Supporting Vulnerable Children & Young People, including those with SEND, when transitioning back to school following school closures

Introduction

This is a resource for schools preparing for children returning to school who may be identified as being a vulnerable group. It uses a resilience framework for identifying those children who are most at risk, offering guidance on how to support those children and also advice for specific vulnerable groups, including children with ASD, Learning Difficulties, SEMH needs, and those with other Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). As a group of South Gloucestershire Educational Psychologists, we sought to review and organise this so that adults could access the information they need more readily and also be assured of our views on its quality. We have provided a wide range of links with a short description of each.

At the outset of the pandemic, we provided suggestions of resources which were appropriate at that time, including: helping children to understand Coronavirus, support for parents, staff wellbeing, and specific resources for children with SEND. They are separated into early years, primary and secondary resources and can be found here, under the heading promoting health and wellbeing in school settings,

The British Psychological Society is currently engaging in a large project to develop and collate resources for schools. When this is completed, South Gloucestershire EPs will ensure these resources are shared with schools. We will also update this guidance when there is a clearer picture of how and when students will return to school.

Resiliency Framework

Identifying those children who are most vulnerable

A resilience framework is a straightforward way of identifying those children who are likely to have difficulty with the transition back to school. It should be recognised that some children may not have been previously considered vulnerable, but the events of the lockdown may have put them in a vulnerable category; for example, they may be displaying signs of anxiety not previously evident.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities (e.g. schools) and society that can promote wellbeing and reduce the risk of negative outcomes and include providing and fostering:

- Warm, caring relationships.
- Positive school experiences.
- Maintaining and making friendships.
- Having hobbies and interests.
- Good level of cognitive skills.

- Good social skills.
- Self-regulation skills.
- Self-efficacy.
- Optimism.

Risk Factors

Risk factors are those characteristics that are likely to contribute to poorer outcomes for CYP and include:

- Nature and amount of adversity experienced (Lockdown itself is likely to have exacerbated some other adverse childhood experiences).
- The timing/spacing between adverse events.
- Limited understanding by CYP of what is going on.
- Weaker cognitive skills.
- Weaker social competency skills.
- Loss of a parent (separation/death/imprisonment).
- Family breakdown/parental conflict.
- Poverty, parental unemployment.
- Domestic abuse.
- Abuse and neglect.
- Parents with additional difficulties which prevent the CYP's needs being met (mental and physical health issues).

Behavioural Indicators of Vulnerability

This list is not exhaustive but should be a good starting point to alert staff. These are behaviours that your CYP might present with at school**:**

- Changes in usual behaviour.
- Low mood.
- Increase in anxious behaviours.
- Increase in physical health problems.
- Withdrawal and isolation.
- Over compliance.
- Increased need for reassurance.
- Helplessness.
- Increased distractibility.
- Increased levels of fatigue.
- Lowered self-esteem (perception of self as less competent than before).
- Weaker social skills.
- Emotionally more reactive including challenging behaviour involving the police, harm to self and others, substance use, destructiveness.
- Irregular school attendance.

Other formats for identifying those who might be vulnerable

More formal methods for identifying those who might be vulnerable include: an intake questionnaire completed by or with parents; intake interviews with pupils or use class or small group activities:

- [The SG Anxiety Resources](#) document has a "Worries and Strength Prompt Sheet" on pp22-23 which might provide a useful basis for creating an intake questionnaire

- [You Tube Video](#) This teacher uses a basic rating system to allow children to communicate how they are feeling at the beginning of each day. This would be a way of keeping track of vulnerable children who are consistently reporting low ratings.

Universal approaches to supporting transitions

So, what can be done? Again, this list is not prescriptive nor definitive. The wealth of knowledge and understanding in schools is great and should be utilised within and across schools. The aim is to assist planning.

What can be done before the children return?

- A whole school response which needs to be agreed and practised by all staff – consistency will be key.
- Agree consistent expectations and behaviour plans that are based on positive affirmations and collaborative problem-solving.
- Think about each child/young person's individual needs.
- Make available advice from SENDCos to parents e.g. ideas about how to prevent and or cope with meltdowns, setting up new routines at home, Social Stories™.
- Gain feedback from parents about their CYP.
- Send differentiated home learning.
- Remote video-enabled check-ins with familiar staff.
- Remote video-enabled 'welcome to your new school' tours.
- Provision of materials for home learning.
- Refresh selves of Emotion Coaching Principles and scripts [here](#).
- Consider access to extra-curricular activities at school (for example after school hours and summer holiday period).

What can be done when school starts back?

Planning should take into account the fundamental message that says: you are welcome here, we want you here, you are safe here (physically and mentally). Stress can be buffered by:

- Spend time welcoming the children back, individually or small groups.
- Create a sense of community within the classroom. This can be achieved through involving pupils in the planning and implementation of activities, and social activities that create a sense of belonging. Communal language such as 'our school' or 'our project' is also helpful.
- Creating low anxiety classrooms and school environments – share your calm, optimism and hope.
- Be empathic, compassionate and accepting.
- Knowing about and using children's interests in teaching and learning opportunities: be playful and curious.

- Being intentional in providing quality, supportive, safe relationships.
- Fostering the right balance between structure and nurture.
- Actively applying emotion coaching – all feelings are valid. It's ok to have a wobble.
- Being mindful that all behaviour is communication – there might be an increase in CYP needing attention and reassurance.
- Focusing on developing CYP's sense of belonging and identity.
- Focusing on strengthening core life skills including: planning, organising and problem-solving.
- Not expecting too much too soon.
- Teaching emotional literacy focusing on how to manage anxiety universally and, where necessary, allowing for small group and 1:1 interventions of sufficient duration and frequency. A good model is the ELSA approach.
- Connecting with families.
- Connecting with outside agencies.

Staff well-being

Nearly all the above strategies can be applied to staff. Managing personal and professional stress is as important.

- Know your limits.
- Take time out.
- Seek support and distraction from friends, family or colleagues.
- Explore and practise simple self-calming techniques.
- Remind yourself, practise and model positive self-talk.
- Be active.
- Ask for help.
- Slow down and allow yourself time to really notice things.
- Create a plan you can follow if you begin to feel less able to cope, consider sharing it and follow it if necessary.

Vulnerable groups

The following is divided into three main sections:

a. Children with learning difficulties and those with autism,
b. Children with SEMH needs,
c. Children with other Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Children with learning difficulties and those with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Children and young people with learning difficulties and autism spectrum disorders will experience many of the same emotions and have similar concerns as their neuro-typical peers regarding the transition back to school. However, children with learning difficulties and particularly those with ASD may experience anxiety at a heightened level due to the changes they have already experienced in their usual routines and further changes which will be necessary as they return to school. Children with learning difficulties may find it harder to understand what is happening and may struggle to find the language to discuss their concerns.

Children with a high level of need are likely to require an individually planned return to school. These children are most likely to have been those with whom school have kept in close contact during school closures. This will be beneficial in schools being aware of how the child has managed during this time and preparation for the return to school can be woven naturally into these 'keep in touch' discussions in coming weeks.

The Schudio TV website is highly recommended. Once you have signed up (it's free) you can access a series of modules on preparing children with ASD and SEND to go back to school. It takes a person centred approach. If you look at all the modules it takes about an hour, but feels time very well spent.

Planning for the return to school: Preparation is key.

Finding out what has happened for the child and their family during school closures will provide a **starting point for planning** and for gaining insight into the child's perspective on returning to school. Helpful information to find out includes: What the child has been enjoying whilst they haven't been at school; have there been any significant events; how did the child learn best during their time at home; and what is the child worried about in returning to school. We can tailor our planning once we have answers to some of these questions: for example, revisiting activities which children have enjoyed at home and offering direct reassurance on concerns. Children could be encouraged to bring in photobooks of activities they have completed or experiences they have enjoyed with their families.

Sharing of clear and simple information to support understanding.

Children will need adults to describe the current situation for them in clear and **simple language**, which is in line with their developmental stage, levels of understanding, and language. They will benefit from visuals which support the spoken word, such as **social stories**™ which clarify new expectations about social distancing and photographs which illustrate new rules. **Visual prompts/task schedules** may be needed which break down new expectations into smaller steps, such as washing hands when entering school. Children may be able to practice some of these skills before they return to school so that they are more familiar. The STARS website has some resources which can be downloaded and personalised for your setting.

The 'normal for now' routine

Where possible, we should seek to **ground the new in the familiar**. For example, the child may be in a different classroom, but we could make sure they have their own workstation and familiar resources. Highlighting to children things that are the same helps them to make the **connection between the old and the new** and offers reassurance of the things they can 'hold on to'. There will be very many changes in the way schools function, many of these are unknowns at that moment but, once known, we should seek to prepare children of these prior to their return to school. Videos, photographs, webcams, and the school website may be useful vehicles for this.

Supporting new routines with **visuals** will also be helpful. Parents could use **pictorial calendars** with their child to show which days they will be at school and which days they will be at home. Once the return to school date is known, parents can start to count down the days with their child using this tool. In the run up to school starting, parents could helpfully support their child by **re-instating routines** which may have slipped during this period at home, such as getting up, dressed, and having breakfast.

Adults in school will be working with all children to re-establish **expectations, rules and boundaries**, as well as introducing new ones which relate specifically to physical distancing measures. For all children, visual supports and frequent reminders will be needed. Adults will need to ensure lanyards/key rings feature all the additional visual cues children might need and ensure children understand what they represent.

Changes to adults working in school may be necessary, for example, if there are adults who are shielding at home. A **simple narrative** which provides an explanation of this and provides reassurance about the adult's well-being would be useful. The adult may also be able to 'check in' with children at times during the week or for specific activities. Prior to returning to school, children should be prepared for the **change in adult**, through video technology or photobooks. A familiar and trusted adult should meet and greet on the first day, introducing the new member of staff when the child is settled. A **message of invitation** could be sent to the child from a trusted adult, with welcoming tones about seeing the child again.

Readiness for learning

Children will have had **different experiences** during school closures, and this will heavily influence how they feel and adjust to school re-opening. New means of communicating through technology may have 'opened up' the world to some children, whilst other children will have greatly enjoyed being able to shut themselves away and communicate with only the others living in their household. For many, the return to the communication rich environment of school will feel **over-whelming** initially. Children may struggle to sit and attend for the same length of time as before school closed. They may be used to working in different ways or completing very little work that has been directed by an adult We can support them by explaining and reinforcing our expectations and providing additional opportunities to **take breaks**, spend time in a **quieter environment** and increasing access to **sensory**

supports. Returning to familiar resources such as "now, next and later" boards, timers, and "in/out" baskets may also be supportive, even if children had previously moved on from needing these.

All children are likely to spend time in **discussion of their experiences** during 'lockdown' with their peers and this will be an important part of them processing these experiences and their feelings. Children with ASD may struggle to listen empathically to others, needing an adult to model and prompt; similarly, they may need support in sharing their own experiences.

Anxiety

Adults need to be aware that the return to school is likely to be **anxiety** provoking and, as a result, behaviours which are more challenging to manage may be seen. Trusted and familiar adults should ensure that the child has opportunities to **express their concerns**, either through conversation, drawing, or in play. Wondering aloud language or sharing stories may help the child to process what they are feeling. Ensuring plentiful opportunities for **calming** and **sensory** times will be essential. Children may have used different techniques during their time at home, for example, new Apps or outdoor activities; liaison with home will therefore be important so that strategies are consistent. Children may have new concerns about leaving their families and their homes; social scripts or narratives may be helpful to provide trustworthy reassurance on this.

There may also be specific situations which invoke anxiety, for example, children may be hypervigilant about others washing their hands or may have a panic response if someone coughs in class. Having scripts which all adults can use to reassure children will help them to receive consistent messages which will help them to feel safe and respond in socially appropriate ways.

Some useful resources:

At the time of writing, there are plentiful resources related to coronavirus; the EPS created a document highlighting some of the best of these for EY, Primary and Secondary which may be helpful for general reference (link in the introduction). There are fewer resources currently around transitions back to school. These will come! Our recommendation is to check these thoroughly to make sure they are providing accurate information in a format which is accessible to the child/children.

In the meantime, these sites may be helpful:

South Gloucestershire Autism Toolkits (EY, Primary and Secondary) offer a wealth of advice and examples of support strategies.

A useful document from the Frank Gordon Child Development Institute on supporting children with ASD (but would be applicable to many children with SEND) can be found here. The site provides practical support ideas along with templates and visuals around Covid-19.

Young minds website providing 'top tips' for transition for children with SEND.

[Autism Scotland Toolbox](#) containing principles of good practice for transitions for children and young people with ASD.

NAS website highlighting ways to support children and young people who have been absent from school or who are presenting with [school avoidance](#).

Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs

CYP may display signs of separation anxiety and be fearful about potential loss on their return to school. CYP not previously showing signs of chronic low mood or depression may develop signs or symptoms. Furthermore, children with attachment difficulties are particularly vulnerable in how they respond to change and transition. The lockdown has taken away a lot of control in daily lives and this is true for CYP as well as for adults.

- New anxieties can often develop after a stressful event. CYP who have already been identified as being anxious may have increased anxiety.
- Children may show more signs of depression due to social isolation or feelings of powerlessness.
- With the increased hand washing and hand sanitisation, avoidance of touching surfaces outside the home, etc., some obsessive-compulsive tendencies may be in evidence in some CYP.
- There has been an impact on people's mental health so there will be children whose parents have found it particularly difficult to cope. At the beginning of May 2020, a sizeable proportion of parents do not want their children to return to school just yet.

Supporting children with their mental health needs at this time of transition involves helping them process the experience they have just undergone as well as helping them accept the "new normal".

Guidelines for supporting CYP with mental health needs:

For all CYP experiencing signs or symptoms of anxiety or depression, the following approaches can be used:

- **normalisation of feelings and associated bodily / physical sensations** - all the feelings that CYP experience are perfectly normal. Their feelings might be different to those of their peers or more intense, but it is natural for people to show a range of feelings and a range of intensity. All feelings are okay. It is also important to normalise the bodily sensations that accompany emotions such as anxiety.
- Some children will be able to more easily identify and express feelings; other children may need some additional support in this area i.e. **support in aspects of emotional literacy** (e.g. identification and labelling of feelings). In the meantime, this can be incorporated into normalising feelings. Help children express their feelings non-verbally through drawing and acting them out for example. Help them identify their sensations. Then drop in some emotion labelling.

- **an emotion coaching approach** would help normalise feelings and responses as this has a strong emphasis on empathy and validation.
- **continued opportunities to express their feelings** – processing and expressing powerful feelings that threaten to overwhelm is not a one-off event. CYP need ongoing opportunities to do this. This could be done through daily Circle Time for instance.
- **journaling** – this can be used alongside opportunities to express feelings with the support of an adult.
- **following everyday routines** – outside of this, CYP need to know the new routines that are set up and follow these, written or pictorial explanations would be helpful (e.g. new visual timetable). These provide structure and help anchor us to everyday reality. If anything is uncertain or subject to change, they need to be prepared for this. They also need to know how they can access support in managing the new routines if needed.
- **CBT principles** are very helpful in dealing with anxiety and depression. CBT approaches include **psycho-education**: this involves letting children know something about how anxiety and depression can develop as a response to stress through the fight, flight and freeze response. Psycho-education doesn't need to be in-depth in this context. The type of psycho-education offered will depend on the age of the child and their developmental level.
- **Focusing on what is under our control and what is happening right now** rather than what is outside of our control and what might happen in the future is another important strategy. This includes mindfulness.
- In this particular situation, CYP may have experienced misinformation about COVID-19. Given that misconceptions have the potential to fuel anxiety and depression, it is also important to **provide factual information (avoiding overload)** and answer CYP's questions about the coronavirus as they arise.
- To counteract anxiety and depressive tendencies, support in **developing resilience** would be helpful. In addition, good sleep, regular exercise and a healthy diet contribute to resilience. Exercise is also important because it can help to metabolise stress hormones as well as encourage being in the present moment.
- Many strategies come under the umbrella of **Positive Psychology** which has the primary interest of identifying and building mental assets as opposed to addressing weaknesses and problems so can also be used to develop resilience. It focuses on topics like character strengths, optimism, life satisfaction, happiness, well-being, gratitude, **compassion** (as well as self-**compassion**), self-esteem and self-confidence, hope, and elevation. As with resilience (there is some overlap) it can provide a counter-balance to more challenging circumstances and reactions. It can help counter-balance the brain's natural negativity bias. A simple approach to countering anxious and depressive tendencies which is consistent with Positive Psychology is to consciously **focus on activities which you enjoy and which make you happy**. Keeping a "happiness diary" can be helpful as a written record provides evidence that there are positive aspects to life that can't be so easily discounted. Positive

psychology also embraces mindfulness, gratitude, acceptance and compassion/ self-compassion.

- **Being in nature** can be very beneficial to mental health in general
- **Try and give children as much control** as possible over the strategies they would like to use
- **Encourage children to look out for each other**: as well as being a desirable trait for positive reciprocal social relationships, there is evidence to suggest that in reaching out to and helping others we also make ourselves feel better.

Support materials and resources

General resources for mental health

Mentally Healthy Schools has a number of links to useful resources on coronavirus based anxiety

The SG Anxiety Resources has a range of ideas for supporting mental health.

Psychology Tools Website has lots of excellent downloads (including one on embracing uncertainty – intolerance of uncertainty is a key feature in generalised anxiety and other mental health issues). You can sign up for a free trial and get 4 downloads without charge.

Separation anxiety

Hands On Scotland Website provides strategies to support CYP and their parents on separation anxiety and school avoidance

Obsessive-compulsive anxiety

This Child Mind webpage outlines OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). CYP showing obsessive-compulsive tendencies would not necessarily show the whole range of behaviours or meet any diagnostic thresholds related to OCD, so this link is included simply to provide a better understanding of what CYP might be experiencing and how to support CYP in school.

Normalisation of feelings

CosmicKidsZedDen You Tube Video explaining about feelings, normalising them, accepting them, they come and go, including meditation at the end.

Additional support on emotional literacy and expressing feelings

YouTubeVideo this uses excerpts from the film Inside Out to teach basic feelings to children

YouTubeVideo: "Name that Emotion with Murray" - a Sesame Street introduction to basic feelings.

Social Emotional Workshop Website provides information on and resources for doing a daily feelings check in with the class, and additional ideas for children who might need individualised support

ChocChildrens Webpage: a concise page of information about journaling for children. It would help you get a CYP started on journaling

CBT based approaches and principles

Book: "Starving the Anxiety Gremlin for Children aged 5-9: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Anxiety Management" by Kate Collins-Donnelly. This would be a useful resource for an ELSA or SENCo to use with children who need individual support and are not benefitting enough from mindfulness. Your link EP can be consulted if further support is needed to implement this type of intervention.

Book: Starving the Depression Gremlin: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Managing Depression for Young People" by Kate Collins-Donnelly.

Individual support in developing resilience for older pupils

[Mark Adams You Tube Video](#) Educational and Coaching Psychologist on Resilience in the Coping with COVID-19 series – including talks on RUTs and RETs

Positive psychology

[The Joy Within Website](#) with PDF download: Guidance on the benefits of keeping a gratitude journal, prompts and a journaling template.

[Worth It: Well being Website](#) this primarily offers training on how to develop a strengths-based approach in schools, founded on Positive Psychology, but has a nice illustration of all the character strengths that could be used in your own activities.

Encourage pupils to look out for pupils who are feeling vulnerable

[YouTubeVideo](#) Children use a basic rating system to say how they are feeling at the beginning of the day. Children can also be encouraged to notice who might need some TLC. In these times of social distancing, a hug might not be the way forward, but other ways of giving TLC could be discussed e.g. drawing a picture, making a card, saying something nice, inviting to a game.

Supporting individual CYP to continue to engage in activities and use pleasure-predicting

[Dr Patrick Keelan Psychologist Webpage](#) This is not written for children but is a clear and concise explanation of why and how to use pleasure-predicting.

[BPD Recovery Webpage](#) provides a very practical suggestions on taking control of your moods. It includes examples of charts that can be used to record results of activity scheduling and pleasure-predicting

a. Other Adverse Childhood Experiences

Supporting Vulnerable children (general)

[The Anna Freud Centre](#) have produced an outline of working with vulnerable students during times of disruption. They have produced a concise 4-page document which outlines two guiding principles; model calm for the students and the importance of a providing a safe environment. There are also three practical steps; risk assess individual pupils, focus on nurture and upskill staff.

Attachment Difficulties

There are a range of established frameworks which provide the key basis for supporting transitions back into school for children with attachment difficulties, or difficulties with relationships. Two excellent frameworks are; Emotion Coaching and PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy).

- Recognise the child may need someone who they can "check-in" with when arriving at school and during the day.
- They may need to have 'hellos' facilitated as they may fear what has happened to their relationship in the meantime. This applies to adults and peers.
- Remember some children may well enjoy having some jobs to do as the structure and boundaries help them feel secure.
- Endings. Plan for endings, breaks and time away from key relationships, where possible.
- The Mentally Healthy Schools website has lots of excellent resources including this simple two-page summary for helping to see the world from the perspective of a child with attachment difficulties and how to respond in turn.

Domestic abuse.

Women's Aid have developed a child friendly website for children to access if they have worries about domestic abuse. The website contains resources for school staff to use and links to relevant sources of support. Recognise that some children may be reluctant to return to school if they are worried about a member of their family.

The Government have produced updated guidance on domestic abuse and Covid 19.

Separated parents.

Advice for families on effective co-parenting and child arrangements where parents do not live in the same household. CAFCASS has put together the following guidance to support children and families as the situation surrounding Covid 19. The information is regularly updated.

Young carers. Carers UK has guidance with resources for carers, including how to create a contingency plan and protect those that you care for. It is important to be aware of those children who live with vulnerable people who may have difficulty transitioning back to school. Ensure that contact remains with them by others means if they cannot attend.

Also, see South Gloucestershire Young Carers