



From Coronavirus back to the Classroom

Helping schools to make the
transition back to school work for
the most vulnerable young people



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1. Purpose & Scope

It is clear that some young people will find the concept of returning to school after such a long break and for such unprecedented reasons, quite a challenge. It's also clear that some parents will be apprehensive about their child returning to school. This pack, the guidance, links and resources, aim to provide schools, parents and young people with strategies to overcome the anxieties associated with the return to school.

Children who experience anxiety are not an homogenous group; as a result, interventions will need to be tailored to meet the needs of each individual. Some children will have experienced anxiety prior to the pandemic, and some children may have experienced anxiety throughout the pandemic. For some children, being at home may have reduced pre-existing anxiety and so returning to school may be challenging. Being proactive in this work will have many benefits. Understanding and establishing a target group before young people are expected to return will make the challenge less daunting for all concerned. It will not however be a completely exhaustive list as some young people may surprise you.

Many schools and school leaders will have some very clear ideas about supporting parents and young people through the transition period when schools re-open. This document is not intended to be a complete guide for schools but could be used as tool to support a deeper understanding of how best to manage the transition of returning to school.

2. Introduction

Some schools will have found that they have got closer to their communities through this crisis and are looking forward to building on these stronger relationships in the future. Some families however will have found the crisis very difficult and will be daunted by the prospect of managing their own and their child's emotions when schools return.

The challenge is clear and what is also clear is that professionals working with children and young people have an incredibly wide range of skills that can support this. By working together, the outcomes will be significantly more positive. People are naturally curious but curiosity is fragile¹. As human beings, we want to know more about things but can be easily put off if the initial approach is wrong; good planning is crucial.

Recent blogs by Mary Meredith, Head of Inclusion, Lincolnshire County Council, provide a well-articulated background into the reasons why we must take a sensitive approach to re-opening schools. The first, [Five ways to help children heal when schools reopen](#) is highly thought provoking article that focusses on the need to place wellbeing '*front and centre and evaluating every element of school policy through that lens*'; the second article also worth referencing here, [School recovery through PACE and a plea to policy makers](#), looks at '*how schools might mitigate some of that toxicity [lockdown experiences] through a focus on Kim Golding's attitude of PACE.*' Mary highlight's the recent [statement from the Welsh Government, Minister for Education Kirsty Williams](#) provided a framework for school reopening that places the safety, and mental, emotional, physical wellbeing of students and staff as its number one priority and goes on to reference the importance of having the confidence of parents, staff and students – based on evidence and information – so that they can plan ahead.

UNICEF have published a document '[Framework for reopening schools](#)' which explains that *the adverse effects of school closures on children's safety, wellbeing and learning are well documented. Interrupting education services also has serious, long-term consequences for societies such as increased inequality, poorer health outcomes, and reduced social cohesion*' reinforcing the need to plan very carefully for young people's return to school.

¹ Daniel T Willingham – Why don't students like school

Meeting the challenge of supporting vulnerable young people to get back to school

Some of the Key Challenges With Returning to School

Anxiety

- Those with **pre-existing anxiety** about school may have had reduced anxiety throughout their time at home and may be less inclined to return once schools re-open;
- Some children may not have experienced significant anxiety previously and may have become more anxious during the pandemic, which teachers may be unaware of;
- Some parents may not want their children to go back to school fearing risk of infection;
- Those with pre-existing medical conditions and shielding letters may not be able to return to school when they re-open;
- Some parents will have enjoyed having their children at home and may choose to electively home educate their children moving forward;
- Children who have not previously experienced anxiety before might need support with re-establishing friendships/ routines/ need to follow rules etc.

Adverse Experiences

- **Bereavement** whilst off school and may not have come to terms with the grief that surrounds losing someone close.;
- Parents losing job, businesses etc;
- Exposure to adult-focused news and images during coronavirus coverage;
- Possible increased exposure to abusive situations, such as witnessing domestic abuse, neglect;
- Not being able to see grandparents or close family members;
- Some may have been victims of abuse while at home and there may be some increases in disclosures.

Friendships and Social Development

- EYFS → Y1, Year 6 → 7 (will not have had a proper and full end to their primary phase) Y11 → 12 (those who take up the option of sitting GCSE exams in Autumn term will have challenge of balancing this with new studies); some already anxious about the transition may be even more concerned;
- Moving up year groups, in particular to start GCSE courses will cause additional anxiety where some may feel ill prepared for the course and under pressure to do and learn more in shorter periods of time;
- Social media communications between children may have affected their relationships adversely and some may not want to come back to school.

Family/System Factors (finances etc)

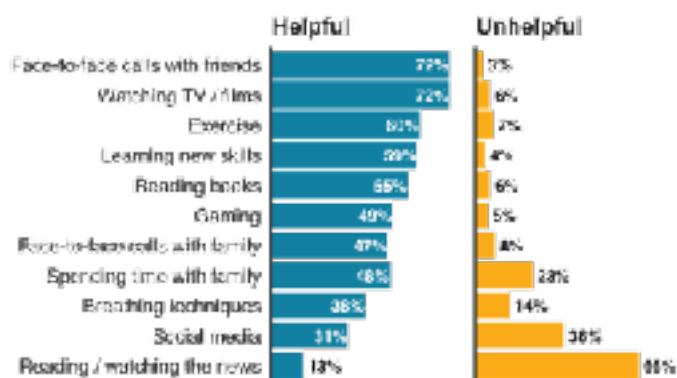
- Some children may have grown out of their uniforms and parents, as a result of being furloughed or released from work, may not have the money to buy new clothes.

What impact has the pandemic crisis had on young people's mental health?

Data from a recent survey by Young Minds

Which activities do young people find helpful and unhelpful for their mental health?

Survey of 2,111 young people with mental health needs

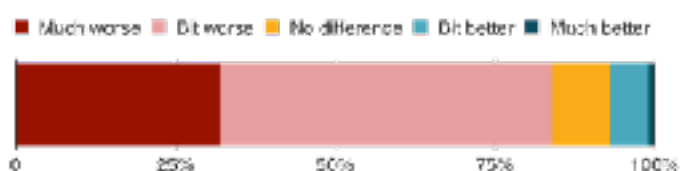


Source: YoungMinds survey carried out between 20-25 March



How has coronavirus affected the mental health of young people?

Survey of 2,111 young people with mental health needs



Source: YoungMinds survey carried out between 20-25 March



Anecdotally, CAMHS services across the country are reporting a mixed picture. There is some evidence suggesting that young people are happier at home and that there has been a reduction in the number of new referrals being made to their service. The absence of pressures that some young people experience at school, socializing with peers, conforming to societal norms and completing work set by school staff, is, in some cases, making the lives of some young people happier.

The @CAMHSNetwork are reporting that nationally referrals to CAMHS have dropped significantly, and expect to see a rebound effect post COVID19. They ask what plans and strategies schools are making to manage the rebound and further demand on services due to after effects on children from the restrictions?

What might parents' views be?

Denmark eased its coronavirus lockdown on the 14th April, by reopening schools and day care centres but an active group of parents have voiced their opinions around concerns. One Facebook group in Denmark called 'My kid is not going to be a Guinea Pig' that has more than 40,000 followers.

The question that parents are asking is, '*will schools be any safer when they re-open than when the decision was made to close on 20th March?*' Parents response to this may be that they chose not to send their children back immediately that schools re-open and perhaps for some time.

A piece of research reported by the BBC² on 01/05/20, highlighted that '*More than 40% would still be reluctant to go shopping or send their children to school and more than 30% would be worried about going to work or meeting friends.*'

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52495201>

What could a programme of support look like?

All actions should be taking place as soon as possible and certainly before the reopening of schools.

1. [Identify those pupils](#) who may find returning to school difficult by:
 - a. Liaising with partner feeder schools, vulnerable pupils;
 - b. Liaising with social care partners, what evidence of DA etc;
 - c. Using historic school data on attendance, SEND, SEMH & other vulnerabilities.
2. [Build a school knowledge](#) base of how things have changed and what the current feelings are now for these children & families - identify individual members of staff as family transition liaison leads.
3. [Tailor individual programmes](#) from a menu of interventions to support each pupil. The group will not be homogenous and there will be a need for individualised approaches. Programmes of support must have, at their core, human interaction that builds trusting relationships and a sense of belonging.
4. [Recovery Curriculum for all](#)

Returning to school, in whatever guise this takes, will be a sensitive period for school leaders, parents and children. Schools will need to take the lead and proactively take ownership of finding solutions for both parents and young people. Schools should act as the glue that holds the web of therapeutic relationships together to ensure that young people feel able to come back to school following the extended period of closure.

Risks of not providing interventions:

Waiting and expecting our pupils to return to school on the dates that the government decide will, with some pupils, put us on the back foot. Given the exceptional circumstances, schools, trusts and Local Authorities will need to consider existing policy and practice very carefully to ensure that the needs of our most vulnerable learners are not disadvantaged by punitive processes or are left feeling unsupported following high challenge experience. The risk of not intervening and being proactive, leaves us with the real possibility of:

- Parental requests for elective home education;
- Lower & possibly even non-attendance;
- Lo attendance letters sent to families;
- Fixed penalty fine letters sent to families as part of the school's attendance improvement policy – [interim legislation](#) temporarily allows schools & local authorities to disapply from issuing penalty notices until 31/05/20.

3. Identify Pupils

Generally, this is something that schools are very good at. School staff can use a number of different data sets & indicators to identify those who they may feel might find the return to school difficult. Some examples of data that might be helpful are listed below:

1. Pupils with a history of low attendance;
2. Looked after children and children on the edge of care;
3. Young people on Child Protection plans and those who are considered as Child in Need;
4. Young Carers;
5. Ethnicity – we know that the BME community has a higher prevalence of Coronavirus;
6. Current school closure data e.g. which pupils have not been engaging with online learning. Are there any who were doing well but seem to have disengaged during lockdown?
7. Pupils With Existing Medical Conditions particularly those for whom being in school offers a level of anxiety;
8. The children and young people whose parents are Key workers may have heightened concerns over their parent's exposure to risk;
9. Pupils Who Are Shielding. An example of the [shielding letter can be found here](#) – it is advisable, for your school records, to ask parents to end you a copy of the shielding letter.

4. Build School Knowledge

Contacting Parents

Parents will be anxious themselves; communicating with them in an engaging way will be difficult. The [prompt in the appendix](#) provides some guidance for school staff to consider when making contact with parents.

What will your response, as a school be if parents indicate that they would like to electively home educate?

Screening Questions

The questions set out for school staff to use with parents and with pupils when discussing the challenges a young person is facing. The questions suggested are adapted from School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (C)³ – [see appendix](#). Schools should not have hard and fast expectations when considering the results of the survey but should consider outcomes subjectively.

5. Tailor Individual Programmes

The vulnerable young people identified by schools as requiring additional support cannot be considered as an homogenous group. They will have different characteristics and will be affected by different environmental factors. When building a school knowledge base around pupils, schools will find it helpful to use a template action plan to first collate the information they collect and second to assist them with sharing their actions with others including the pupil and their parents.

Whilst it isn't a perfect fit for these purposes, Oxfordshire County Council's example [SEN Support: Profile and Outcomes Plan](#) can be downloaded using this link.

Some examples of interventions to include in the action plan are:

- [Advice for key worker parents](#) and [When your parent is a key worker](#) – the British Psychological Society has produced 2 documents to help families come to terms with the challenges faced by being a key worker.
- Dr Helen Griffiths, Consultant Psychologist in Children Paediatric Medicine at Oxford University Healthcare Trust will be creating some training materials including webinars and **short videos** for:
 - School staff [live webinars for OCC schools]
 - Well-being for staff
 - Parents [information video] – jointly by Psychology & OHS staff
 - Young people
 - Young people who remain shielded
- Schools could consider:
 - Conducting a video call with the young person one to one, ask them to tell you about the best and worst thing about lockdown;
 - Arrange some small group meet ups between peer groups with a teacher.
- Schools should consider if there are any agencies and organisations already working with the young person that should be contributing to a joined up piece of supportive work. Agencies will vary depending on geographic location and may include:
 - CAMHS & Mental Health Support Teams – [making a referral to CAMHS](#)
 - ELSA
 - Ed Psych
 - Counsellors
 - Social work teams including family support workers
- High engagement low threat / challenge activities
- Restorative practices
- A number of national organisations and charities have and will continue to publish resources that may be of use including:
 - [Anna Freud Centre](#)
 - [Helping children and young people to manage anxiety](#)
 - Young Minds
 - [What To Do If Your Child Is Anxious About Going Back To School](#)

³ Produced by Oxford Clinical Psychology <https://www.oxfordclinicalpsych.com/>

- [Supporting your child with school anxiety](#)
 - [Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs](#)
- Beyond Blue (Australia) - [Tackling back-to-school anxiety](#)
- The Oxfordshire Hospital School through its Medical Needs in Schools project produced a series of resources designed to help young people experiencing anxiety in school:
 - [Anxiety Toolkit](#)
 - [Anxiety Lesson from OHS – Lesson Plan](#)
 - [Anxiety Lesson from OHS – Presentation](#)
 - [Anxiety Lesson – video clip 1](#)
 - [Anxiety Lesson – video clip 2](#)
- Social stories (what & who would we want them for?)
- Virtual school tours for those who are not familiar with the environment – this could be particularly helpful for those transitioning to new schools.

6. The Recovery Curriculum

Absence from school will inevitably have led to gaps in development and learning. The following ideas are taken from the Evidence for Learning Recovery Curriculum⁴.

Some school leaders may focus on the recovery of lost knowledge, but this does not recognise the scale of impact. Already Headteachers are saying “The children will be so far behind academically when they return.” Such statements are incompatible with the process of recovery from adverse experiences, loss, trauma, anxiety and grief. Now is the time to return to more humane approaches concerned with the fundamental wellbeing, and secure positive development of the child. Managing the child and family’s anxiety about their academic progress, helping them normalize their feelings and concerns, will support them to feel more settled to resume academic learning.

Compassionate Leadership is crucial at this time. Young people will have experienced losses, of routine, structure, friendship, opportunity and freedom during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Others will have developed skills including compassion and may have developed a better sense of the world around them. The challenges will need to be addressed without losing sight of the positive developments that will also be evident.

The following 5 levers identified in the Recovery Curriculum offer a very clear road map to help school leaders navigate their way around a dynamic curriculum offer for young people.

Lever 1: Relationships – we can’t expect our students to return joyfully, and many of the relationships that were thriving, may need to be invested in and restored. We need to plan for this to happen, not assume that it will. Reach out to greet them, use the relationships we build to cushion the discomfort of returning.

Lever 2: Community – we must recognise that curriculum will have been based in the community for a long period of time. We need to listen to what has happened in this time, understand the needs of our community and engage them in the transitioning of learning back into school.

Lever 3: Transparent Curriculum – all of our students will feel like they have lost time in learning and we must show them how we are addressing these gaps, consulting and co-constructing with our students to heal this sense of loss.

Lever 4: Metacognition – in different environments, students will have been learning in different ways. It is vital that we make the skills for learning in a school environment explicit to our students to reskill and rebuild their confidence as learners.

Lever 5: Space – to be, to rediscover self, and to find their voice on learning in this issue. It is only natural that we all work at an incredible pace to make sure this group of learners are not disadvantaged against their peers, providing opportunity and exploration alongside the intensity of our expectations.

⁴ <https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

The Recovery Curriculum is explained in more detail in this [YouTube video](#).

7. Appendix

Screening questions for parents or carers

1. How is <<name>> feeling about going back to school?
Anxious Ok Excited
2. How often does <<name>> have negative feelings about going to school because they are afraid of something related to school?
Seldom Sometimes Often
3. How often do you think <<name>> feels they would rather be with you than go back to school?
Seldom Sometimes Often
4. Since schools have been closed, how often has <<name>> engaged in activities with others, either in the house or online, to do something fun?
Seldom Sometimes Often
5. Since schools have been closed, how often has <<name>> been in contact with school friends?
Seldom Sometimes Often
6. How often does <<name>> have negative feelings about school (for example, scared, nervous, or sad) when you talk about going back to school?
Seldom Sometimes Often
7. How much do you think <<name>> would rather be taught by you, as parents at home rather than by their teachers at school?
Seldom Sometimes Often
8. How often has <<name>> engaged in the work set for them since school has been closed?
Seldom Sometimes Often
9. Does <<name>> know why they're feeling anxious about going back to school? Is it because they are worried about:
Friendships Missing their parents / carers School work

Screening questions for pupils

1. How do you feel about going back to school in general?
Anxious Ok Excited
2. How do you feel about seeing you school friends again?
Anxious Ok Excited
3. How do you feel about seeing other people at school again?
Anxious Ok Excited
4. How do you feel about going back to school to see the teachers and be in lessons, learning again?
Anxious Ok Excited
5. How often do you have negative feelings about going to school because you're afraid of something related to school?
Seldom Sometimes Often
6. How often do you feel that you would rather be with your parent(s) / carer(s) than go back to school?
Seldom Sometimes Often
7. Since schools have been closed, how often have you engaged in activities with others, either in the house or online, to do something fun?
Seldom Sometimes Often
8. Since schools have been closed, how often have you been in contact with school friends?
Seldom Sometimes Often
9. How often do you have negative feelings about school (for example, scared, nervous, or sad) when you think about going back to school?
Seldom Sometimes Often
10. How much do you think you would rather be taught by your parents / carers at home rather than by your teachers at school?
Seldom Sometimes Often
11. How often have you engaged in the work set for you since school has been closed?
Seldom Sometimes Often
12. If you are, do you know why they're feeling anxious about going back to school? Is it because you are worried about:
Friendships Missing your parents School work Other _____

Providing Support to Family of Pupils

This guidance is adapted from the One Education Educational Psychology Support Service at Manchester City Council.⁵

The purpose of the welfare calls is to check on the wellbeing of students and their families and offer support where we can. There are a variety of ways that we can offer support. This includes:

i. Active Listening

Active listening is the ability to focus completely on a speaker, understand their message, comprehend the information and respond thoughtfully.

Schools need to be clear on what they want to get from conversations with parents; what are you actively listening for and how can you ensure that the conversations open with a clear explanation for the purpose of the call. Schools may find it useful to send an email / text to identified parents explaining the purpose of the call before it happens; this way parents can consider responses and make sure that their child has an opportunity to contribute and provide feedback if appropriate.

For example:

Hello Mr / Mrs <<name>>, thanks for taking the time to talk to me this morning. I just wanted, if it's ok, to spend a few minutes with you talking about <<name>> and how they feel about returning to school and what we could do to support them.

Skills of Active Listening

- a. **Show you are listening:** Active listening involves listening with all senses, even when using the phone. Give someone your full attention and show you are listening e.g. with appropriately spaced interjections “Yes”, “I can imagine” or simply “Mmm hmm”. By providing this 'feedback' the person speaking will usually feel more at ease and therefore communicate more easily, openly and honestly.
- b. **Questioning and Clarifying:** The listener can demonstrate that they have been paying attention by asking relevant questions and/or making statements that build or help to clarify what the speaker has said. By asking relevant questions the listener also helps to reinforce that they have an interest in what the speaker has been saying. A mixture of Open questions (eg “what are your concerns about”) clarifying questions (“Tell me more about”, “what did you mean by”) And hypothetical questions (what do you think would happen if)
- c. **Reflecting and paraphrasing:** Reflecting is closely repeating or paraphrasing what the speaker has said in order to show comprehension. Reflection is a powerful skill that can reinforce the message of the speaker and demonstrate understanding.
- d. **Summarising and agreeing any goals:** Repeating a summary of what has been said back to the speaker is a powerful way of showing that you are listening and builds rapport. You may also want to take this opportunity to plan with the family any actions that they may want to put in place and support problem solving of working towards these actions.

ii. Offering Containment

“Containment is thought to occur when one person receives and understands the emotional communication of another without being overwhelmed by it, processes it and then communicates understanding and recognition back to the other person. This process can restore the capacity to think in the other person” (Douglas, 2007, p.33).

The British Psychological Society⁶ offer some helpful support on this aspect of working with parents.

Containment is a simple but powerful concept. Early, ongoing experiences of containment enable the development of thinking to manage experiences and emotion. When individuals’ experiences of containment are inadequate or significantly interrupted, cognitive and emotional development are affected.

⁵ https://hsm.manchester.gov.uk/kb5/manchester/directory/service.page?id=aT4_AvRYWo8&directorychannel=1-7-3-1

⁶ <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Talking%20to%20children%20about%20illness.pdf>

Uncontainable feelings and experiences are normal and arise throughout the lifespan. It is likely and normal that people may feel uncontainable emotions during this crisis. Adults may have less opportunities to feel “contained” as changes to their social network and the conversations they may have with professionals about their child will have changed. Your conversation with them provides an opportunity for you to help contain some of their feelings and emotions about the changes to life in the pandemic.

In working with families, the ‘container’ is able to acknowledge distress, sit with distress being present, and provide a calm space for the person to express themselves and be heard. This might support the person to feel contained and be better able to manage their own emotions.

This might be done through:

- Listening to the adult’s concerns
- Name and acknowledge the feelings and emotions you hear – “I’m picking up that things feel really stressful at the moment!” or “It seems you’re experiencing lots of happy moments with the children in lockdown”
- Reflecting statements about what you have understood – “that sounds really difficult, you are having to manage lots of demands”; “lots of different things are being asked of you and it sounds like it can be hard to know which to do first”
- Keep an open dialogue of checking whether your perception is right – “I am not sure I am getting it right as it’s difficult over the phone but it sounds like you’re managing a really tricky situation as best as you can/feeling quite overwhelmed by it all”
- Keeping a calm, slow pace even if the person you are talking to is speaking quickly

It may feel tempting to offer our own experiences/observations of things that have been difficult. Be careful that in an attempt to normalise, you do not inadvertently increase anxiety or distress (e.g. by giving another example of a difficult circumstance). Stick to neutral and containing sentences, “Yes, I think a lot of people are feeling that way at the moment, it is really difficult isn’t it?”

The primary purposes of containment are to:

- i. prevent someone from feeling overwhelmed
- ii. increase the person’s ability to cope with stressors
- iii. prevent potentially dangerous or risky behaviours
- iv. to allow the person to feel more in control of their thoughts and emotions.

The secondary purpose of containment in this situation is to model containing behaviour so that the adults we are working with are able to offer this emotional containment to the children within their care. So how can containment work in this situation?

In some way your communication with the adult needs to allow them opportunity to express their feelings (see active listening above) allowing you the opportunity to acknowledge any difficult feelings. This allows you the opportunity to find a way of acknowledging their feelings or to help name the emotion that they may be feeling e.g. anxiety, likely in this current crisis. You can allow space for the person to agree or correct about the emotion you have named. By containing the person’s emotions you allow them the opportunity and space to regulate their emotions and to think about their own and their family’s needs.

iii. Reinforcing Self Care Message for Parents

Remembering that prioritising your own wellbeing benefits not only you but your whole family

As all of us spend more time indoors and with our families, looking after ourselves becomes a luxury as we tend to the needs of our children, cook meals, attempt learning at home and maybe even try and work from home too. But during this difficult time, when stress and anxiety levels are heightened, looking after yourself becomes essential, not a luxury.

Here are 5 reasons we need self-care:

- a. To help us cope in the moment and to respond more appropriately at the most testing times
- b. To help us restore and replenish physically, emotionally and mentally
- c. To support our resilience and energy supply
- d. So we can access the kind of parent we all want to be – kind, supporting, loving and so on

- e. So we can empower our children with the toolkits for a lifetime so they can become compassionate and resilient adults