

CORONAVIRUS: SUPPORTING PUPILS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



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Coronavirus: Supporting pupils' mental health and well-being

This guidance aims to help school leaders and their staff, in all phases of education, support children and young people with their mental health and well-being in light of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, by outlining some universal approaches for all pupils and for with those with low-level mental health needs.

We recognise there will be groups of children and young people for whom the impact of the coronavirus pandemic has created more serious levels of concern. These pupils need additional support and they will likely need more specialist help from health or social care services.

Schools should be particularly alert to those with pre-existing mental health conditions and those with adverse experiences directly related to the coronavirus, such as illness and bereavement.

[Research](#) shows children from minority ethnic groups are more likely to experience poor health outcomes and, therefore, are more likely to experience mental health difficulties during

the pandemic. In England, death rates from the coronavirus are also higher among people of Black and Asian ethnic groups. In this sense, the evidence emerging indicates that the coronavirus is amplifying the inequalities associated with social determinants of mental and physical health. Several social and economic factors (e.g. poverty and separation from parents and carers) make some young people more vulnerable to the mental health challenges of the pandemic. Children and young people from homes where domestic abuse is a concern are at increased risk of mental health difficulties.



The impact of coronavirus pandemic on children and young peoples' mental health and well-being

There has been much research in recent months which looks at the potential impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting lockdown on children and young people. If you are interested to read more, [issue 1](#) and [issue 2](#) of the Emerging Evidence series looks at evidence from around the world during the current coronavirus pandemic which might help us begin to explore some specific questions around the impact on children and young people's mental health.

The coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented; none of us has experienced this before so we don't know what the exact impact will be. Moreover, every child and family will react differently. It is important to remember that for most pupils, lockdown will have also brought experiences which may have had a positive impact on their mental well-being. For example, some children and young people may have enjoyed having more time and sharing new experiences with family. Some may have established new routines that work better for them and some may have felt less pressure from tests, exams and academic success. Others may have developed new skills such as building resilience, problem-solving abilities and new coping strategies.

However, the pandemic will have affected mental well-being in various negative ways. As well as the short-term impact, there may be long-term consequences for mental health. Possible negative impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental well-being of children and young people include:

- **Loss:** of seeing friends and family; of routines; of goals/milestones, such as exams; of rituals such as end of year activities or exams; of school life; of normal life and activities.
- **Friendships:** lack of socialisation; loss of self-worth gained from peer groups; missing friends; difficulties maintaining friendships remotely; loss of social rewards and social identity.
- **Anxiety, fear and confusion:** fear about future uncertainty; fear of future school closures; confusion about new rules; anxiety about illness and hygiene.
- **Disrupted sleep patterns:** causing loss of concentration and affecting mood.
- **Family experiences:** abuse; conflict; stress; financial issues; coping with mental health issues of adults; increased caring responsibilities.
- **School:** worries about missing learning and falling behind; loss of routines; academic worries due to school closures or exam cancellations; lack of access to trusted adults.
- **Bereavement and illness:** coping with the illness or death of family, friends and loved ones.

How might these experiences affect pupils when they return to school?

As children and young people return to school, they will be bringing their experience of coronavirus and lockdown with them but some of their anxieties and concerns may shift to focus on their new circumstances.

For some children and young people, managing the transition back into school might be the most challenging aspect they face. Something that has always been a constant in their life, school, has become transitory and their relationship with school may have become fragile. When they return, school is likely to look and feel very different.

As they return to school, pupils may struggle with:

- **Fear, anxiety and uncertainty:** for family and friends; going to school; spreading or catching the virus; being separated from their families; maintaining social distancing in the school environment; whether schools might close again; tests, assessments and exams which are taking place or which might be cancelled again.
- **Transition:** school will not be the same; “enjoyable” and social aspects of school may not happen or will be different; pupils may need to manage new routines and expectations; they may have different teachers and/or be in a different class or peer groups. Children and young people at key transition pathways may be feeling more worried about what they might have missed or falling behind with learning.

- **Relationships:** rebuilding, changing and maintaining relationships with peers and adults.
- **Self-regulation,** concentration and engagement.
- **Adapting:** to routines and boundaries of school, including school rules.

Teachers may notice unusual behaviours in their pupils: children may be jumpy, volatile, hyper-vigilant or they may find it hard to settle. There will also be children who become withdrawn or who do not want to come to school. Other signs linked to anxiety about managing transitions include irritability, feeling overwhelmed, feelings of agitation or anger, not being able to regulate emotions, becoming easily tearful or a lack of concentration.



How can you support pupils to readjust, recover and move forwards?

Children and young people are often more resilient than we give them credit for and we must remember that schools cannot be responsible for everything; they can only control what happens in school and they have very limited influence over life outside school.

Here are some simple strategies to put into practice across your school:

- Create a sense of safety in school by providing structure, routine and enjoyable activities.
- Provide opportunities for pupils to talk to each other and with trusted adults about their experiences of lockdown.
- Support friendships and provide time and space for pupils to reconnect with each other and with school life.
- Take care in putting pupils into groups and regularly review how these groups are working.
- Listen to pupils and use your school council to seek feedback and opinions from children and young people.
- Normalise uncertainty while also recognising and validating emotions.
- Provide written and visual information that sets out how things will be the same or different and help pupils to see what they can control.
- Talk about coronavirus and related worries, use this as an opportunity to correct inaccurate information.
- Set an example of calmness, promoting calming activities through PE, art and music, where possible.
- Ensure academic needs are met but don't put too much academic pressure on pupils.
- Support teachers and families with their own stresses and anxieties, which will in turn help pupils.
- Be flexible and supportive when applying behaviour policies.

Resources

[Return to school](#) Resources for primary and secondary schools focused on community recovery, to help school leaders and staff start to bring their schools back together. Created by Place2Be, these assembly and class activity ideas are intended as a universal resource for all pupils and draw on themes including hope, gratitude and connectedness.

[Helping children to process loss](#) Place2Be's educational psychologist explores some of the ways you can support pupils with difficult feelings of loss that they may be experiencing.



Fear, anxiety and uncertainty

As teachers and school leaders, there are several things you can do to support children and young people who may be feeling anxious at this time. It is important for schools to normalise that it's ok to feel anxious. It can also be useful for pupils to understand that things are changeable; but if they are worried, they can speak to identified key adults in their life (both at school and at home) about how they are feeling. Providing clear, factual information about what changes are occurring and why is important in helping to contain potential anxiety.

If a child is feeling anxious, here a few strategies that may be helpful to implement:

- Normalise worry as a reaction to not knowing. Help children and young people to identify their physical signs of anxiety and tell them about the support options that are available to them. Communicate clearly and consistently.
- Help children and young people to identify positive coping strategies that help them to manage their anxiety, such as taking regular breaks, doing physical activity, practising breathing exercises, talking about or expressing their emotions, having a regular routine and connecting with others.
- Be calm but supportive and try not to get drawn into the child or young person's emotions. It helps if you stay focused on the practical: model positive ways for managing anxiety.
- Praise and reward small (and big) successes when children and young people face their anxieties. It can help them to remain positive.
- Remind children and young people of the internal and external support options available to them and refer them to specialist support if needed. Help them to identify staff members from whom they could seek support.

Resources

[Mentally Healthy Schools toolkit](#): managing anxiety and improving well-being resources for school staff, parents and carers and children in early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2 to help manage anxiety and improve well-being during the coronavirus crisis.

[Seven ways to support children and young people who are worried](#): clinicians at the Anna Freud Centre have developed seven ways that they consider to be best practice in responding to children and young people's fears.

[Mental health and the coronavirus research bite #1](#): a review of research on self-management strategies for young people experiencing anxiety.

[Helping children and young people to manage anxiety](#): a practical guide to supporting pupils and students during periods of disruption.

[Mindfulness calendar](#): daily five-minute activities with suggested short mindfulness activities for each day, which school staff can do together with pupils.

[An anxiety thermometer](#) to help pupils measure their anxiety level.

[What to do if you're anxious about coronavirus](#): a blog post for older pupils who may be feeling anxious, concerned or stressed about coronavirus.

[Bloom](#): a free resilience-building programme for 14-18 year-olds co-delivered by teachers and mental health training associates. Bloom supports young people to develop the tools and knowledge to manage their own mental health through life's transitions, both now and in the future.

[Dealing with uncertainty](#): a resource for secondary pupils based on Bloom's resilience-building tools.

Transitions

Although endings are sometimes challenging, there are several ways in which school staff can support pupils to experience more positive transitions to the next stage of their education:

Preparation

- While it may not always be possible under current circumstances, preparation gives pupils time to come to terms with change and for networks and supports to be established.

Focusing on accomplishments, rather than losses

- It can be helpful to frame the ending as a moment of transition and growth, rather than as a loss and final closure.

Communicating honestly, while being hopeful about the future

- It is important to avoid making unrealistic promises about when activities will resume or what the future will hold. Having regular conversations to check-in with pupils about their worries and hopes may help in managing expectations. While honesty and openness about the future are key, optimism and hope that things will get better are also important for promoting a positive outlook and managing worries and anxieties.

Normalise worries and anxieties

- It is normal to feel worried or anxious when activities and supportive relationships end and during times of change and uncertainty. Home-based self-management strategies, including physical activity and breathing exercises, may help to manage these feelings of anxiety.

Sustaining social support networks

- The pandemic means that pupils are experiencing endings without the usual social support systems of schools and activities. Sustaining social ties with friends, siblings and other loved ones (online and by phone, for instance), is important to help them feel connected and supported.

Resources

[Managing unexpected endings and transitions](#): a practical guide to support pupils and students to manage change during periods of disruption.

[Mentally Healthy Schools toolkit: managing transitions](#): a collection of resources for primary aged children, school staff, parents and carers which support children through transitions in their school life – whether they're starting a new class or starting a new school.

[Mental health and the coronavirus research bite #2](#): a review of research about supporting children and young people with unplanned endings.

[Managing the transition back to school](#): a practical guide offering actions that schools and colleges can take in the lead up to, and after the transition back to school following the pandemic.

[Welcome back guide](#): an easy guide when communicating with the children returning to school.

[Starting again](#): practical tips to support pupils to reset and 'start again' to help ease the transition back to school.

[River to the sea project](#): Place2Be's specialist Art Room team has created a project for pupils finishing primary school to make at home together with parents, carers, or other family members. It will give young people a chance to reflect on their time at primary school and the changes ahead as they start secondary school.

Relationships

Relationships will be a key part of helping children and young people to reintegrate into school life. As a consequence of the pandemic, many pupils will have been unable to see their friends, extended families, teachers and other trusted adults. As relationships are an integral part of social and developmental growth, any disruption to their relationships can be very challenging to their well-being.

In supporting pupils with their relationships, schools should consider that:

- It is likely pupils will be navigating ways to re-establish connections with their peers and possibly to develop new friendship groups, particularly if their friends didn't return to school immediately or they are placed in different teaching "bubbles".
- Pupils may need time to establish or re-establish relationships with school staff.
- It would be useful to explore how to provide a range of interventions that give pupils the chance to reconnect with their peers and to create new social networks.
- Having a sense of belonging will be important if pupils are to feel emotionally safe and be able to re-engage in learning.
- They should make pupils aware of the support options available to them, both internally and externally to the school. This will help to foster a sense of trust and containment that will be important for relationship building.

Resources

[Peer support guidance](#) from Mentally Healthy Schools, including real-life case studies and information on how to develop a peer support programme in your school.

[A 'seven days of kindness' calendar](#) which encourages primary aged children to do two kind things each day – one for someone else, and one for themselves.

[Getting to know each other better during quarantine](#): A resource for secondary-aged pupils about working on relationships with those they live with.



Self-regulation, concentration and engagement

Some pupils will need help to settle back into learning. It is likely that many pupils will have had less or a limited structure over the last few months, and so will need time to readapt. Pupils' worries about returning to school life may also affect their levels of concentration; schools have to be realistic about what to expect and give pupils time to settle.

In supporting pupils with this, schools should consider:

- Finding ways for teachers to reconnect and reach out to their pupils before expecting them to engage in learning. Exploring ways in which they could help pupils to feel comfortable and safe in their classrooms, with their peers and teachers, before the emphasis moves to academic study.
- Creating an opportunity to share successes and achievements during lockdown (both academic and non-academic) or to reflect on and process some of their experiences.
- Asking pupils about their experiences of remote learning – what did they like and not like? Involving them in shaping what their return to school looks like could be hugely empowering and is likely to help with engagement.
- Children are likely to have missed regular feedback on their work and so making sure that they are getting lots of this could help them to concentrate and engage.
- Praising small achievements and offering reassurance will help to support pupils during this transition, as some may be worried about not having kept up-to-date with schoolwork.
- Some pupils may struggle to maintain the level of concentration required in school and there may be a need for movement breaks to help with this.

Resources

[Brain breaks](#): Mental and physical activities to break up a period of concentration, designed to help pupils re-focus when they return to normal classroom activities.

[Finding the balance activity](#): School activities for both staff and pupils to help identify the elements that play a role in affecting our mental health.



Using PSHE Education including the Relationships and Health Education curriculum

Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education is the school subject dedicated to supporting pupils to be healthy, safe and prepared for modern life. PSHE should be taught through regularly timetabled lessons as standard, as this is a vital area of the curriculum in normal times, but it is of even greater relevance due to the covid-19 pandemic, resulting lockdown and recovery challenges ahead.

PSHE education, therefore, has a key role to play in helping schools to develop a 'recovery curriculum'. While PSHE teachers are not – and should not be expected to be – counsellors or therapists, during this recovery period, these lessons will inevitably be more pastoral or interventional in tone than usual. Focus can be given in lessons to supporting pupils to manage

a range of worries and concerns about returning to school. This will also help them to be able to concentrate and succeed in other lessons.

Pupils will have had unique experiences under lockdown. Some will need tailored, pastoral intervention, but all pupils will need a significant amount of support with managing their physical and emotional health and relationships as they return to school and beyond. The school curriculum, and regular PSHE lessons must, therefore, play a central part.

As pupils return to school, the PSHE curriculum should be adapted both to respond to pupils' immediate needs and as a vital plank of longer-term strategies to support pupils over the coming months and years.

What can schools and teachers do through PSHE education?

- Ensure whole-staff agreement on PSHE education's role in supporting pupils' return and an understanding of its distinction from targeted interventions and pastoral care.
- Prepare for a potential increase in disclosures from those who have experienced or witnessed trauma or other difficulties during the lockdown, following PSHE lessons.
- Use PSHE lessons as part of the strategy to reconnect pupils and establish their place within 'bubbles' or 'pods' as required.
- Spend time re-establishing PSHE ground rules and ensuring the classroom is a safe place. Pupils need to feel bonded again as a group, trust their teacher and feel safe in exploring difficult issues.
- Talk about the experiences pupils have had in a distanced way, through scenarios and fictional characters rather than open discussion about individual pupil experiences.
- To support pastoral care processes, lesson time might be used to survey pupils about what they need and their main worries and feelings about returning to school (this can inform both immediate teaching and also develop future PSHE planning).
- Focus immediately on areas such as relationships, mental health and emotional well-being, but also consult pupils on what they need or want to cover beyond this. Use local health data and guidance on the impact of covid-19 on children to refine priorities.

Consider covering these topics soon after schools return:

- **Transition** including learning routines and skills to help settle back into school life.
- **Friendship** such as re-establishing friendships that have been at a distance, making new friends (if relevant to the year group) and managing friendship issues.
- **Promoting well-being** including managing anxiety, promoting positive well-being, coping strategies and dealing with change.
- **Media consumption** such as how to manage the extensive covid-19 news coverage and differentiate between facts, rumours and speculation.
- **Staying safe** physically and emotionally, including online.
- **Bereavement, change and loss** including supporting pupils to manage grief, either covid-19 related, or related to not being able to attend funerals, be with family etc. Also, consider the possibility that someone in the class may have lost someone close or have parents who may have lost their job or suffered other instances of loss and change.

When considering longer-term planning for PSHE Education and how it can support pupils' mental health and well-being:

- Bear in mind the potential ongoing impact of covid-19 when addressing topics in the future, and how to manage these issues sensitively. For example, with the economic shock of covid-19, young people may be anxious about family finances, as well as how they secure their own financial well-being in the future.
- Take into account the increased risk of pupil vulnerabilities that have come out of the covid-19 situation, for example, an increase in children and young people's anxiety.
- Consider how online technologies are currently discussed in lessons and ensure examples and scenarios used in activities reflect pupils' current usage of online media. For example, pupils may have increased their use of video chat and live streaming during the lockdown. Schools should try to teach about these forms of communication sooner than they might otherwise have done (e.g. with younger year groups) and build them into lessons relating to relationships, online communication and media literacy.

Resources

[Guidance and a suite of lesson plans](#) from the PSHE Association on teaching about mental health and emotional well-being through PSHE.

[PSHE Association Coronavirus Hub guidance](#) documents, podcasts and articles to help you to provide high-quality PSHE, both to pupils in school and to those being taught remotely.

[Tools for the Job](#) resources, training and support from the PSHE Association for your school to prepare for and implement statutory Health Education and Relationships Education (primary) and the secondary Relationships and Sex Education (RSE).

[Teaching about mental well-being](#) training module developed by the Department for Education which provides practical materials for primary and secondary schools to use to train staff about teaching mental well-being.



Supporting the well-being of school staff

We cannot overestimate the importance of looking after each other and supporting your own well-being and the well-being of your staff during these difficult times. Change can be disruptive, and people respond in different ways, but all of us will face challenges, both personal and professional, over the coming weeks and months. Being mindful of the need to take care of your own well-being is the best place to start.

Resources

[Looking after each other and ourselves:](#)

a guide to support the mental health and well-being of staff at schools and colleges during periods of disruption.

[Supporting staff well-being in schools:](#)

practical guidance about what school staff and senior leaders can do to support their own and their colleagues' well-being.

[Supporting staff well-being from Mentally](#)

[Healthy Schools:](#) advice, guidance and resources for schools on how to support and improve staff well-being.

[Staff well-being best practice:](#) staff well-being ideas to support each other during this difficult time.

[What keeps us going:](#) a staff activity that focuses on staff's personal mental health and how to cope with issues that we face.

[Teachers, looking after yourself is essential, not optional:](#) Professor Tamsin Ford of The University of Cambridge explains why it is so important that teachers look after both their mental and physical health.





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