

COVID-19: Supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of children returning to school: A brief guide for Calderdale primary school staff

Due to the most recent lockdown, primary and secondary schools in England have only been open for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. All other children have been learning remotely. With support from the Local Authority, schools have planned how all pupils will return to education in March in a measured way that prioritises the safety of everyone.

Some children will be happy to go back to school; however, others may feel worried or uncertain. Our children and young people need to experience successful transitions back to school, recognising that transition is a process and not a single event. We know that an individual's experiences during this time can have a powerful and long-lasting effect on academic outcomes, as well as impacting on their self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. Schools are skilled in planning and preparing for transitions and have already had experience in supporting students to return to school after a period of lockdown. This is a big responsibility at a time when adults in the school community may have similar worries and concerns or have been affected during the pandemic¹.

The purpose of this guidance is to provide advice to staff on how they can support the emotional health and wellbeing of children in managing this transition. This document and all the links and resources it contains can be found on www.openmindscalderdale.org.uk.

During a period of transition children and young people can experience:

- *A loss of attachment to familiar people, friends, the environment and objects within that environment*
- *Uncertainty about their role and identity in class/the school*
- *Entry into an environment that is less predictable*
- *A perceived loss of control*
- *A feeling of being de-skilled and less valued*
- *Uncertainty about the future.*

Effective transitions are supported by:

- *Advance planning and preparation*
- *Clear processes for communication with parent/carers and children and young people*
- *Consideration of relationships*

In addition, we must acknowledge their ongoing thoughts and worries about safety and health at these times.

¹ Support and advice for adults living in Calderdale can be found at: <https://www.calderdaleccg.nhs.uk/looking-after-your-emotional-health-and-wellbeing/>

Things to think about

How can I help?

Planning and preparation

- Some children will be worried and uncertain about returning to school. Others may be generally happy about returning, particularly if school is a safe place for them.
- Some children may have become used to being with their parents/immediate family for an extended period. Therefore, being separated from them may be a potential source of worry for young/vulnerable children.
- There may have been bereavement within the school and community or in the family.
- In contrast, some children and family members may have experienced abuse at home.
- Some may have post-traumatic stress, but this may not be immediate.
- Some children have continued to attend school (although it may not be the one that they usually attend) and may be anxious about other children returning to join them.

- Adapt existing transition materials to share with pupils and families.
- Clearly explain what will be the same and what will be new or changed e.g. which classroom they will be in, which staff they will be with, which pupils they will be with, what the routines will be, how classroom time, breaks and lunchtimes will work, queues, personal hygiene, home learning/homework expectations, if there will be new or altered rules or boundaries (be aware that this may cause information overload for some children, use visual aids where appropriate).
- Explain how children will be kept physically and emotionally safe, and how they/families can get support, and who from e.g. during the day from teachers, pastoral lead, SENCO etc. (children), before/during/after school (parent carers).
- Explain that staff understand that children will need time re-establish and re-learn routines and what is expected of them.
- Plan activities/projects that support the transition process – consider discussing what children have learnt or how they feel. Ensure these are accessible to all pupils & take into account that it may not be appropriate for some children to participate e.g. if they're vulnerable/have suffered a distressing incident(s) during absence from school.
- Identify the pupils who will need a more enhanced and individualised transition plans.

Support and resources

- **Open Minds in Calderdale** web site www.openmindscalderdale.org.uk and **Emotional health and wellbeing support for coronavirus page:** www.openmindscalderdale.org.uk/category/help-and-support-coronavirus.
- **Open Minds (CAMHS)** – COVID-19 arrangements www.calderdaleccg.nhs.uk/cyp-ehwd-c19.
- **Time Out Listening Line for children and young people** offers the opportunity to get some simple advice and guidance about how to keep busy and reduce anxiety. The Time Out website offers a platform to have a say and get involved in the Time Out project. Age range: 10-19 years. Contact details: **07418311736** (text to book an appointment). www.healthymindscalderdale.co.uk/time-out.html
- **Healthy Futures Calderdale ChatHealth** is a messaging service for parents of children aged 5-19, the number is 07507 332157. Nurses pick up messages between 9am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday and will reply within one working day. When a text has been received an immediate bounce-back message is sent to let the person know a message has been received. To advertise ChatHealth to parents please use this short video <https://youtu.be/mJn08t-xnxQ>

- Kooth (Xenzone): an online mental wellbeing community for ages 10 to 25, open until 10pm every evening, 365 days a year www.kooth.com.
- Anna Freud Centre resources for schools www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/support-for-schools-and-colleges.
- Young Minds [Talking to your child about coronavirus](#); [What to do if you're anxious about coronavirus](#); [Transitions Activity for Year 6 Pupils](#); [Find Your Feet: Transitioning to Secondary School](#).
- Anna Freud Centre – [Mentally Healthy Schools Transitions](#).
- [Mentally Healthy Schools](#) has produced an [Inset day toolkit](#) which focuses on student mental health and wellbeing.
- ChildLine [Moving schools](#).

Things to think about

How can I help?

Clear Communication

- Plan accessible communications with children and parents/carers.
- Use your communications to show empathy, acknowledge anxieties and build confidence.
- Review mechanisms for staff and parents/carers to communicate with each other.
- Explain how parents/carers can share in confidence whether their child has experienced any distress or difficulties during lockdown.

- Adapt existing transition communications; focus on kindness, and compassion
- Create clear, unambiguous plain English communications plans which are age/audience appropriate e.g. video, emails, newsletters, vlogs, FAQs to provide timely & official guidance information, and generate confidence in transition plans.
- Ensure feeder/receiving schools have any additional COVID-19/lockdown information about children entering a new setting.
- Plan regular 'check-ins' to review the settling in process and two-way feedback with parent carers.

Support/resources

- Continue to promote Open Minds in Calderdale web site resources www.openmindscalderdale.org.uk.

Things to think about

Relationships

- Focus on re-establishing relationships, connections and belonging between/among staff and children.
- Take in to account any key worker/vulnerable children who have remained in school – their feelings towards others who have not been attending school.
- Give thought to use of displays in school to reflect the situation, e.g. *things that we are sad about and things we should be happy about*.
- Provide safe spaces or people for children to share experiences.
- Give opportunities to commemorate members of the school community who have died, to celebrate the work of the NHS and key workers, acts of kindness offered and received during the pandemic (*NB. in line with family wishes/consent from bereaved families obtained beforehand as this may not be suitable for all children*).
- Balance wellbeing priorities with boundaries in place to keep others safe, *i.e. it's OK to feel scared about being at school but it's not OK to hit staff*.
- Take a gradual approach to reintroducing academic demands, formal assessments.

How can I help?

- Identify pupils who need key workers. Review who this will be, plan for how this relationship will be (re)established.
- Consider the social relationships available to individual pupils i.e. are they with established and known friends. Adults to model appropriate behaviours and talk about experiences when needed.
- Plan time for children and staff to re-develop relationships and to get to know each other (again or for the first time).
- Consider activities that build on relationships, feeling safe, repetition of routines and structures e.g. circle time, games, welcome back assembly (re-establishing school community), celebrate any missed birthdays, show appreciation for key workers, reinforce everyone safe and back together.
- Provide opportunities to talk about feelings/emotions embedded throughout the curriculum. NB. This may not be appropriate for some children to participate e.g. if they're vulnerable/ have suffered a distressing incident(s) during absence from school.
- Adapt existing transition visual resources or create new to explain and reinforce routines and structures e.g. visual timetables, checklists etc.
- Share new rules and restrictions as 'do' statements rather than 'don't' e.g. 'do wash your hands'.
- Staff to not directly question children on what work they may or may not have completed at home.
- Continue to use positive praise.

Support/resources

- Continue to promote the **Open Minds in Calderdale** website www.openmindscalderdale.org.uk.
- **Calderdale Barnardo's Positive Identities Service** for those who identify as LGBTQ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-young-people/LGBTQ>.
- **ChildLine** [Feeling Lonely](#).
- **ChildLine** [Top tips for making friends](#).

- Action for Children [Tips for Young People](#).
- The Communication Trust [Top Tips for Developing Talk](#).
- Barnardo's [See Hear Respond service](#) is provided across England by Barnardo's and other national and local community-based organisations in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The programme has been created to help children and young people in England who are experiencing harm and increased adversity during this period by providing support to those who are not being seen by social care or other key agencies. See Hear Respond accept referrals from any source either through the Freephone number 0800 151 7015 or via the online referral hub.

Staff wellbeing

What individuals can do to look after themselves:

Many members of staff from education settings have continued to work throughout the Coronavirus restrictions. Like the children and young people they care for they too may be experiencing loss, abuse, burn-out or other difficulties. The re-opening of settings will likely add to their existing emotional burdens. Senior Leadership Teams must be proactive in ensuring that mental health and emotional wellbeing is a visible priority.

- Reduce outside demands and avoid taking on additional responsibilities.
- Take time out to get sufficient sleep and rest, relax and eat regularly and healthily, staying well hydrated.
- Try to reduce your time spent looking at the news from media outlets and social media. Try scheduling 'digital power off' times, especially before bed.
- Talk to people you trust and allow yourself to be comforted.
- Use relaxation strategies e.g. slow breathing, self-talk or mindfulness.
- Spend time in a place where you feel safe and calm to reflect on what's happened over the course of the day/week. Acknowledge and allow feelings during this reflective time. Create a wellbeing planning tool for yourself, including knowing where to get outside support from if needed (Local Offer websites can inform this).

Support/resources

- Mentally Healthy Schools [Staff Wellbeing](#).
- Anna Freud [Looking after each other and ourselves](#) and [Supporting staff wellbeing in schools](#).
- Mind: [Five ways to wellbeing](#)
- [Education Support](#)
- MindEd: [CBT Art Workbook for Managing Stress](#)