

Interim Guidance to Support Schools Transitioning Back Following Covid-19

Building Resilient School Communities

The transition back to school following the Covid-19 closure is a new experience for all of us. Most of us our lives have been turned upside down and we had to re-learn to function in a completely different climate, with unexpected challenges and opportunities. We have all- children, parents and staff - faced a loss in routine, separation from family and friends and for some, the worry of losing our income and jobs.

We have very little experience to draw upon in this new venture; nonetheless, previous major events in a community's life, such as epidemics or earthquakes, together with current communication we hold with school staff, parents and, at times, children, helped us understand what the circumstances might be for the Norfolk schools and their population, and how we could be moving forward, minimise stress, preserve mental health and even more, develop positively in the future.

What do we know works?

1. It is important to have and strengthen the sense of community, where
 - a. Basic practical support is primarily important, followed by
 - b. Social and emotional support
2. Most are resilient and do not require extra social, curricular, or emotional support, hence it is very important:
 - a. Not to pathologize normal reactions to the situation (e.g. grief, high stress)
 - b. To nurture optimism, mastery and social support
 - c. Help develop coping strategies via psychoeducation and targeted interventions, when necessary.
3. Perceived health and economic status are major factors in one's resilience and wellbeing.

Transition back to school is more likely to have a positive psychological impact if schools:

- Adopt a **community approach**
- Help **school staff** reconnect to schools, families and pupils
- Help **families**, and **children and young people** reconnect to schools.

Compiled by Dr Helena Bunn (Senior Educational Psychologist)

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Guidance developed by EPSS colleagues and reviewed by Richard Smith and Kirstie Summers (Trainee Educational Psychologists).

Helping staff reconnect to school: leadership, well-being and planning following Covid-19

Recovery and growth after community crises has highlighted the importance of clear, open and decisive leadership in building resilient communities. A good leadership who listens, learns and then acts is particularly important at a time of crisis. Staff will need time to reconnect and plan before children return and during the recovery stage.

School leaders should organise regular meetings with school staff to allow time for reflection and planning for staff, before children return, for staff to:

- Have a good knowledge of the existing systems of support that are already in place in school.
- Reflect and explore on the experience of lockdown on them individually and on their school community, identifying successes and lessons learnt.
- Develop peer systems of support within the workplace, which may mitigate some of the potential adverse psychological outcomes for staff.
- Consider setting up weekly peer support groups to create a safe space for staff to discuss emerging issues. Peer support groups may also incorporate discussions and exercises with staff that focus on the development of coping strategies and enhancing resilience, to minimise the risk of burnout
- Identify staff (and students) who may need extra support going forward.

When exploring and planning what needs to be achieved, a timescale including:

- Assuring the safety and wellbeing of:
 - School staff
 - Students, and by proxy,
 - Families
- Learning and development
- Monitoring health and wellbeing should be developed, with opportunities for regular reviews and adaptations.

A visible leadership, clear communication and open discussions within schools enhances school team cohesion.

Supporting your class when returning from Covid-19- information for teachers

(adapted from Psychological First Aid for schools – a field operations guide, National Child Traumatic Stress Network)

When classes resume, you may feel the need to return to academic learning quickly. However, to best promote long-term recovery and to help students return to their pre-crisis ability to concentrate and function academically, be sure to talk to them about the recovery process and address any safety concerns. You may want to modify the classroom curriculum temporarily, take extra time to cover certain material, or postpone possibly distressing subject matter. Below are suggestions:

Contact and Engagement

Take the Initiative: Students may withdraw or have other difficulties recovering from the crisis and fail to seek help. Actively reach out to students, especially those you have a good relationship with. If they aren't willing to talk with you, seek out another staff member who may be able to help. Speak in private if you can and be discreet.

Seek Consultation: It is impossible to prepare for every scenario that may occur or every concern students may have. Consult with colleagues in school and other professionals and call upon their expertise.

Safety and Comfort

Reassure Students: In the days and weeks to follow students may continue to show signs of emotional distress or concern. Reassure them that they can come to you with such concerns and/or inform them of the procedures in place to get help.

Report Safety Concerns: Be alert to rumours and report these to senior staff as appropriate.

Help Manage Grief: If a student is struggling with the death of a family member, friend or other loved one, provide appropriate emotional support. After identifying the needs of the student, find out about support available and modify academic assignments as needed.

Provide Information about the Event: Consider these guidelines when talking with students:

- Be truthful and share information in a developmentally appropriate way.
- Provide a timeline of upcoming school activities.
- Work with the students in planning memorial tributes or displays if a member of the school community has died.
Encourage students to participate in prosocial service activities (volunteer days, fund raising events).

Stabilization

Stabilize the School Environment: Calmly convey to your students that the staff and leadership team are continuing to monitor the situation and will attempt to address any

concerns they might have. Students are often anxious when facing trauma-related chaos, changes, and transitions. Providing them with a calm,

supportive environment with clear rules and expectations will help them regain a sense of security and normality.

Identify Possible Reminders: Take steps, to the extent possible, to eliminate potential reminders in your classroom that may cause distress. If a student does become reactive, calmly provide emotional support or refer him/her to the school support system.

Information Gathering

Know Common Signs of Distress: Watch and listen for any students who show signs of distress or changes in behaviour and refer them to the appropriate professionals. Signs of distress vary by age and developmental level and can include:

- Poor control of emotions
- Anger and moodiness
- Frustration and anxiety
- Social withdrawal
- Change in academic performance or in attendance
- Trouble with concentration, memory, cognition, and organization
- Physical symptoms like headaches and stomachs
- Risk-taking, unpredictable, and/or impulsive behaviour
- Intense reactions to reminders of the event

Identify Students Needing Services: If you see changes in a student, ask directly how he/she is doing. Many students will not tell someone they are having difficulty until they are directly asked. Also ask the student if he/she knows of any classmates who may need help. They are often aware of changes in their peers.

Practical Assistance

Identify Students with Resource Needs: Help to identify students' needs, such as school supplies, or uniforms.

Help Families: You may be able to help students' families with their needs and concerns by directing them to appropriate support staff and resources. Reassure them of the steps the school is taking to promote recovery. Use a part of staff meetings to discuss some of these needs and concerns so that the leadership team can problem-solve ways how to address them (e.g., identify additional community resources, use of donation funds).

Connection with Social Supports

Increase In-Class Interaction: You will want to encourage interaction among students to facilitate social support. Increase the number of group activities and collaborative assignments. Encourage reconnection with family, friends, and members of their faith communities. Provide information about upcoming community events, add

precautions if you are concerned that some students may not be ready for some events (e.g., memorials).

Information on Coping

Address Concerns: Schedule time with students to listen to their concerns about what happened. Correct misconceptions they may have about recovery. Schedule this discussion early in the day and when there is enough time to address all concerns.

Maintain Structure: Help students' recovery by keeping to the regular classroom structure as best you can. Students benefit from predictability and consistency. When children need to change teachers and/or classrooms, make the new setting as similar as possible to the previous one. If this is not possible, discuss the losses and changes as a group.

Provide Support: Students may exhibit more defiant, hyperactive, and/or distractive behaviours in your classroom. Remain calm and provide clear instructions of the behaviour you expect. Praise students for appropriate, on-task behaviour and for using effective coping skills. To assist students to be more organised, breakdown assignments into manageable parts and encourage them to write them in their planners.

Link with Collaborative Services

Provide Information on Available Services: All families, students, and staff need to know the location of school and community services and the steps required to access these services. If you are unsure of the appropriate and available resources, refer the individual in need to support staff who have that information. Have psychoeducational and informational materials available for parents in order to address their questions.

Follow up on Recommendations: Check in with students and parents to make sure that they are getting the services or resources you have recommended. If not, review the plan and adjust it accordingly. In the days and weeks to follow the school will play a vital role in the recovery of the students and the school community. You serve as the primary contact person for students throughout the course of the day by watching out for the welfare of students, identifying those who are struggling and getting them help, and providing updated and accurate information which you obtain through staff meetings and from the school leadership team. By utilising the suggestions in this handout, you can help students recover and succeed academically, psychologically, and socially. These strategies can also help you and your family. Most importantly, don't forget to take care of yourself during these stressful times.

Supporting pupil’s social, emotional and mental health following Covid-19

What is resilience?

Resilience is defined as:

“The capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic and vocational competence despite exposure to severe stress or simply the stress that is inherent in today’s world.”

(Henderson & Milstein, 2003. p7).

Resilience is a ‘dynamic’ and ‘ecological’ phenomenon, and an individual’s potential for resilience is a product of complex interactions between personal attributes and environmental circumstances ¹

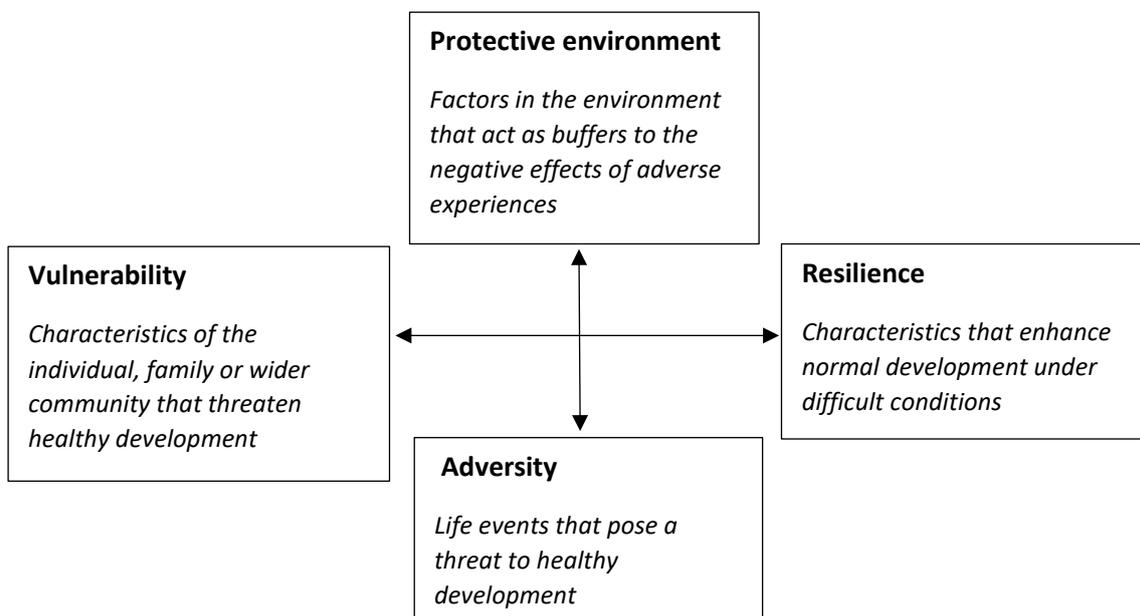


Figure 1. Framework for the assessment of resilience factors¹

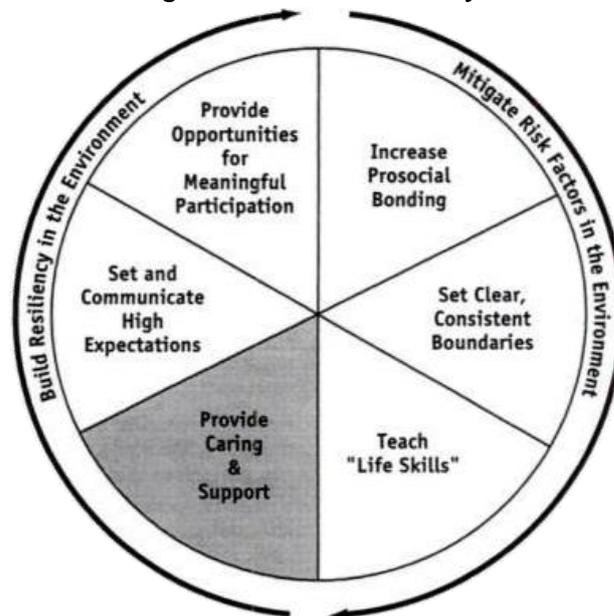
This framework has the potential to be applied to the Covid-19 pandemic, as this may be considered a life event that poses a threat (Adversity). Some children and young people may be more vulnerable than others in terms of both their individual needs and family circumstances. In planning the transition back to school, it may be beneficial to consider the risk factors and protective factors when considering how to support resilience in children and young people.

¹ Daniel, B. & Wassell, S. (2002). *Adolescence: Assessing and promoting resilience in vulnerable children 3*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

The Resiliency Wheel

The Resiliency Wheel was developed by Henderson and Milstein (2003; Figure 2). This is a framework that was developed to give guidance to schools with regards to how to support resilience in children and young people. There are two sides to the wheel; ‘Mitigating risk’, and ‘Building resilience.’ This means that the focus is not only on reducing the impact of risk, but also preparing children and young people so that future risks have less impact on them. The Resiliency Wheel illustrates six ‘Resiliency building conditions’; increasing pro-social bonding, setting clear and consistent boundaries, teaching life skills, providing caring and support, setting and communicating high expectations, and providing opportunities for meaningful participation.

Figure 2: The Resiliency Wheel²



Mitigate risk factors

Henderson and Milstein (2003) outline general actions in schools that mitigate risk:

- (a) increase prosocial bonding
- (b) clear expectations and boundaries so that young people have a clear idea about what is going to happen and how to behave
- (c) teaching important life skills such as problem-solving and conflict resolution, as well as emotion regulation.

² Henderson, N. & Milstein, M. (2003). *Resiliency in Schools: Making it happen for students and educators*. Updated edition. Corwin Press Inc.



Build resilience

Henderson & Milstein (2003) distinguish between factors that reduce the impact of risk and those that build resilience in children and young people. Actions that support the development of resilience in children and young people are:

- (a) Provision of care and support, to support a sense of belonging,
- (b) High expectations and acknowledging pupils' strengths and their potential.
- (c) Opportunities for meaningful participation, which includes involving children and young people in planning and goal setting, in addition to learning activities that are seen as meaningful and relevant.

The Centre for Childhood Resilience³ – reports that focusing on three key principles can help children cope with a range of stressors, including the situation around Covid-19.

Creating a safe environment- providing a physically *and* emotionally safe space in which children can feel comfortable seeking information and understanding what is expected for them and others.

- Meeting basic physiological needs (thirst, hunger, sleep, movement and warmth) as well as attending to their emotional needs helps to create a safe environment.
- Routines and predictability matter for all children and help put them at ease.
- Adults can help by translating information in ways that children can understand.
- Involving children in the creation of a new daily routine may help increase their sense of control in an uncertain situation.

Building relationships and connectedness - providing opportunities and activities for children to enjoy time with peers, staff and to feel a sense of community and belonging.

- Fostering positive relationships with peers.
- Fostering positive relationships with staff.
- Include time to communicate, share feelings, and enjoy shared activities.
- Linking to community groups or efforts, children can enhance their sense of helpfulness and power during uncertainty.

Supporting and teaching emotion regulation - acknowledging that all of us (adults and children) are experiencing many complex feelings and helping them learn and use age-appropriate ways to express those feelings safely.

- Normalising feelings and assuring children that ALL feelings are okay will help to manage unexpected and challenging emotions. Focusing on ways to normalise reactions and practice coping methods will be helpful.
- Develop understanding of thoughts feelings and behaviours and how they are linked.

³ <https://childhoodresilience.org/resources-1>

Risk / protective factors for pupils' emotional wellbeing and ideas for support SEMH following Covid-19

Vulnerability / risk factors	Protective factors / areas for support	Potential strategies	Resources
Reduced anxiety from being at home - potential for increased school refusal.	<p>Teach Life skills: Teaching skills to manage anxiety about returning to school.</p> <p>Developing understanding of thoughts, feelings and behaviours.</p>	<p>Worries/fears document sent to child to fill in before starting so the worries can be directly targeted, maybe a questionnaire style that could highlight the particular worry so staff can be prepared in advance.</p> <p>Emotion Coaching may be a useful approach</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>recognising their emotions,</i> 2. <i>validating their feelings,</i> 3. <i>setting limits on behaviours and</i> 4. <i>facilitating joint problem solving.</i> <p>www.emotioncoachinguk.com</p>	<p><u>Puppy mind</u></p> <p><u>Cosmic Kids Yoga</u></p> <p><u>Stop, Breathe & Think for kids app</u></p> <p><u>Take5breathing</u></p> <p>Surrey County Council - "Coping with school changes related to Covid-19"</p>
	Supporting a sense of connectedness and belonging in school.	A whole class document of things that have happened in the time away (I wish my teacher knew ...).	
	Reducing the pressure of returning to school.	Staggered starts for those children that are anxious. School will feel overwhelming and there will be a need to re-establish routines and relationships. Staggered starts and part-time timetables may support everyone to adjust and allow children (and staff) time to talk about and share their experiences and learning.	
	Caring & support: Key attachment figure in school.	<p>Named member of staff for primary carer transition.</p> <p>Keyworker to touch base before starting school.</p>	

	Supporting peer relationships.	Buddy system. Time at start of school to focus on relationships.	
Anxiety around change, new teachers/classroom/school.	Clarity and consistency. Feelings of safety and security.	Transition café or meetings prior to start date to meet new people or reconnect with existing peers. Breakfast club/settling in period. Maybe look at specific members of staff assigned to settling in phase. Video of the new environment for children starting a new school or classroom (step by step visual guide of what to do when arriving and what things will look like). Explicit explanation of what will happen and how it will happen/what to expect (social stories/visual timetables). A document from school with helpful tips for parents and children e.g. Getting into a routine before school starts (getting up early), copy of school dinner menu, getting equipment and uniform ready and a full timetable so the family is fully armed and prepared before the first day.	
Health anxiety.	Clarity and consistency. Feelings of safety and security.	A description of the health and safety measures being taken to keep them safe in school (regarding the virus but not detailed enough to cause extra concern or anxiety).	
Loss / bereavement.	Opportunities for meaningful participation.	Opportunity for ceremony in school / activities to commemorate those who have been lost.	What is Grief – a worksheet from ELSA Network:

	<p>Developing understanding of thoughts, feelings and behaviour.</p> <p>Feelings of safety and security.</p>	<p>Opportunities to discuss feelings with a key person, where there is a chance to understand that the feelings of grief are normal.</p>	<p>https://www.elsanetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/what-is-grief.pdf (Child friendly explanation of what grief is and how it can affect you)</p> <p>Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk (publications and school and parent resources)</p>
Domestic violence / difficult home situation during lockdown.	Feelings of safety and security.	Safeguarding training to ensure that all adults are ready to listen to children's experiences during lockdown and respond appropriately to disclosures and indicators of abuse.	
Separation anxiety.	Developing feelings of safety, security	<p>A comforter from home, maybe with the primary caregiver's scent (for younger children).</p> <p>Named keyworker.</p>	A good book for this 'The invisible String'.
Lack of endings e.g. year 6 and year 11.	<p>Aspiration and motivation.</p> <p>Recognition of strengths and potential.</p> <p>Developing understanding of thoughts, feelings and behaviour.</p>	<p>Goal setting opportunities.</p> <p>Opportunities to understand that feelings are normal given the circumstances</p>	<p>Darlington EPS document – vision board. Accessible on the Norfolk EPSS' website.</p> <p>See EPSS guidance: <i>Supporting pupils at transition stages</i>.</p> <p>www.thrivingadolescent.com</p>

Compiled by Dr Georgina Turner (Educational Psychologist) & Louse Brown (SEMH Practitioner)

Supporting pupils on the Autistic Spectrum

What we know:

- Change/unpredictable situations can often lead to challenging responses.
- The impact of Covid-19 has led to some students attending school, whilst others remain at home. These environments have been designated as 'safe' places for students.
- Some students have not engaged in any learning related tasks made available from schools, whilst others have completed learning tasks (with some engaging more successfully with learning in the home environment compared to school).
- Families direct experiences of Covid-19 will have been variable, such as: the impact of self-isolating, shielding and social distancing. This change in contact with the wider community impacting on relationships, activities, access to food and household supplies, etc.
- Evolving information has brought reassurance to some, whereas others have experienced heightened levels of anxiety regarding the risk of infection to themselves or their family members.
- The process for lifting restrictions is unknown at this time, media speculation can present false information and further increase anxiety. The return to school will not be going back to what they left.

Preparing for the restrictions being lifted:

- Routines implemented and where possible linked to some of the activities provided by school, however, the priority is to support emotional well-being, and this may mean that these demands have been adapted so that the daily routine is based around functional/play activities in the home. Ideally lunchtimes could be aligned with those at school.
- Relationships between student and familiar staff members maintained- for some students who struggle with engaging in school information, this may be through video calls with parent/carers and/or child and could involve sharing of items of interest to the child through video/emails, for example sending a picture of a Lego model to a child who likes Lego – indicating that the child is being kept in mind.
- Schools in liaison with the families should consider what changes have taken place in the interim period, even the students in school will need support as to what is going to change. This could include: physical changes – most classrooms have had a deep clean and equipment may have been moved; staff appearance may be different e.g. hair, pregnancy, etc; staff may have left their post; the outdoor environment may be different due to seasonal changes/ maintenance; transport arrangements (changes in taxi); etc.

- Parents should also consider practical aspects, such as, uniform and shoes fitting.
- Changes within the home need to be shared, for some families there may have been Safeguarding/bereavement issues to consider.
- Some students may have increase fear of people as a result of the lockdown measures- with a perception that other people are dangerous. Support will need to be given to reduce anxiety about shared spaces and the physical proximity to others (e.g. how many to expect).
- Consideration for how the Covid-19 situation has impacted on staff at an individual and school level.
- Students at the school could be involved in developing a virtual tour of the school, there could be facilitated opportunities, with the appropriate safeguards implemented, to 'show' peers what is happening in school or link peers with friend/class members through virtual platforms with their teacher.
- Close liaison with the family to agree individualised social scripts/social stories to support the transition- reviews should be factored in to share additional information as it becomes known and to gauge how the student/family is feeling about the return to school.
- Recognition that the transition back to school is likely to be a gradual process. The use of visuals and calendars should support this so that the student will become more able to predict how the events will be organised.

Transitions into a new school, in addition to the above:

- Consideration as to how students say 'goodbye' to their previous setting to provide closure.
- Key staff from the new setting will need to establish virtual meetings with the families and student to gain an understanding of the current presentation as this may have changed in the interim. It may be useful to include key staff from current/former setting to share their knowledge to inform the transition.
- The use of pre-existing transition materials should be reviewed as to what additional support can be facilitated using remote working. The use of virtual tours of the school would serve to inform about the physical environment of the school and introduce staff, until restrictions allow for face-to-face contact. This could also include information about the structure of the day and an introduction to the interventions that are offered to students.
- Peer mentors may be an appropriate resource to support when visits to schools can commence.
- See guidance below '*Supporting pupils at transition stages*'.

Compiled by Dr Sue Ackerley (Educational Psychologist), Julie Stewart (ASD Support Coordinator) & Anna Pearson (Specialist Learning Support Teacher)

Supporting pupils at transition stages

Who are these pupils?

Pupils who were at a 'transition' stage of school prior to Covid-19:

- Pre-school pupils moving to Reception;
- Some Year 2 pupils moving to Junior School;
- Year 6 pupils moving to Secondary School;
- Year 11 pupils moving to College, and;
- Year 13 pupils finishing College.

What are the vulnerabilities of these pupils?

Moving to a new school can be unnerving for any child or young person.

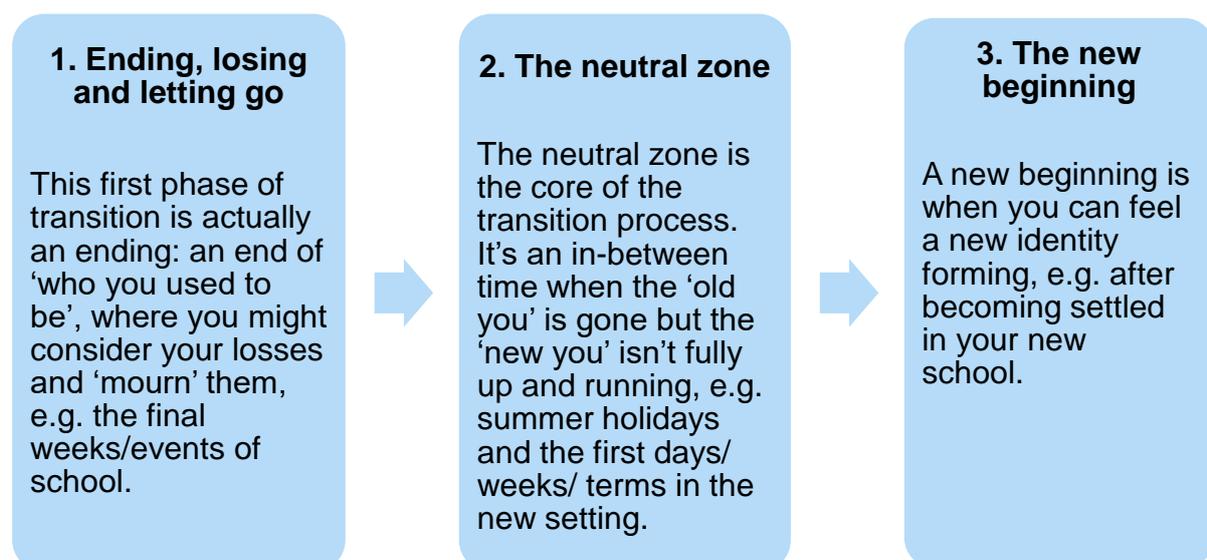
Evidence suggests that particular groups of children and young people are likely to find a school transition challenging, such as, those with;

- Special educational needs and disabilities;
- Mental health needs such as anxiety;
- Limited parental support;
- Experiences of transient living, such as being in care;
- Experiences of being bullied.

Psychological perspective

Change is something that happens to people, even if they don't agree with it. Transition, however, is internal, and is what happens in people's minds as they go through change. Change can happen very quickly, while transition usually occurs more slowly.

Bridge's model of transition highlights three stages of transition which people go through when they experience change:



As a result of the period of school restrictions due to Covid-19, a number of pupils may be missing out on 'Stage 1' of their school transition processes. Pupils may be positioned in the Stage 2 'neutral zone' earlier than is typical and expected, due to having had less time and opportunities to 'mourn' their previous school.

For example:

They may experience a reduction in time with staff or peers who they will be 'leaving' at the end of the school year.

- Potential impact: earlier than anticipated 'goodbyes'.

Missing out on pre-planned activities and events to mark 'the end' of their experience at the setting. e.g. Sports days, Leaving assemblies, Fairs etc.

- Potential impact: missing expected 'closure' and 'endings'

Missing out on pre-planned activities and events to prepare for transition to new school, e.g. Intake days at new school/college, class discussions around transition

- Potential impact: missing expected 'preparation' for Stage 2 and 3.

What is some practical advice for supporting these pupils?

Stage 1: Ending, losing and letting go

- **Take time to list all the ways in which your new school life might be different:** Think of all the changes you can, and any knock-on effects on other areas of your life. E.g. *"I won't see my old teachers", or "I might not see all my friends in every lesson anymore", or "I won't know the school layout and might need a map"*.
- **Take the time to mourn losses:** Expect and accept signs of grieving and don't confuse them with failure. It is OK to feel angry, sad, frightened, angry and confused. Don't feel that you have to make the feelings go away. It's even better if you can share this with a friend who you're moving with, and/or friends/teachers you're not.
- **Define what's over, and what isn't:** It's not all sad. Look at the big list of changes and group them into themes: interesting patterns might emerge. Some things might be 'gone' because they are bound to a time and place, but not everything has to end permanently, e.g. seeing friends from your old school. Some things just need to be changed to the new situation, e.g. making plans to meet friends after school/at clubs.
- **Endings and celebrations:** Where any events to celebrate the end of your time at Infant/Primary/Secondary school/College have had to be cancelled or rearranged, find time and creative ways to still have these markers and celebrations, e.g. online 'parties', assemblies, sports events etc.



Stage 2: The neutral zone

- **Accept that it's normal:** It's normal to not have everything worked out in a day, week, or even a month, e.g. it is normal to still get lost sometimes in a new school, to forget your books, or miss your old teachers etc., even after some time.

- **Create a sense of achievement and movement:** The good thing about transitions is that they can be great for learning new things. You can define what success looks like and you can reward yourself when you achieve these goals. E.g. learning how to use new equipment in Science or Art lessons, learning new sports skills at clubs, etc.



Stage 3: The new beginning

- **Picture the new beginning:** Visualisation is a powerful mental tool. Try to *picture* your new beginning and what it will feel to be part of it, e.g. picture your new school uniform, new stationary, school bag, new classrooms, clubs etc.
- **Have a plan, milestones, and check-in moments:** When things start to change in your life it's important to create some 'achievement milestones', and build in time for reflection, e.g. see how things are going and how you are feeling at the end of every school day, week, half-term, term etc. You may notice a difference in how you feel!

General advice to support successful school transitions

At the earliest stage, identify those pupils who may be more at risk. Closely liaise with parents/carers to develop a plan for how to best prepare the young person.

To support the children through the stages described above:

- Provide opportunities to talk about the transition and share any concerns.
- Connect pupils who may be moving to same/settings.
- Utilising a key adult approach may be helpful to enable the children to feel confident to share any worries or concerns they may have.
- Arrange remote 'transition' days where the children can get to know the staff at their new setting. The use of maps and pictures could be helpful.
- Carry out 'virtual' celebrations to mark the end of the school year.

Further resources

- Bridges, W. (2017). *Managing Transitions: Making the most of change*. Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
- Mentally Healthy Schools support for transitions.
<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/school-based-risk-factors/transitions/>
- Activities and resources to support discussion about school transitions:
<https://www.tes.com/articles/transitions>
- Tips to share with pupils:
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/moving-on-top-tips-for-pupils.pdf>
- A video that can be shared with children:
<https://youngminds.org.uk/resources/school-resources/find-your-feet-transitioning-to-secondary-school/>

Helping vulnerable parents to support their children transitioning back to school following Covid-19

Within education, the children and young people we serve are obviously our primary focus. However, children and young people do not exist in a vacuum. They are part of a range of systems. We can consider these systems surrounding a child or young person from Bronfenbrenner’s Ecosystemic Model (1979):

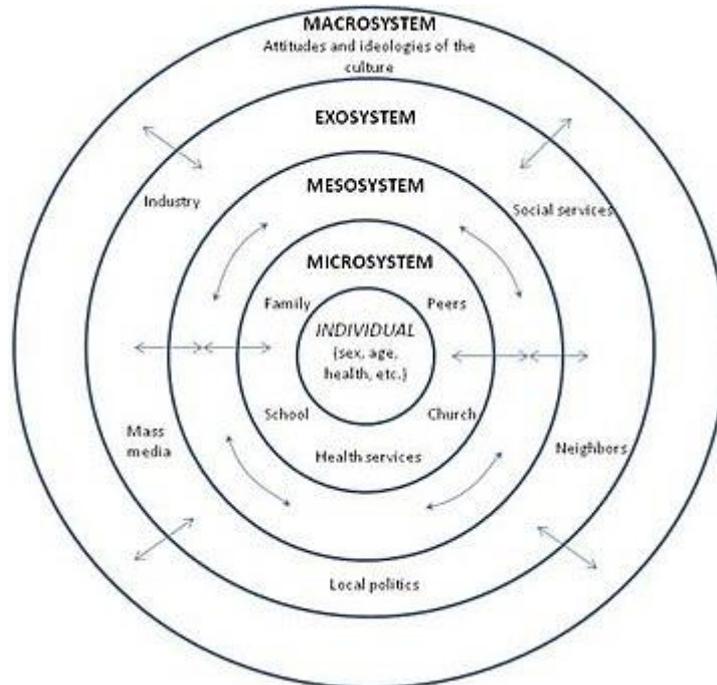


Figure 1. The Ecosystemic model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

As can be seen from Figure 1 there are five levels to this model, and it is important to consider all of them when thinking how best to support a child or young person. One might consider the microsystem to be the support system for the child or young person. We must however as professionals consider how we can support members of the microsystem in order to allow them to best support the child or young person at the centre of the system.

This information sheet focuses on supporting children and young people by considering the needs of their parents who may be considered as vulnerable themselves. More specifically parents who may have learning disabilities, a neurodevelopmental condition, literacy needs, or parents who have enduring mental health or physical health needs. This support will be especially critical as we prepare for children to return to school in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

Below are some different ideas about supporting vulnerable parents to manage the transition back to school but it is by no means an exhaustive list. The best way to meet the needs of a given parent is to make time to discuss and identify reasonable adjustments to support them.

Different vulnerable parent groups and potential areas of need:

Parents with learning disabilities, social communication needs or literacy difficulties –

- Parents in these groups may experience difficulties with the volume and complexity of information communicated to them regarding their child/children's transition back to school.
- Parents in these groups may also struggle to communicate or advocate their needs to the school.
- The change in routine from social distancing might be extremely challenging to manage and cause a great deal of anxiety

Parents with mental health needs –

- Parents within this group may have specific anxieties about allowing their children to school and the associated risks relating to Covid-19.
- The volume of information given to them and specific changes relating to school may feel overwhelming.
- These parents may also find it very challenging to managing their child's anxieties and frustrations regarding returning to school.

Parents with physical health needs –

- Parents from this group may be especially vulnerable to the ongoing health related challenges that we face due to Covid-19.

It will be important for schools to support these parents by ensuring their children follow all necessary hand hygiene processes when returning home from school.

Support for parents with learning disabilities, social communication needs or literacy difficulties

- Develop easy read letters to communicate information to these parents where possible use Arial, Font 14 for the text. Make sure sentences are short, using concrete information and only contain one piece of key information. Support the written information with pictures where possible.
- Avoid using Jargon either in written or verbal communications.
- If transition is staggered for different age groups be sure to provide colour coded visual timetables so that parents can easily follow when their children are expected to be in school.
- Where possible ensure the parents have a contact person within the school who they feel comfortable to approach if they have any questions.
- Ensure any changes are announced in advance where possible to allow parents time to process them and seek support from the school if required.
- Allow parents/carers time to process information.
- Be sure to allow enough time when you are giving information to parents or carers over the phone or in person.
- Identify any support systems the parent/carer has and communicate key information to them with signed prior consent from the individual.
- Ensure children are accessing support from Young Carers where appropriate.

Parents with mental health needs

- Support the parent to understand the process school is taking to manage the health and wellbeing of all people within the school.
- If transition back to school is staggered for different age groups be sure to provide easy to follow guidance so that parents can follow it and not feel overwhelmed at what will be a potentially anxiety provoking time.
- Provide practical guidance about maintaining hand hygiene and other protective steps when transitioning between school and home. This may help to reduce anxieties at transition points during the day.
- Monitoring student wellbeing and provide practical advice on managing any mental health needs of the child as well as the parents.
- Where possible ensure the parents have a contact person within the school who they feel comfortable to approach if they have any questions.
- Ensure the parent engages with any existing support resources and networks to help them manage transitions.

- Ensure children are accessing support from Young Carers where appropriate.

Parents with physical health needs

- Follow any necessary protective processes and risk assessment to safeguard the parents under the advice of primary health care professionals supporting them.
- Ensure the children follow all hand hygiene procedures thoroughly at school and ensure they have a clear process to maintain hygiene when returning home.
- Ensure children are accessing support from Young Carers where appropriate.

Table of resources

Parents with Mental Health Needs	The Mind Guide to parenting with a mental health problem (2019)
Parents with Learning Disabilities	<p>Supporting Parents with Learning Disabilities – CHANGE Good Practice Guidance (2006)</p> <p>Good Practice Guidance on Working with Parents with Learning Disabilities Bristol University, Esme Fairbairn Foundation (2007)</p>

Compiled by Richard Smith (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

Supporting bereaved children returning to school after Covid-19

Many children and young people will have experienced bereavement during this time period, and this will have brought some unique issues.

Children who have been bereaved during this time period may not have been able to access support in the usual way from their wider support network. They may not have had opportunities to communicate with their friends and other trusted adults outside of their immediate family. They may not have been able to take part in funerals and have missed out on opportunities to say good-bye to a loved one.

Experiencing the death of a family member during this time of physical distancing may lead to disenfranchised grief. Doka defines this as ‘grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned’ (Doka, 1989).

Children will have also missed out on the experience of normality whilst attending school, which often provides relief from the grief at home.

When returning to school, experiences of children will vary widely. For bereaved children this may have been a very difficult time, whilst some other children may have enjoyed their time away from school.

People deal with the current situation very differently; a small number of children will have experienced this period as traumatic. Whilst some children take comfort from talking about the past few weeks and the events that have happened, other children will want to go back to the normality of school, which schools may not be able to provide. It is likely that schools will have to make some considerable adjustments when they open, and they may also want to deliver a recovery curriculum.

If children have experienced the death of a family member through Covid-19, they may also continue to worry about Covid-19. An increased thinking of death and safety, problems with sleeping, eating, anger and attention can all be part of how children deal with their experiences.

When providing support, the following may be useful to consider (Psychological First Aid, Scotland, 2020):



Please consider the following, which has been adapted from our sample bereavement policy for schools:

After being informed of bereavement

- Contact the parent/carer to express sympathy – this might be difficult, but it is much easier if you get in touch with the family early on.
- Gather as much information as possible about the circumstance of the death, and find out what the child has been told.
- Offer the opportunity for children to come back to school if possible – find out about any worries or concerns about returning. It may be difficult for children to come back whilst the family is still worried about others becoming ill with Covid-19. If this is a particular concern, ensure that this is discussed with other professionals such as the Critical Incident Lead Officer, your Educational Psychologist or from colleagues from the attendance service.
- Explain that support will be available for them and that you will discuss this in detail upon their return.
- Share information with all staff – and talk with them again after you have met with the child and family and know their wishes, e.g. what kind of support would they like from staff.
- Talk with the parent/carer and child to find out their views of how they would like to be supported. We all acknowledge that this might be difficult, but unless you discuss this with the child/young person you will not know what support will be helpful to them.

Discuss

- if and how children would like the information to be shared with their classmates
- who would be the best person to provide support for them, and who they can talk to when they are finding it difficult
- discuss how children can access time out if they are finding it difficult to cope with a lesson (time out cards can be helpful)
- identify a person who will keep in touch with home
- discuss pressures of homework and exams

Short-term support

Be sensitive to the specific needs of the bereaved child at this current time– these will be different for different children. Some children might appreciate the availability of a quiet space – but others might just want the usual opportunities to be with their friends and experience a sense of normality.

Younger children may usually be comforted by physical contact, a little hug. This may not be possible at the moment. Schools may wish to consider having a large cuddly toy accessible for children to hug.

Talking about Covid-19 can be difficult for children who have experienced a bereavement in this time – be mindful of this.

Be aware of friends - children sometimes provide a considerable amount of support to their friend – you may need to consider how they are supported, and whether to make parents aware.

Reassure children that their feelings are normal in this very unusual situation.

Children may struggle with difficulties with concentration as the bereavement takes up a lot of thinking time. Young people tell us that teachers sometimes get annoyed with them as they had not completed work – being unaware of their situation. Good communication across the school is really important – particularly in secondary schools. Staff cannot be supportive if schools are too precious about the information they share – all staff need to know.

Give praise for any achievements and reassure the child that things will improve in time. Be mindful of the child's ability to fully engage in learning and the quality of the work they are able to produce – it can a challenging task to find the right balance between allowing for difficulties whilst not lowering expectations.

Be consistent with expectations for appropriate behaviour, but do offer support if a child has difficulties.

Arrange regular 'check in' meetings with their trusted adult to monitor their progress and take account of issues as they arise, offering early support.

We are aware that grief does not operate on a timetable, and it may be months or years later that a young person is most in need of support. As children and young people are growing up, their understanding and needs change, and many will revisit their bereavement at different stages of their life, especially as teenagers.

Supporting Parents/Carers

A death in the family can cause a disruption for many months. Family members are grieving, relationships alter, and members may take on new roles. Parents/carers may continue to be worried about the potential of others being affected by Covid-19.

Coming back on the playground, taking their children back to school for a first time after a bereavement can be very difficult at this particular time when everyone may be exchanging stories about how they spent time at home during Covid-19. Ensure you have a conversation with parents/carers and consider if you can make arrangements to make it easier for them, e.g. meet them in reception, allow them to drop their child a bit earlier/later, etc.

Keeping in touch with families and letting them know how their children are doing can be helpful. Find out what would work in the current situation and provide a named link person for families if at all possible.

How staff will be supported

Bereavement is 'not only painful to experience, but also painful to witness' (Bowlby, 1980).

Supporting bereaved children can be very stressful, especially at this time when there is so much else to think about. Witnessing another person's grief can also remind staff of their own experiences of bereavement.

As a school you have a duty of care towards our employees and will need to ensure that staff are appropriately supported when dealing with difficult issues, like supporting bereaved children. Headteachers are responsible for putting appropriate support mechanisms in place for staff. They should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Staff can also support each other. It is important to know one's limitations. There is only so much staff can offer, and sometimes it is time to refer children on to specialist bereavement services.

Being prepared can give staff confidence, which will make it easier to support bereaved children – there is training available for any member of staff, offered by the Norfolk Critical Incident Service and specifically tailored to schools.



Support and advice available to children and families

Norfolk Educational Psychology Service, Website information
<https://www.norfolkepss.org.uk/bereavement-during-covid-19/>

Nelson's Journey, Norfolk bereavement charity
<http://www.nelsonsjourney.org.uk/contact-us/>

Smiles and Tears Smartphone App – available from the App store

Grief Encounter, Website information and helpline
<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/serviceupdate/>

Winston's Wish, Website information and helpline
<https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/>

Cruse Bereavement Care, Website information and helpline
<https://www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/children-and-young-people>

Compiled by Dr Bianca Finger-Berry (Critical Incident Lead)

Covid-19 as a traumatic experience

We know that most children who have lived through traumatic experiences such as wars, natural disasters and terrorist attacks will recover. We expect that most children will bounce back from this difficult time in their life, and whilst having a short-term impact, most will not have long term symptoms.

However, some children and young people have experienced the period so far as being traumatic. Traumatic experiences involve the exposure to terrible events which are outside the range of daily human experience, and which are emotionally painful, intense and distressing.

According to DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition) the criteria are as follows:

"Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:

- *Directly experiencing the traumatic event*
- *Witnessing, in person, the traumatic event*
- *Learning that the traumatic event occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event must have been violent or accidental*
- *Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse)" (pg. 271)².*

For these children the following may be useful to consider:

- Trauma blocks higher cognitive learning processes (Van der Kolk, 2014)
- As levels of traumatic stress increase, the ability to problem solve decreases (Cioer et al, 2014)
- Continued exposure to high levels of stress hormones can manifest into inability to calm (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005)
- Hypervigilant, highly aroused, hyperactive - can appear like ADHD (Brendtro, 2015)
- Inability to de-escalate at a typical rate (Van der Kolk, 2014)
- Struggle in school academically, behaviourally and socially (Merritt & Klein, 2014)
- Difficulties in forming relationships
- Concentration difficulties
- Inability to conform – appears as oppositional behaviour (Fecser, 2015)
- Trauma affects the development of skills, emotions and values (Amendola & Oliver, 2013)

Trauma in schools: Identifying and working with students who have experienced trauma (Berg, 2017)

Considering developmental aspects are also important:

- Children of all ages are vulnerable, but react in age-specific ways
- Each developmental stage provides both protective self-healing processes and vulnerabilities
- Traumatic experience may slow down or expedite developmental transition
- The target of worries and threats age-specific
- Families respond as a system

Uniqueness of children in traumatization :

- Personality: temperament
- Age
- Family relations
- Meanings of trauma
- Cognitive capacity
- Developmental concerns

(European Network Traumatic Stress)

To identify children who need additional support, it is helpful to understand more about post-traumatic stress disorder. The most common symptoms are:

Re-experiencing: This is when a person involuntarily and vividly relives the traumatic event in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, repetitive and distressing images or sensations, physical sensations such as pain, sweating, feeling sick or trembling

Avoidance and emotional numbing: Trying to avoid being reminded of the traumatic event

Hyperarousal (feeling on edge): Someone with PTSD may be very anxious and find it difficult to relax. They may be constantly aware of threats and easily startled.

Other problems, in children in particular trouble sleeping, upsetting nightmares, losing interest in activities they used to enjoy, physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches. Other symptoms in children include difficult behaviour, avoiding things related to the traumatic event, re-enacting the traumatic event again and again through their play. (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/symptoms/>)

The school environment when children return needs to be made as safe as possible, and this refers to both their physical safety as well as their psychological well-being.

Please see guidance on 'supporting your class when returning from Covid-19' for ideas on how to make some adaptations: <https://www.norfolkepss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Supporting-your-class-after-returning-to-school.pdf>

If you are concerned that a child is experiencing acute stress reactions due to Covid-19, please ensure that appropriate services are accessed:

- Child's GP: details on child's records
- Norfolk First Response: 24/7 helpline offering immediate advice, support and signposting for people with mental health difficulties: 0808 196 3494
- Chathealth: texting service for 11-19 year olds: 07480 635060 (9-5 Monday – Friday)
- Point 1: support for children experiencing mental health or emotional problems: 0800 977 4077
- Trauma Response Network: <https://www.traumaresponsenetwork.org/turn-to-us2> (free therapy for those experiencing acute anxiety or PTSD due to Covid-19)