adrenaline to react, sometimes called the "fight or flight" response. We cannot think clearly or learn when we feel this way. You can help your child by supporting them to recognise their feelings and have some strategies to use to help them feel calm if they feel anxious or worried.

What you can do:

- Keep calm and positive yourself. Show your child what you do to stay calm. They will learn from watching what you do more than from listening to your advice.
- When feeling anxious, help your child to focus on the 'here and now'; their breath, what they can see and hear, how their feet feel on the ground. Pooky Knightsmith, a mental health adviser, has a number of really helpful, practical [YouTube videos](#) demonstrating a range of techniques and strategies.
- When we slow down our breathing, our bodies and minds also slow down. Teach your child to use deep breathing. Take a big inhalation through your nose, hold for 5 seconds, then slowly breath out through pursed lips (like blowing to cool something down), focusing on gently and slowly pushing the air down your body. Repeat this process 5 times at a slow, steady rate.
- As mentioned above, speaking about our worries helps us feel calm. Focus on finding solutions.
- Grounding techniques are quick and effective ways to calm someone quickly when they are feeling anxious or to help someone become mindful of their current surroundings. A simple technique is called '**5,4,3,2,1**'. All you have to do is stay still and focus on what is around you. Name:
 - **5** things you can **see**,
 - **4** things you can **hear**,
 - **3** things you can **feel**,
 - **2** things you can **smell**, and take
 - **1** long, deep breath.

A belief they can succeed (self-efficacy)

Children need to feel they have some control over what is happening to them, and a belief that their actions are likely to lead to generally positive outcomes (Bandura, 1997).

What you can do:

- Talk to your child and remind them about similar challenges they have overcome in the past and how they did it (e.g. "Remember when you didn't want to go to that camp/weekend away/exam or test etc but you did it anyway? What helped you do that?").
- Remind your child that their friends will also be going back to school. If their friends can manage it, so can they.
- Give them some choice and control over how they prepare for going back to school. They might want to bring something small from home to remind them of you; help them choose what to bring.

- Discuss together what you can do and focus on problem solving together.

Social connectedness

It is important that adults and pupils feel they belong and have people who can support them back at school.

What you can do:

- Arrange for your child to spend some time with school friends in advance of going back.
- If your child has had a difficult lockdown, it would be worth contacting your school to let them know how things have been and how their behaviour has changed. The school will then be in a better position to support your child, should they need it.

Promoting hope

Whilst things may feel difficult at the moment, it is important that adults and pupils feel things will get better and work out in the future. While having their anxieties and fears acknowledged, they also need to be provided with reassurance that in the long term they are likely to feel positive again.

What you can do:

- Write down with your child all the things they are looking forward to about going to school. What can they do at school they couldn't do before?
- Consider the question: "What did I like or enjoy about lockdown?" and think of ways those things can be continued as we go forward.
- As your child returns to school, each day write down with them 3 things that went well that day, and why they went well. This helps focus your child on the positives and provides a record of positive events which you can review together.

In summary

Research shows that most children are resilient. With caring adults in their lives, a return to routine and the support of friends and family, most children will enjoy returning to school and any anxiety they may feel now will pass.

References

Material adapted from:

Angus Educational Psychology Service (August 2020)

Hobfoll, S.; Bell, C.; Watson, P. & Bryant, R. Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5668133_Five_Essential_Elements_of_Immediate_and_Mid-Term_Mass_Trauma_Intervention_Empirical_Evidence

Fife Council: Returning to School

<https://www.fife.gov.uk/kb/docs/articles/education2/supporting-children-in-school/educational-psychology-service/es-coronavirus-page-listings/returning-to-school>

Fife Educational Psychology Service: Supporting the return to School

<https://girfec.fife.scot/wp-content/uploads/sites/61/2020/06/Trauma-Pack-Final.pdf>

Angus Educational Psychology Service: Helping Children and Young People to Cope During COVID-19

https://www.angus.gov.uk/schools_and_young_people/parent_and_pupil_guidance/helping_children_and_young_people_to_cope_during_covid_19

Activities to support transition to school	
Stage	Activity

P1-P4	<p>Book – Coming Back to School in a Bubble by Kezia Matthews (Shere Infant School and Nursery).</p> <p>A free picture book to reassure children about the social “bubbles” that they will be in on return to school, how to look after each other’s health and how to remain connected to the wider school.</p> <p>https://files.schudio.com/activelearningtrust/files/Coming_back_to_school_in_a_bubble_A_book_for_children_(1).pdf</p>
P1-P4	<p>Book – A Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside</p> <p>A reassuring picture book encouraging children to open up about their fears and anxieties to help manage their feelings. A good book to soothe worries during stressful times.</p>
P1 -P7	<p>The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers</p> <p>A picture book to start a discussion about grief.</p>
S1-S6	<p>Book - You think I’m evil by David Taransaud Activities ideas for making connections with teenage boys. The third person activities give the opportunity for children to explore their inner thoughts in a less intrusive way. S1-S6</p>
P1-S1	<p>Worry Monster</p> <p>Children can design a worry monster and then tell their worries to it. They can list/ draw any of their worries first.</p> <p>https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Design-a-worry-monster.pdf</p>
P1-P7	<p>Transitional Objects/support for separation</p> <p>Book - The Invisible String by Patrice Karst This is a story about how twins realise there is an invisible string connecting all people who love one another... you can feel it in your heart and always be connected, even from afar. Perfect for: dealing with loss, moving, friendship issues, family problems, nighttime fears.</p>
All	<p>Basic Mindful practices</p> <p>A good starter to introduce mindful practices into your child including breathing and meditation.</p> <p>https://mindfulintheclassroom.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/mindful-activities-basics-v-1-20151.pdf</p> <p>https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/sites/default/files/1-Mindfulness%20activity%20book.pdf</p>
All	<p>Mindfulness Colouring Sheets Downloads</p> <p>https://www.betweenessions.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/mindfulness-coloring-book-4_25-16.pdf</p>
P1-P7	<p>Cosmic Kids Yoga</p> <p>Videos demonstrating mindfulness techniques in child friendly language</p> <p>https://www.cosmickids.com/</p>
N-P4	<p>Mindfulness App</p> <p>Works on smartboard with lots of quick mindful activities.</p> <p>https://www.stopbreathethink.com/kids/</p>
P1-7	<p>“Relax like a cat”</p> <p>Storybook approach to guided progressive muscle relaxation. Website includes printable story and audio using male or female voices</p> <p>https://www.moodcafe.co.uk/for-pupils-and-young-people/relaxation-for-pupils.aspx</p>
All	<p>Active Movement Breaks</p> <p>Physical movement can support the regulation of children’s’ nervous systems and promote calm. The Alphabet Game includes children spelling out their names (or anything else) using exercises associated with letters. For example see https://www.theotoolbox.com/alphabet-exercises-for-kids/</p>

P2-S1	<p>Kind to yourself challenge</p> <p>This is a 5 day challenge to support mental health including recognising achievements and forgiving mistakes https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Kindness-to-yourself-challenge.pdf</p>
P1-P4	<p>Warm and Fuzzies</p> <p>Helping children reflect on ways that they can make themselves feel warm and fuzzy https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Warm-and-fuzzy.pdf https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Warm-and-fuzzy-jar.pdf</p>
P1-P4	<p>Book - A Volcano in My Tummy: Helping Children to Handle Anger</p> <p>Presents a clear and effective approach to helping children and adults alike understand and deal constructively with anger. Using easy to understand skills including how to teach communication of emotions.</p>
P4	<p>Book - My Hidden Chimp</p> <p>by Professor Steve Peters by explaining the developing 'chimp' brain in children, the author suggests how 10 habits can help children to understand and manage their emotions and behaviour.</p>
P1-P4	<p>Unhelpful thoughts</p> <p>For children who tend to think negatively about situations which cause them to direct these feelings inwardly or outwardly – affecting their self-esteem. The adult's role is to use coaching skills to help the child think differently and move from unhelpful to helpful thoughts. https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Negative-to-positive.pdf</p>
P5-S6	<p>Book - Banish your Self-Esteem Thief by Kate Collins-Donnelly</p> <p>Using cognitive behavioural approaches and mindfulness principles and techniques, this workbook will help change how young people think and act in order to build positive self-esteem - to work through alone or with the help of a parent or teacher.</p>
P4 – S1-6	<p>The Problem-Solving Tree</p> <p>Have children draw out a tree including the roots, the trunk and leaving space for leaves. Leaves: Work with the child to identify all of the effects of their main concern/problem - write each of these in a leaf in the tree canopy e.g impacts on friendships, emotional wellbeing, learning etc. Trunk: Write the main concern/problem on the tree trunk Roots: Support the child to consider the underlying causes of the main concern/problem. Be prepared to support the child or take a break if this becomes overwhelming. Support children to link underlying causes to the effects e.g. colour coding. The ones that link to the most leaves is your starting point to start identifying solutions.</p>