

COVID-19: Supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of students returning to school: A brief guide for Calderdale secondary 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 secondary school 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 we help?
<p>Planning and preparation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some students 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 students 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. There may have been bereavement within the school and community or in the family. In contrast, some students and family members may have experienced abuse at home. Some students may have post-traumatic stress, but this may not be immediate. Some students have continued to attend school and may be anxious about other students returning to join them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapt existing transition materials to share with students and families. Some students and staff come to school for normality. They may not want to have to talk or think about what's happened as a result of the pandemic but would rather have as normal as possible a school day of learning. Being sad and dealing with the emotions and consequences takes a lot of energy and head space. Not talking about what happened doesn't mean that the student isn't thinking about it or is being unusually avoidant. It's important to take our cues from the student and for them to know there is no one right reaction. It's okay to ask them quietly what their preference is. Clearly explain/show what will be the same and what will be different e.g. which classroom they will be in, which tutors they will be with, how lessons, breaks and lunchtimes will work, queues, toilets, 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 students, use visual aids where appropriate). Explain how students will be kept physically and emotionally safe, and how they and their families can get support, and who from e.g. during the day from tutors, pastoral lead, SENCO etc. Explain that staff understand students will need time to re-establish and re-learn routines and what is expected of them. Identify the students who will need a more enhanced and individualised transition plan.

Support and resources

- Open Minds in Calderdale website. www.openmindscalderdale.org.uk
- Information about Open Minds (CAMHS). 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 website offers a platform to have your 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
- Kooth is an online mental wellbeing community for young people aged 10-25. Open until 10pm every day. www.kooth.com

- **Healthy Futures Calderdale ChatHealth** is a messaging service for students aged 11-19 (07480 635297), and for parents and carers (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.
- **C&K Careers Chat** offers support, advice and guidance for children and young people in Calderdale and Kirklees aged 13-24 years. Open Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm. Thur, 9am-8pm.
- **Young Minds** [What to do if you're anxious about coronavirus](#).

Things to think about	How can we help?
<p>Clear Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan regular, accessible communications with students 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. • Have clear systems in place for students to share their experiences in confidence with a trusted member of staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt existing transition communications; focus on kindness, and compassion • Create clear and plain English communications plans which provide timely and official guidance information and generate confidence in transition e.g. the use of emails, newsletters, blogs, FAQs. • Provide reassurance that the thoughts, feelings and reactions are a normal part of recovering from the losses associated with the pandemic, even though they may be upsetting, and that they will lessen in intensity over time. • Remember that sometimes when students are finding something emotionally difficult, the first signs might be through changes in their behaviour. This can be especially true for students with existing needs or those that were most affected and are finding it difficult to communicate how they are feeling.
<p>Support and resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to promote Open Minds in Calderdale website resources. www.openmindscalderdale.org.uk • Anna Freud Centre resources for schools. www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/support-for-schools-and-colleges • Department for Education. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings 	

Things to think about	How can we help?
<h3>Relationships</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on re-establishing relationships, connections and belonging between/amongst staff and students. Take in to account any key worker/vulnerable students who have remained in school – their feelings towards others who have not been attending school. Give thought to use of display boards in school to reflect the situation. Provide safe spaces or people for students to share experiences. Take into account that some students may have experienced death or know someone who has died during the pandemic. 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 (<i>NB. in line with family wishes/consent from bereaved families obtained beforehand as this may not be suitable for all students</i>). Balance wellbeing priorities with boundaries in place to keep others safe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify students who need key workers and plan for how relationships will be (re)established. Consider the social relationships available to individual students i.e. are they with established and known friends. Adults to model appropriate behaviours and talk about experiences when needed. Plan time for students and staff to re-develop relationships and to get to know each other where possible. Provide opportunities to talk about feelings/emotions embedded throughout the curriculum. NB. This may not be appropriate for some students to participate e.g. if they're vulnerable/have suffered a distressing incident during absence from school. Adapt existing 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 students on what work they may or may not have completed at home. Continue to use positive praise.
<h3>Support and resources</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 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.

- [ChildLine Feeling Lonely.](#)
- [ChildLine Top tips for making friends.](#)
- [Action for Children Tips for Young People.](#)

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 and 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.](#)