

Returning to school through Covid-19



The return to school is a big change for the children you care for. Some may be excited about the return to their peers, loved teachers, and some normality, while for others, we know school can be inherently stressful and dysregulating. For all of our children, it is important to remember that they may feel conflicting emotions about going back in, and this is ordinary. It won't be school as usual for them, and we are likely to see stress responses from both the transitional nature of this return, as well as the fact that they are going back to something different and possibly scary.

Take home messages:

- Expect it to be tough for them: they are going back to a place that's different, with new expectations to manage. They may have significant fears related to the changes in routine and environment, and this may be reactivating for them of old traumas
- Remember what these changes may be activating for them: these children's experiences of environments and routines changing are most likely almost wholly negative, traumatic experiences and we need to hold in mind that our children will be responding both to the current situation and to what it reminds them about in the past
- Even more difficult is the requirement for social distancing, which is in direct opposition to what we know about all children's attachment, social/emotional and developmental needs
- Try your best to hold onto your PACEful attitude: empathy for their experiences, acceptance of their emotional worlds, curiosity about what is going on for them, and as much play and playfulness as possible

How can we make the transition easier for them?

- Transitions for traumatised children are highly stressful, and so we need to prepare them as much as we can
- Talk to them about the return to school in as much detail as you can. Talk about what the routine will look like, the structure of the day, where they will be (what classrooms and so on), what adults will be with them, changes in class size, changes to lunch and playtime routines, and what they will be asked to do

- Be curious about what worries and fears they might have: you can always role play these with them, if they are worried about how to greet friends, receive comfort when they feel upset in the day, practise getting their lunch from a new place or similar
- You could also use a visual timetable for them at home and ask school to have one too to help them to know in advance what they will be doing next, and to feel more in control
- It's a good idea to have as much communication with school as you can to facilitate this. Make sure you have detailed information from school to share with the child you are caring for. Ask school if they will take pictures of the classrooms to show your child, or take a quick video
- Check ins before school restarts with a valued teacher or key person is also a good idea, as is asking someone your child knows to meet them at the gate/playground for the first few weeks back
- If this is not already happening, start getting them back into a routine before they go back, or as soon as you can. Routines around sleep and wake times, mealtimes and so on can help prepare them for the return to school
- You can also do a 'dry run' with a trip to school before they return to get them used to the idea again, and allow them to practise
- It will be so important to communicate with the school around your/your child's particular worries. You can also help them by letting them know what has worked well for your child through this period of no/home school, and what has been difficult
- This is an opportunity to have a different experience of school rather than return to business as usual: let's do our best to work with schools to encourage that
- After the school day ends, prioritise play and lots of space and time to unwind. Don't worry about homework and getting them back to where they were or you feel they 'should' be academically

Let's try to give them the chance to have a good experience of repair after this loss. Remember they will need explicit check ins around how it felt to be at school, and for you to be naming the strangeness, and any feelings you might wonder they have (e.g. nervousness, wobbliness, scared, anxious, excited but with some butterflies)

Remember that, through lockdown and the loss of school, the children we care for have lost routine, structure, and opportunities for friendship and freedom. Getting this back could be simultaneously exciting and overwhelming, and they may struggle more on some days than others, as will you. As always, hold kindness and compassion for yourself and the children/young people you look after for how these big feelings are managed and survived.

Resources

Here are some helpful links that you may want to explore:

1. The Anna Freud Centre has a project called Mentally Healthy Schools (<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/>). You may want to share this with your child's teacher or the school to help them to hold your child's mental wellbeing in mind. Here is a specific resource on resilience developed by this project: <https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/media/2047/coronavirus-toolkit-6-resilience.pdf>
2. Here is another resource aimed at schools which you can share with your child's education setting, and /or adapt yourself to use at home (e.g. making explicit time to talk about how your child is feeling about school, ideally not straight after school but after some wind down time; ideas about routine and 'overcommunicating'): <https://beaconschoolsupport.co.uk/newsletters/the-new-normal-returning-to-school-after-COVID-19>
3. A third resource aimed at schools and which can be adapted for home around strategies to support regulation of distress: <https://touchbase.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/7-Regulation-in-school-for-troubled-pupils.pdf>
4. A 'Back to school after Coronavirus' story that can be personalised to the details provided by your child's school, to read with your child in preparation or alongside their return: <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/back-to-school-after-coronavirus-story/>
5. A webinar on using connection and belonging in schools to ease separation anxiety: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CcGJzW2Uxc>
6. A wealth of resources here around school during Covid-19: <http://www.southendlearningnetwork.co.uk/educationalpsychology>