



BEDFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

COVID-19
(Coronavirus)



A Parent's Guide to Returning to School

Supporting children & young people's transition back to school

Children's Services

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Acknowledgements

This guide has been compiled by Educational Psychologists at Bedford Borough Council. The key principles espoused in this document draw on government guidance at the time of compilation. It is acknowledged that given the very transitory nature of the rate of infection (R-rate), this information is subject to change. The material presented in this guide, references key theoretical assumptions from relevant literature as well as practical techniques and strategies that have been acquired with the very kind permission from both Wakefield (2020) and BiBorough Councils (2020).

Introduction

Change is an inevitable part of life, which affects all of us. When children and young people return to school following the global lockdown, everything will be different, and this is likely to induce a level of anxiety. The unprecedented months away from school have undoubtedly instigated a major interruption in many students' learning, as well as their social and emotional development. When we emerge from lockdown, children and young people will benefit from support to manage: their mental health; missed learning opportunities; possible bereavements; illness; the impact of economic changes to livelihoods; parental stress / anxiety; and changes in friendships and relationships (to name but a few). These may manifest as behaviours which can be difficult to manage.



You may notice the following:

- **Difficulty separating from you:** Clinging onto you at drop-off; refusing or not wanting to attend school; appearing distressed or being constantly worried about something bad happening to you or other family members; not wanting to be left alone; struggling with sleep and nightmares; complaining of physical discomfort.
- **Mood changes:** Disengagement; high levels of irritability; quick to anger; sadness; withdrawal.
- **Behaviour changes:** Behaviour may be more challenging or disruptive than usual and include: aggression; irritability; defiance; temper outbursts; or hyper-sensitivity.
- **Anxiety-related indicators:** Persistent and excessive fear; hypervigilance; crying, freezing, tantrums; avoidance of specific situations; preoccupation with safety and danger related to COVID-19; persistent references to 'disasters' and worry of another disaster happening.
- **Somatisation (physical symptoms resulting from their worry):** Persistent complaints of physical problems such as stomach aches, headaches or feeling sick.
- **Regressive behaviour:** Bed-wetting; using a 'baby' voice; thumb sucking.
- **Poor self-esteem:** Feelings of being 'less', e.g. saying 'I can't do it' frequently or avoiding activities that are perceived to be too challenging.
- **Relationship disturbances:** Loss or change of friendships; social isolation; engagement in more solitary play activities.
- **Low mood:** Irritability; loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities; over- or under eating; sleep disturbances. Seek further advice if your child experiences self-harm or suicidal ideation.
- **Concentration and attention difficulties.**



To mitigate some of these impacts, it is widely recommended that educational professionals **prepare effective transition strategies** that can be implemented when schools begin to welcome children back. Efficient transition can have a positive effect on children's academic outcomes, self-esteem and emotional well-being. Practical transition strategies will vary according to the unique structures of individual settings; however, there are a variety of universal principles that can be considered by all.

It is worth noting that **schools should consider every child / young person as a new pupil** (whether there is a change of setting or not), due to the amount of time that they have been absent.

As a parent / carer, the return to school will also be a time of significant change for you. You will have been at home with your children for an extended period of time and are likely to have your own set of worries about the return to school. Feelings of worry are understandable and normal in the current circumstances. It is important that schools understand these emotions and proactively seek to reduce your anxieties.

Some of the primary concerns may include:

- Your child's safety, particularly if they have any existing health concerns.
- The enduring emotional impact of recent events (including experiences of loss and bereavement).
- The impact of the disruption to your child's learning and progress.
- Your child being able to re-establish friendships and relationships in school.

Strategies to Help Manage your Child's Return to School

Working closely with your child's school will help to reduce both you and your child's worries or concerns. Below are some suggestions of how you may wish to help your child manage their return to school, as well as what you may expect from your school.

It should be stressed that government guidance is updated regularly and so all suggestions and strategies should be read with the current guidelines in mind.



- **Effective and enhanced communication:** You should have a key point of contact in school to voice general concerns and share specific information that may impact on your child's return to school (e.g. bereavement due to Covid-19).
- **Consultation between home and school:** Utilise alternative methods of communication prior to transition, such as email exchanges, telephone conversations and video calls.
- **Social distancing and safety measures:** You should be provided with detailed information on how measures are being implemented in school and how these adhere to government guidance.
- **Create a plan around the transition:** Talk through what the first day back at school after lockdown may look like, and emphasise the positives as well as the potential challenges. Discuss who your child may be able to approach within the school setting, if difficulties arise. Understand any classroom changes, and shifts in the peer group. Be clear when you discuss these with your child.
- **Transition plans:** The school should make you aware of all plans that are being implemented for transitions, the enhanced arrangements on offer and how the support can be tailored to each individual pupil. Information may include: the enhanced emotional support that will be in place, the steps school will take to address the impact on learning and any changes that they can prepare your child for, e.g. new staff, classroom, and routines.
- **Familiarising your child with a new setting:** It may be useful for schools to provide you with a virtual photo book and/or video tours identifying key features of the school/classroom, e.g. school entrance, toilets, playground, class pegs, and how these may be different upon the return to school.
- **Relaxed/staggered starts:** Current restrictions may prevent you and your child from following a typical drop off routine. They may be starting and finishing school at a different time from their friends. Talk through these changes and how you may manage them.
- **Plan for separation anxiety:** Even if your child has not experienced difficulties separating from you in the past, their experiences during the lockdown period (whether positive or negative), may instigate separation difficulties. Inform the teacher if your child is having difficulty separating from you at drop off time. Work with the teacher to consider setting some high interest activities for students to engage.

- **Transitional objects (e.g. a toy):** Children may require extra support to make the emotional transition from dependence to independence when leaving you. Transitional objects can help comfort children and support them through this transition. It may be difficult to facilitate this in school with the current government guidance on the risk of infection spread. Schools may wish to implement rules on the types of transitional objects allowed to be brought in, e.g. hard toys which can be sanitised.
- **Predictability and routine:** It is important to maintain consistent daily routines, especially during the settling-in phase in the initial weeks. Children also respond well to boundaries as it helps them to feel safe. Be explicit about rules and expectations. Try to prepare your child for changes ahead of time, a visual timetable may enhance a sense of predictability and safety. Schedule pleasant events and 'special time' with your child wherever possible.
- **Listening to your child:** Ask gentle questions and provide opportunities for your child to voice their concerns. Incorporate ideas and feelings about change and transition into their play; through story and drama, role-play and in their 'small world' play.
- **Help your child to manage his/her feelings:** Help your child to understand a range of different feeling states by using feelings charts or commercially available flashcards. You can even draw faces on a sheet of paper, and work with your child to label what these feelings may be. Assist your child to construct a self-toolkit that they can turn to when they feel overwhelmed. In the tool kit, they could include strategies that they can use in specific situations, e.g. a stress ball; bubbles (for breathing); cards to remind them of who they can talk to about their feelings etc. Reassure your child by emphasising that adults are working hard to keep them safe. Normalise feelings and remind your child that everyone is experiencing difficulties at this time, and there is no 'right' way to feel.
- There is a wide range of **stories** and **resources** that can help your child understand these emotions, such as:
 - **Everybody worries** – a picture book for children (<https://www.calameo.com/read/000777721945cfe5bb9cc?authid=Xu9pcOzU3TQx>).
 - **The Huge Bag of Worries** by Virginia Ironside and Frank Rodgers (ages 2-5).
 - **What to Do When You Worry Too Much?** A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety (age 6-12) - Dawn Huebner.
 - **Don't Worry, Be Happy** - Poppy O'Neill (ages 7-11).
 - Techniques such as **worry monsters** or **thought diaries** can also help.



- **Breathing techniques** can also be used to help your child regulate their emotions, these include:
 - Taking slower, deeper breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth (from the abdomen or diaphragm).
 - Blowing bubbles or blowing into a pinwheel.
 - Slowly blow out 'candles' on their fingertips.
 - Having whistling contests.
 - Imagining that with each breath, their body becomes filled slowly with a soothing colour, aroma, light, or warmth.
 - Breath in for three, hold for three, out for three.
- **Behavioural Regulation:** Remember that all behaviour is a form of communication. Consider calming activities that you can do together. Activities such as: colouring in; baking; playing football; reading books etc., may be useful. Consider a reward system for when you see behaviours that you want to reinforce (e.g. stickers).
- **Self-esteem:** Help your child to develop a sense of mastery and control wherein they are able to connect with their personal strengths. Instil the notion that others believe in them and are interested in their ideas. Encourage discussions which consider their lockdown experience, and how they have dealt with potential challenges.

Pupils with Identified Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) or Social Communication needs (with or without an EHCP), Looked After Children (LAC) and those with Child in Need (CIN) or Child Protection Plans (CPP)

- **Individual programmes of re-integration:**

For all pupils identified as vulnerable (particularly those with EHCPs), regular liaisons between parents/carers, services working with the pupil/family and teaching staff, is recommended, where possible, to coproduce the most effective reintegration plan. This should aim to unite the up-to-date strategies and routines that have been successful at home, with the expert advice from specific services, and the school support and teaching approaches that have proved effective in the past.

- **Boundaries and routines:** Ensure that your child knows what is expected of them, and how familiar situations and routines have changed due to the impact of coronavirus.

- **Emotional Wellbeing:** Your child may require an enhanced level of planned emotional support and nurture, through caring relationships with key adults, to enable a successful reintegration. Many educators will have remained in close contact with individuals throughout the period of school closure and have an idea of how they are coping, however this may manifest itself differently in the school environment. Understanding the pupil's emotional wellbeing will help staff gauge the right time to reintroduce formal learning.

- **Nurture Groups:** Nurture Groups can be employed within school and are usually led by a designated teacher, who implements psychosocial interventions with 12 or less students. Given the current government guidance, it is recommended that settings who wish to create a new Nurture Group, do so amongst children who are in the same 'bubble'. This may involve all teachers incorporating nurture principles and approaches into their daily teaching and dedicating specific lesson time to nurture activities.

- **Safety:** Pupils with SEND may require greater support to recognise how to stay safe and understand any new rules, such as those related to hygiene and social distancing.

- **Bereavement Support:** Inform the school if you feel your child would benefit from bereavement support. More information and resources on how to best support these children can be found here: <https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-schools-support-children-young-people/>.



Some Useful Websites

- <https://www.camhs-resources.co.uk/coronavirus>
- www.boingboing.org.uk
- www.nurtureuk.org
- www.youngminds.org

Remember, what worked today may not work tomorrow.

Notes

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Finding out more

If you would like further copies, a large-print copy or information about us and our services, please telephone or write to us at our address below.

Për Informacion

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