



# A guide for parents and carers to prepare their child to return to school after lockdown

\*For brevity the term 'school' is used throughout this document to reference all educational providers

## Supporting your child to plan going back to school

### Structure

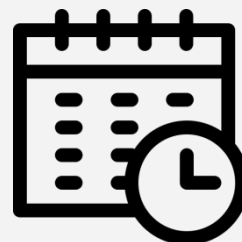
#### Going back to school will be a big change in routine

Keep up to date with the information being sent out by your child's school and find out what plan they have put in place. Schools should be writing to all families to tell you

Prepare your child —talk through what to expect, what school have said will happen and what they should do

Have a clear routine for school mornings— Sort out sleep routine in advance and getting up at a time which suits school hours.

Think about the practicalities of drop-off, including social distancing



#### For a child returning to school, having a strong relationship with someone they feel safe with in school can be vital.



Talk with your child in terms of who they will see in school (staff and children)

Take advantage of any opportunity to connect with school staff—e.g. check-ins, video messages from school

Encourage your child to connect with friends before returning, either online or in person where possible

Communicate any particular needs your child may have with school as early as possible

### Emotional regulation

#### Your child may have many different feelings about going back, including anxiety, excitement, sadness.

Ask them how they are feeling, help them to name their emotions and help them to realise that such feelings are 'normal'

Be prepared for feelings to come out in different ways, e.g. changes in behaviour, sleep, eating

Remember to 'stay calm to bring calm'. Think about how to support your own feelings such as . further information from school, having a key contact in school.

After the first day reduce stimulation and demands—and all share a reward!



## Supporting your child when they are back at school

### Structure

**As they get back into school, keeping life structured will help them feel that life is getting back to 'normal'**

Encourage them to get into a routine around school (e.g. morning routine, regular sleep times)

Reduce demands outside of school, at least for the first few weeks

Know where support can be obtained if needed, both in school and outside



### Attunement (relationships)

**When they are back at school it is important that they know that you are still there to support them**



Check-in and review how school is going, without a) overwhelming or b) patronising them

Do activities together that you enjoyed in lockdown

Ensure contact maintained during lockdown (e.g. with distant family members) is maintained

Set up ways to meet/connect with friends who may not be back at school

### Emotional regulation

**School may be a very different place to how it was before lockdown, and this may evoke many different feelings in your child.**

Ask them how they are feeling about being back at school and listen without judgement

Acknowledge and normalise difficult feelings

Use physical contact (e.g. hugs) to help regulate their emotions—vital after a day of social distancing!

Ensure you consider your own emotional support needs—it is a big change for you when your child returns to school!



## **Coronavirus – A guide for parents and carers to support their child to return to school after lockdown.**

As lockdown measures are lifted across the country children will increasingly return to school. Everyone will have a different view on this. Some will be excited, others will be worried and stressed. This document has been designed to support parents and carers in preparing their child to return to school. This guide will cover:

### **Preparation**

- Sharing concerns and feelings
- Manage your own feelings
- Connection
- Hopes

### **The Return**

- Routine
- Enhanced Communication
- Anxiety
- School Refusal
- Separation
- Practicalities

---

### **Preparation**

#### *Being informed*

Each school will be planning to support a return to school and writing to parents to tell you what they are going to do. Every school will have their own plan depending on their needs in terms of the physical environment and staffing. Keep up to date with the information your child's school is sharing. If you have specific questions or concerns, such as how the school will address social distancing or group children together that they have not answered or advised they will be answering, you should contact them directly.

It will also be helpful for school if you can update them of any individual information that will help them best support your child

#### *Sharing concerns and feelings*

Talking to your child about how they are feeling going back to school is important. Allow them to share their feelings and accept some fear is normal. Try and take time to listen and acknowledge how they are feeling so they can think it through, express themselves and understand any concerns they have. It is hard to hear your child's

worries and natural to want to reassure and solve things but sometimes just being heard is enough. If they find it hard to talk, perhaps encourage them to draw or show you their feelings through toys. Ask what they have enjoyed about lockdown but what they have missed about school. Try to expand on areas such as how they feel about learning, friendships, teachers and all the recent changes.

Explain that school will look, feel and be very different and that talking about it will build their resilience to possible changes.

Some of these questions may help –

- What are you most looking forward to?
- Who makes you feel safe at school?
- Do you have any worries about the school work/learning? Who can help?
- Are there any friends you would like to have contact with before going back?
- What would make things feel less stressful? How can I help?

It may help your child to rate their feelings using a ladder like this by asking where they are and how they can get down from the ladder:



For younger/primary children, you may find stories helpful such as –

- Invisible String by Patrice Karst
- Everyone Worries by John Burgerman
- Don't Worry, Be Happy – A guide to overcoming anxiety by Poppy O'Neill
- Huge Bag of Worries – Virginia Ironside
- What to do when you worry too much? A kid's guide to anxiety – Dawn Huebner

### *Manage your own feelings*

Recognise your own concerns about them returning to school and think about what support will help you so you can be calm and reassuring with your child and not pass your worries onto them. Talk to another adult about these, not your child. You may feel worried about the following –

- Different classes and teachers
- How lockdown and the pandemic has impacted your child
- Disruption of their learning
- Your child's friendships
- Your child's health and safety at school.

Talk to school, other adults/parents or access support to help manage your worries. If your worries feel unmanageable to you, your child will pick up on this and it will make them feel it's not safe to go back to school. Remember that schools are working hard to make sure that your child is safe at school.

### *Connection*

Encourage children to connect with teachers and friends before returning to school. It is helpful if children have individual contact with their teachers to re-establish attachments and start to build new relationships.

The child's biggest concern may be re-establishing their friendships. Try to increase communication with peers before returning and if needed make a plan to walk in with or meet a friend on the first day back if possible whilst remembering that social distancing will still apply. It's important to be aware that your child may not be in the same group as their friends which may be upsetting for them.

As a parent/carer, contact your school/teacher to share any anxieties your child may have about returning and also to update them on how successful or unsuccessful home learning has been. It is important the teacher gets a general sense of your child's experience. It is also vital they know of any significant family events during lockdown such as illness, loss or changes.

Schools will communicate what changes will be in place such as timetable adjustments. It is important your child has as much knowledge as possible to alleviate anxieties and give them as much control as possible about what to expect. Schools should be contacting parents with all the practical details of returning to school as soon as they are arranged. Be aware that schools are having to juggle changing guidance so things may change and it may not be possible for them to provide all the answers at once.

### *Hopes*

List your child's hopes about returning to school, including things they are looking forward to and things they hope to do again once they return.

### **The Return**

Globally this has been a time of unease and a huge loss of fundamental security. Some young people may have been around intense family stress and pressure or experienced less attention than usual due to parents having to balance work and

childcare demands. At the same time, many children may have experienced positives during lockdown due to fewer demands, lack of school and friendship pressure, a quieter schedule, more time with family and possibly more contact with distant family via technology.

It is important to accept that every child will have had a different experience and will need a different approach to supporting them back into school. Don't lose sight of your knowledge as a parent/carer and knowing what strategies help your child in times of stress.

Ask yourself –

- What helps them cope – what strategies do they have?
- What behaviours might people see if my child is struggling? What soothes them?
- What has someone done in the past to help them feel less anxious? Who at school do they feel safe with?
- What works well in school?
- What support networks have you and your child got?

### *Routine*

Although things are still uncertain, some predictability may be useful during this time. Re-establish routines by listing things to do before, during and after school. This will include sleep routines as they may have altered during lockdown. Think about what school tell you about how the school day may be different as part of these routines.

### *Enhanced Communication*

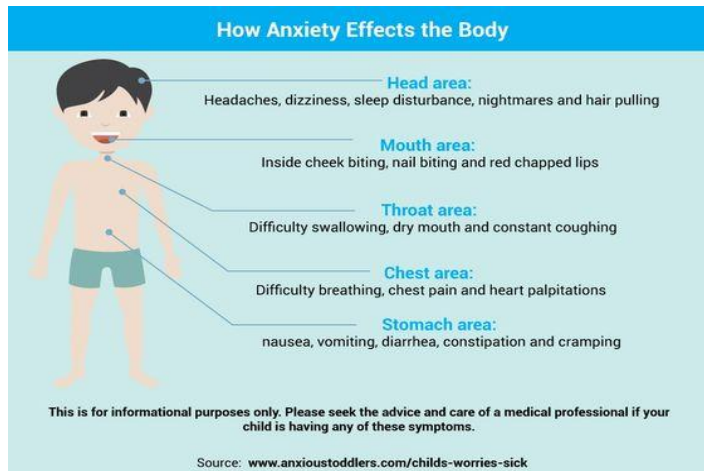
As government guidance changes, the school situation will also change, therefore, regular communication with school will be both essential and reassuring.

Your school will be making careful plans to ensure the pupils can return as safely as possible and feel settled as quickly as possible. During their return, you may find it helpful to request updates on how your child is coping, what might be impacting them and what is to be expected in future months if known. It will be helpful to know how learning will be continued following the absence and if your child is feeling overwhelmed how this can be supported. Be aware that schools have never done this before so may not be able to give you all the answers you want or communicate as quickly as you'd like.

### *Anxiety*

Your child may be experiencing raised anxieties about returning and/or is refusing to go back.

Anxiety is a bodily warning signal in response to a real or perceived threat. This is a normal response and can be helpful in small amounts as it can increase concentration and performance. However, if anxiety is high and constant, it can result in an inability to cope with stress both physically and emotionally which can manifest in symptoms such as tummy aches, headaches, lack of sleep, tearful/depression, feeling overwhelmed or aggressive.



When supporting anxiety it is important to emphasise a feeling of safety for your child, as they will be moving from previous rules such as 'stay home', 'socially distance' and 'wash your hands', to similar but different rules in school. This may lead to worries that they, or family members will contract the virus, or changes to behaviours such as over-washing their hands/cleaning or constantly seeking reassurance. Talk to them in terms of 'new' safety rules and what school is doing to keep them safe, whilst acknowledging their worries and giving them time and space to talk them through.

Some helpful ways to support your child with anxiety are;

- Regulate the emotion by encouraging deep breathing to slow the body and distract negative thoughts
- Share and name feelings/thoughts and open communication and provide information about emotion
- List negative thoughts and come up with alternative more resilient ones, for example;

I can't do it	⇒	I can't do it yet, I can do hard things
It is too scary	⇒	I am O.K. people can help me...one step at a time
I am useless at	⇒	I am not expected to know everything, I can ask for help

- Externalise 'anxiety' as something separate to them, you can ask questions about anxiety like this;
  - What would you call it?



- What does it say to you?
- How does it get in the way?
- Who is in charge, you or that?
- Who and what are its enemies?
- Exercise and physical activity helps reduce anxiety – walking, running, yoga etc.

### *School Refusal*

A feeling of increased anxiety may also cause avoidance and this may have a direct influence on how your child feels about going to school. If your child is tearful, angry, distracted, avoidant, refusing, panicked or distressed in the mornings or when thinking about school, you may need to make a plan with school about how to support your child. A joint approach with school will help to build coping strategies for your child, improve communication and from this make a plan to gradually increase their confidence to return to school.

It is important to note that at this point families will not be penalised if their child does not go back to school. If you are not sure whether your child should go back to school then discuss this with your school.

### *Separation*

Some children may experience separation anxiety from the parent/carer after this extended time together. They are leaving a familiar environment and back to a less predictable and more socially challenging one. Encourage links with safe school staff and friends before returning and if needed, help your child to make plans to meet them on their return as a safe base.

Transitional object – allow them to take something from home in their pocket or school bag in which they can be reminded of the safety net that is home and family, and that it will still be there on their return. Younger children may benefit from something visual or sensory like perfume and older children might appreciate messages of encouragement hidden in their belongings.

Separation anxiety will ease once they have become adjusted to the school environment again and should pass relatively quickly if they were settled in school before lockdown occurred.

### *Practicalities*

As a family, returning to school may not mean returning to 'normal life' as you knew it. You may need to make practical changes to childcare, working patterns and routine if schools are on a phased return. It is helpful to consider this with your employer and any other adult involved to plan for any hurdles you may face.

You don't have to be a therapist to support your child through this transition. *Your* knowledge of *your* child and love, are the most important factors in helping them to feel at ease with the situation. Many things will affect how they feel about the transition but if they feel they are able to share and express their feelings and together you tolerate, work through them in a supportive, loving relationship this should reduce the distress it causes.