

RETURNING TO SCHOOL DURING COVID-19: TRANSITION AND RECOVERY

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POSITION PAPER MAY 2020

INTRODUCTION

The transition back to school following the Covid-19 closure will be challenging. Decisions to impose lockdown were taken quickly and in a context of anxiety about the virus and uncertainty about how long the restrictions would be in place. The lockdown also prevented pupils from experiencing the usual rites of passage such as exams, leavers' parties and opportunities to visit and connect with new teachers and schools – all of which mark significant and positive endpoints. In addition, transition planning for those pupils with additional support needs was halted.

Developing and establishing a new normal is a huge task, and there are many hurdles to overcome. The plan for recovery is complicated by the fact that we have no previous experience of anything of the same scale and magnitude which we can look to for guidance – the lockdown has affected everyone in one way or another. Under such circumstances, with so much uncertainty and so many questions that are difficult to answer, it has never been more important to communicate with each other and to establish a firm direction of travel.

Balancing the needs of pupils, staff and families whilst implementing national guidelines, and providing both an emotionally and physically safe environment for our children and young people is a huge challenge which requires significant planning. However, our schools and early learning and childcare settings are very resilient communities; they possess the key strengths, skills and creativity to manage and overcome such barriers. This has already been shown in their response to the current lockdown.

Looking to research in related areas can also help us to explore key approaches and strategies which can foster resilience, recreate a sense of belonging and safety, and rebuild the emotional health of our school communities. The learning from such studies will be of real importance in guiding the complex process of recovery planning.

HOW RESEARCH CAN INFORM PRACTICE

1. Research into how People Cope in Quarantine and in Isolated Environments

A review of the psychological impact of living in quarantine conditions highlights adverse and potentially long lasting effects such as stress, difficulty sleeping, low mood, irritability and anger (Brooks et al, 2020). For children and young people, these effects may be further pronounced if they have limited self-help and coping strategies and where early life experiences have had a negative impact on their social and emotional development. However several factors can mitigate the negative impact of quarantine, including protecting personal liberty and agency, maintaining social networks and ensuring clear communication. Other research exploring individuals who live in isolated environments also highlights positive coping strategies such as participating in hobbies and exercise, acknowledging and celebrating small

achievements and using techniques such as visualisation and relaxation (Sandal and Smith, 2018; Smith et al., 2018; Palinkas, 2008). Such strategies may help to develop resilience during the period of lockdown and can inform recovery planning.

2. Research into Attachment, Resilience and the Impact of Trauma

The impact of the current lockdown is exacerbated by the fact that it has been fuelled by a worldwide pandemic. This results in people experiencing a heightened level of anxiety and therefore feeling 'unsafe'. This experience of threat leads to a stress response, which impacts on our functioning, and our ability to focus and to learn. In addition, because the situation is still evolving, the transition back to school will happen in a slow and staged way. The uncertainty of not knowing what lies ahead, especially in times of adversity, leads to increased feelings of fear. Prolonged experience under these circumstances can mean that anxiety and stress levels will continue to be elevated, in some cases to a toxic extent, as both staff and pupils feel a lack of control and experience different thresholds about what they deem to be manageable in the new environment. This highlights the need for a trauma-informed response to recovery for children and young people and the use of nurturing approaches to develop or re-establish a sense of safety through attunement and by building a sense of belonging (Van Der Kolk, 2019; Levine and Kline, 2006; Bomber, 2007).

How each child and young person will cope with the impact of the lockdown and the transition back to school, will depend on their experience and whether they have the strategies and resilience required to manage, both as an individual and as a member of their family system. Those who are well supported by their family in a close, nurturing environment, and who maintain links with friends, are far more likely to demonstrate resilience. Children and young people who have suffered a loss or whose family has been impacted financially as a result of Covid-19, as well as those who have experienced disrupted attachment experiences, illness or other trauma, may be more compromised in their recovery (University of Massachusetts, 2020). The socioeconomic context in which children live will also be a significant factor in their experience of lockdown. Children most vulnerable to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic may not simply be able to settle back to learning. This necessitates an individualised and relationship-based approach to planning for the recovery, based on an assessment and understanding of children and young people's experiences and needs.

3. Knowledge of Child Development

The plan for recovery and the transition back to school must also be informed by an understanding of children's age and stage of development (Harvard University, 2020) and by the individual developmental trajectories of children with additional support needs. For example, physical distancing goes against the needs of most adolescents to assert themselves as individuals and to take risks (Loades and Mastroyannopoulou, 2010). In addition, children with autism and more complex learning needs have difficulty transferring skills to a different context; they may struggle to understand abstract concepts such as coronavirus and social distancing and may need longer and different approaches to adapt to changes in routine, to changes in staff, classroom, playground, and new hygiene rules such as handwashing etc. Research into the impact of loss and change on children with severe and profound learning needs indicates that even a change of teacher or classroom in a school year may have a significant adverse impact on children's functioning (Young, 2016).

The good news is that most children and young people will recover from the effects of the current situation with little psychological intervention. It is therefore important to be aware of typical responses to stressful situations, particularly loss and bereavement, and resist pathologising these as signs of significant mental health concerns. By considering a trauma-informed and nurturing approach which prioritises relationships and connections, people within educational establishments will support the recovery and resilience of all children regardless of their experience of lockdown.

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE TRANSITION AND RECOVERY PLANNING

1. A FOCUS ON RECONNECTING, RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND WELLBEING

A Whole-School Approach which Focuses on Wellbeing

For staff, this will be driven by an understanding of how all individuals have been affected by the current situation and by considering who may be vulnerable as a result of risk factors such as previous mental wellbeing needs, personal experiences of bereavement, financial difficulties or lack of a family or social support. Visible leadership, clear communication, open discussions, building team cohesion, establishing support systems between peers and through supervision, and action planning for vulnerable individuals, are at the heart of promoting staff recovery and wellbeing (Sharma, Bhardwaj, and Gupta, 2018).

For pupils, a whole school approach which focuses on wellbeing allows children and young people time and space to process and talk about their experiences; to come together to remember and celebrate those who made sacrifices and possibly lost their lives; and to show gratitude and acknowledge the positives that have emerged from the pandemic. Studies suggest that positive growth is often an outcome of a crisis (Tedeschi, and Calhoun, 2004), and helping children and young people to identify their own resourcefulness, coping strategies and resilience is key to this. Indeed, the fact that children will be taught in smaller classes, will facilitate the formation of good and open relationships between staff and the pupils in their care.

Reconnecting Opportunities Prior to the Transition

The use of social media to interact has been widespread, and may well have been helpful for the most part, but it does not replace the contact and connection we have with each other as social beings. For children and young people, the familiarity and consistency of school life and their ability to see and engage with friends will have been interrupted significantly and it is important for children to achieve 'closure' through opportunities to reconnect with their previous staff and peers, and also to talk about the rites of passage which they have missed.

Some pupils will benefit from participating in a transition programme prior to returning to school which clearly sets out what the new environment and routines will be and allows them to discuss any anxieties they may have. There should also be opportunities to engage with and form relationships with new staff and environments. This may involve facilitating social interaction opportunities in small groups via an online platform; making a guided tour of the new environment so children can familiarise themselves with it prior to the return; developing social stories and other such visuals or media to share the new space with pupils, staff and

parents. These interventions can be evaluated to inform further recommendations as the children and young people move back into the school environment.

Increasing Children, Staff, and Parents' Sense of Agency

By communicating clearly and openly with children, young people, parents and staff, and providing appropriate opportunities for consultation and dialogue about what is happening, the community will develop a sense of agency. Psychological safety in groups is created by an environment that encourages people to express their opinions and it is important for cohesion, connectedness and commitment that all stakeholders feel part of the process and that they are listened to. It will also be important to introduce flexibility and to emphasise that the situation is constantly changing, but that the support and commitment of the school to ensuring an equitable and safe recovery will remain constant.

2. CREATING A SENSE OF SAFETY: ADAPTING THE ENVIRONMENT AND TEACHING NEW BEHAVIOURS

The current context underlines how important it is for all pupils and staff to feel safe in their environment. Our early learning and childcare centres and our schools are places where children and young people should feel calm and comfortable. Therefore, there needs to be a sensible approach taken to creating environments that are conducive to social distancing and regular cleaning, but also to learning and play. Where possible, the environment should be planned in accordance with the principles of a nurture group, together with appropriate spacing and predictable, consistent routines that promote a sense of safety for everyone. Additional consideration will also need to be given to identifying break out areas as places where individuals can retreat to in times of frustration. Such places should also be identified for staff.

When transitioning into and out of unusual environments, it takes time for people to adjust to their new situation. Knowing and being aware that this is likely to be the case can be helpful and will allow people to look ahead to a time when things will gradually improve as the conditions become normalised. This emphasises the need to move slowly and to reflect on new and more relaxed approaches to the school day and uniform etc. Staff will need to teach, model and practise new behaviours (Michie et al., 2008), and establish new daily and weekly routines in the school environment that are consistent with social distancing, using appropriate resources to enable all children and young people to become familiar with them. Particular consideration should also be given to differentiated, longer term strategies for some children and young people who have additional support needs.

The transition will be made more complicated and protracted for pupils who are only attending for a proportion of the week, as class groups are amended to meet social distancing rules. The impact of these changes will require careful planning that takes into account the needs of individual pupils. There is clearly the potential for friendship groups to be fragmented where there is only part-time attendance, so care should be taken to avoid the possibility that some children and young people return and feel even more isolated. Where possible, consideration should be given to ensuring that all children and young people have at least one or two other people in their group with whom that they feel connected. Finally, there needs to be renewed focus and care taken with respect to significant transitions points. Flexibility will be key – being aware that these transitions will be adapted and amended according to national changes and also to pupil and staff responses.

3. A CURRICULUM WHICH FOCUSES ON PLAY, MOVEMENT AND SELF-REGULATION

Literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing will be first among equals when it comes to direct teaching time. However children's readiness to learn will depend on the levels of anxiety they experience. If these are high, it is much more difficult for an individual to maintain their sense of focus and to self-regulate. This emphasises the need to ensure that nurturing, self-regulatory activities take centre stage, at times. With a focus on using outdoor spaces in the short term, there will be many opportunities to practise movement, mindfulness and breathing exercises in a way that will allow these to become an integral part of the curriculum.

Although there may have to be a more creative approach to providing both the environment and toys, play will also be an important part of the school day. For younger children, it is through play that they process and make sense of what is going on in the world around them. Play will also enable children to gain a sense of agency, as well as reconnecting with their peers, developing their social interaction and problem solving skills (Ginsburg, 2007).

Knowing that it is perfectly normal for mood and motivation to ebb and flow and that there will be some good days and some bad days can be comforting. Ways of coping with low mood include acknowledging progress and focusing on small achievements to help foster a sense of competence. There will be opportunities ahead to focus on teaching skills of resilience, namely; emotional awareness and regulation, impulse control, the ability to reach out, causal analysis, empathy, self-efficacy, and optimism (Reivich and Shatte, 2003). Research from people working in isolated environments emphasises the importance of breaking down tasks and focusing on the most important, achievable, and immediate tasks: what can be tackled over the next hour, day or week (Smith et al., 2017). This strategy is also valuable for reinforcing self-efficacy: the sense that one can cope with the demands faced (Kjaergaard et al., 2015). These little wins can be celebrated amongst a trusted social support network.

4. TRANSITION PLANNING PRINCIPLES FOR PUPILS WITH ASN

Research into effective transition planning for children and young people with more significant ASN highlights the effectiveness of close collaboration between all agencies involved in supporting the child or young person. It will be important to identify key people for individual children and young people and ensure there is a team around the more vulnerable. There should be a focus placed on establishing a relationship between school, parents and pupils prior to the return.

The general principles of effective transition planning must be individualised and based on an assessment and in-depth understanding of individual needs (Rose et al., 2019). This will then inform the use of appropriate teaching and learning strategies – such as the use of visuals, concrete objects, and teaching approaches (e.g. TEACCH) to facilitate the return and to create children's sense of safety in their new environment.

Some pupils will find the transition back to school extremely difficult. This may be as a result of their additional support needs, the environment, the need to re-establish routines or the social and learning demands that can cause high levels of anxiety for some. Lockdown has, for some children, reduced these pressures particularly those for whom school attendance or engagement in learning was problematic prior to the pandemic. School and education staff should already be seeking to maintain a level of contact with the pupil and family to keep lines

of communication open and support the transition back to school. It will also be beneficial for there to be further reflection on what has worked for children and young people who have found the environment in lockdown more manageable and who have more successfully engaged in remote learning. This information can be used to inform interventions and strategies for specific groups of children and young people to make school more manageable for them going forward.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE IN TRANSITION AND RECOVERY PLANNING

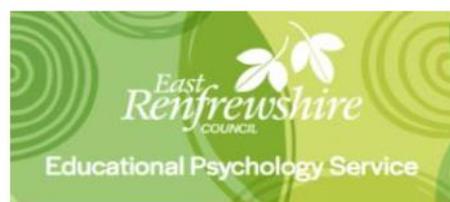
The Educational Psychology Service will continue to carry out the core roles of **consultation, assessment and intervention** in relation to the needs of individual children and young people and to inform their transition back to school. This will include continued participation in key resource and multi-agency groups to contribute to transition planning at an authority and individual level. The following service activity - which includes **training** and **research** – will be undertaken in order to promote staff and pupil wellbeing and to facilitate recovery during and after the period of lockdown:

- Continuing to liaise closely with all educational establishments and other multi-agency partners to monitor and support the wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people during lockdown, in the hubs and throughout the transition back to school
- Participating and contributing to the recovery planning group
- Providing ongoing support to our ASN links and school HTs as they balance supporting the wellbeing of staff and pupils whilst creating a physically safe environment
- Informing and supporting collaborative assessments of individuals' needs based on their experiences during lockdown and their stages of development and providing consultation and advice in order to inform individual transition planning
- Focusing on the development and delivery of CLPL around key themes of staff and pupil wellbeing, transition and recovery planning - this will include a diverse means of delivery (e.g. sway, webinars; online means of delivering training) and using key principles of a trauma informed practice/nurture, and of child development
- Planning and creating resources to support transition to hubs and to school and researching and consulting on specific strategies to support wellbeing during this time. (resources and videos will be uploaded on the Healthier Minds and Meeting Learners Needs websites to be used by staff and pupils across East Renfrewshire)
- Informing and contributing to the 'virtual learning hub' across literacy health wellbeing and ASN
- Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of online platform groups to provide opportunities to reconnect prior to the return to school
- Disseminating and creating appropriate measures for staff which enable them to consider environmental and teaching approaches, and communication styles as they return to school
- Providing guidance on appropriate and low-key means of tracking and monitoring individual wellbeing which explore what is working and what else we need to do (this will include reference to and employment of the EPS Family Wellbeing Scale)

- Supporting staff in helping children to learn how to manage the new environment and how to model and teach behavioural change
- Supporting schools to gather pupil views about their experience of Covid-19 and the return to school to inform planning; using tests of change to provide evaluative data on transitions back to school on an ongoing basis.

Support Assistant (Prevention and Intervention)

- Rebuilding trust and connection with pupils through telephone contact, home visits (with appropriate safety measures in place) and frequent trips out to reduce anxiety about leaving the house and returning to school
- Focusing on pupils making the transition to secondary school –(new referrals can be made through the EPS)
- Communicating with families, education staff and contributing to multi-agency planning regarding individual pupils



<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/PsychologicalService/>

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