



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Managing the transition back to school:

*a guide for schools
and colleges*

Lockdown is easing and schools and colleges are starting to welcome increasing numbers of pupils back to their settings. Like any transition the return to school or college requires careful preparation and support. We know that a large number of pupils will adapt quickly and positively re-engage with their education. However, some pupils will need additional support to cope with change and build [resilience](#).

Challenges faced by children and young people during the coronavirus crisis

During the crisis children and young people have faced an extensive period of disruption. For some this has brought with it feelings of [loss](#), and in some cases more traumatic experiences such as illness or [bereavement](#) of a loved one.

[Previous research](#) on the effects of quarantine and isolation have led some researchers to voice concerns about children directly and indirectly exposed to the coronavirus developing mental health conditions such as acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)¹. One study from China found that a significant proportion of children who have contracted the coronavirus have subsequently experienced symptoms of PTSD². However, the truth is that we don't know enough about the impact of coronavirus yet, let alone how it will play out over the longer term. In the meantime, it's worth keeping an eye out for children who may be struggling.

Actions to consider before schools reopen

Check in:

We know that positive relationships and good connections with pupils form the basis of any successful support, and schools have prioritised this for the pupils who have been learning at home since March. Pupils will benefit from an additional

check-in to talk through their return to school and verbalize any anxieties they may have. This is the opportunity to identify any concerns that a child may have or to identify whether they are likely to be at an increased risk from the virus or from other circumstances.

The check-in can take the form of a problem-solving conversation where teachers can encourage pupils to work through their own concerns. It is also an opportunity for teachers to identify new vulnerabilities and [plan for pupils who may need support](#) on returning, as well as to offer referrals to external pathways where appropriate.

Similarly, parents and carers may also appreciate this opportunity to either raise their concerns around their child's wellbeing or discuss their own worries around schools reopening.



Written communication:

We know that many schools have updated their policies in response to new government guidance on social distancing and are communicating them to their pupil population remotely. Many pupils and their families will benefit from this being in the form of written documents or through videos and images of the new layout of

classrooms or playgrounds. This gives families an opportunity to review changes and continue to familiarize themselves which will help to reduce any confusion or anxiety they may have around returning to school.

Online learning platforms:

The next few weeks may be a good opportunity to send home tasks that will support children to make that transition back into school, for those year groups or children who aren't yet returning. This could include [goal setting](#) for the next academic year or identifying activities pupils wish to be part of so they can engage in positive forward thinking.

Actions to be taken once children and young people return to school

Keep familiar routines:

As the school population begins to return to normal, it is important that children settle back into familiar routines. We know that lots of activities will have to change to account for new guidelines, so finding elements of consistency will support pupils and help them to adjust. For example, scheduling activities to take place at the same time or using a familiar rewards system to encourage positive behavior can help. Discussing how routines have been altered also helps to keep everyone safe.

Promote a safe space for discussion:

It's important to get a balance between celebrating what pupils have achieved during lockdown and the challenges many pupils may have faced, and to give them the opportunity to discuss these if they feel comfortable. It will be reassuring for pupils to hear their peers raising similar concerns and experiences. It can also offer an opportunity to develop peer support

More about Schools in Mind

Schools in Mind is a free network for staff working in schools and colleges, and allied professionals which shares practical, academic and clinical expertise regarding the wellbeing and mental health issues that affect schools.

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networks or teacher-led solution discussions, which can focus on equipping pupils with strategies to cope with change.

Safe spaces and trusted adults:

For pupils who may be feeling particularly [anxious](#), or those whose anxieties remain after routines have been established, it will be important to make individual plans to support the child or young person. The plan may include identifying key adults who can support the young person, and setting up safe places that they can go to for a set period of time when it's needed.

Identify a process for questions:

We know that pupils of all ages will have questions about the changes to schools and the global situation. Not all children and young people will have felt confident to ask these questions at home or through virtual learning. Setting aside some specific allocated time to discuss their questions is important and can prevent pupils becoming overwhelmed with information throughout the day.

Continue to work closely with families:

Parents and carers will have engaged differently with their child's education over the past months. Some have enjoyed this experience while others may have struggled. Whatever the level of engagement these relationships are important and it's in the children and young people's best interest to continue this new type of home-school relationship as these turbulent times continue.

Schools may wish to increase their communication with parents and carers as a way of reassuring them about the safety measures in place and to remind them of their role in the partnership in order to keep everyone safe. It may also provide an opportunity to reach out to families who may need support but who have in the past been reluctant to engage with external agencies.

Understanding need:

Research is rapidly emerging linking the experience of lockdown and school closures with an increase in mental health difficulties and

it is important for schools to identify how this relates to their own school community. We would recommend schools carrying out a [simple wellbeing survey](#) between June and September to identify any new or emerging needs amongst their pupils.

A whole school approach:

These activities, approaches and resources are intended to support schools as they begin the process of opening their gates to pupils. The current crisis also offers an opportunity to apply new thinking about children and young people's emotional needs.

This may now be the time for school leaders to look at developing a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing in order to support the school and college community beyond this period of transition. A whole school or college approach will enable settings to provide a universal offer that all staff and pupils can benefit from and to target and tailor resources to those who need them the most. We are currently developing more resources to support schools in achieving this. If you would like to receive these free resources please join our free [Schools in Mind learning network](#).



Additional resources

- [Managing unexpected endings and transitions](#), Anna Freud Centre.
- [Helping children and young people to manage anxiety](#), Anna Freud Centre.
- [Coronavirus toolkit 6: Resources for building resilience](#), Mentally Healthy Schools, Anna Freud Centre.
- [Return to school resources](#), Place2Be.
- [Coronavirus Q&A: Helping parents and carers to support children and young people](#), Anna Freud Centre.
- [Emerging evidence: Coronavirus and children and young people's mental health. Issue 1](#), EBPU.

¹ Horesh, D and Brown, A. 2020, Covid-19 response: Traumatic stress in the age of Covid-19: A call to close critical gaps and adapt to new realities. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, Vol. 12(4), pp. 331-335.

Chevance, A; Gourion, D; Hoertel, N. et al. 2020, Ensuring mental health care during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in France: a narrative review. *L'Encéphale*.

² Liu, JJ; Bao, Y; Huang, X. et al. 2020, Mental health considerations for children quarantined because of COVID-19. *The Lancet*

Finding support

Samaritans: 116 123 / samaritans.org

Childline: 0800 1111 / childline.org.uk

Youth Wellbeing Directory: youthwellbeing.co.uk

Details on how to find urgent help are available here: www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/urgent-help/

About us

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 65 years. Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment. We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

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