

ConnectEd

Mental Health Services for Schools

COVID-19 Response

Supporting children's wellbeing as they return to school Ideas, resources & activities for primary schools

1) Introduction

This document provides advice and suggested resources/activities that will help promote children's emotional wellbeing as we transition out of the lockdown.

Many children will have experienced trauma as a result of the Coronavirus, whether due to separation, anxiety or bereavement. There is emerging evidence that quarantine conditions themselves can have negative psychological effects. As children return to school promoting children's emotional resilience will be central to their recovery and longer-term wellbeing.

Below we have outlined how schools can adopt a whole school, trauma informed approach to supporting children at this challenging time.

A Trauma Informed Approach: Children's responses to trauma are different to adults and can impact many areas of their development, leading to complex and difficult to understand behaviours.ⁱ Yet by understanding how traumatic experiences and stress can affect children, schools can begin to design early intervention approaches to help them to recoverⁱⁱ.

A Whole School Approach: This approach helps children flourish, learn and succeed; it does this by providing opportunities for pupils, and the adults around them, to develop the strengths and coping skills that underpin resilience.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this document:

- *Section two* outlines five key areas in which schools can promote children's wellbeing and resilience.
- *Section three* sets out some whole school behavioural strategies for working with trauma impacted pupils.
- *Section four* provides examples of some behaviours which indicate a child is not settling down well and may need individual or specialist support.
- *Section five* provides recommendations for further reading/useful resources.

2) Building emotional resilience in the school community: Ideas, activities and resources

Below we have listed five key areas in which schools can make a difference to children's wellbeing following the distressing events of recent months^{iv}. The advice, activities and resources detailed can help your school to build a whole school, trauma informed approach to supporting pupils' wellbeing.

The role of the adults in the school is critical in promoting recovery through early intervention. It is important to ensure that the adults in school are receiving the support they need in order to successfully manage returning to school.

1. Promoting safety: Children have experienced a disruption of their protective shield and this may result in stress, anxiety and problems like sleep disturbance.

Advice

- Create relative safety in school through reminding children school is a safe place and giving a clear explanation of how and why (i.e. physical distancing and handwashing).
- Ensure an accurate and organised sharing of information and voice across the staff body; be aware of the influence of the media and address any rumours where information is lacking.
- Restore attachment networks: Think about children and staff who may not yet be back and let each other know how everyone is.
- Engage parents and carers in your approach and share learning and advice.

Resources/Activities

- Stories can help children start talking about their fears and introduce some coping strategies.
- Recommended books include:
 - i) *The Dark Dark Night* by Christina Butler and Jane Chapman
 - ii) *Jillian Jiggs to the Rescue* by Phoebe Gilman
 - iii) *There's a Nightmare in My Closet* by Mercer Mayer
- Encourage children to think about what happened in the book, how the characters feel and what that feeling makes them do.
- End by reassuring children that their feelings are valid and thinking about what we can do to help ourselves and each other when we feel unsafe.

2. Promoting a sense of calm: Heightened levels of emotional arousal or numbness may be observed in children (i.e. panic or dissociation) and problems sleeping, eating and performing tasks.

Advice

- Reassure children that emotional reactions are normal and an ordinary part of a difficult experience.
- Use physical/muscle relaxation techniques and relaxation through music and art based activities.
- Use problem solving tasks to support children to build skills to break down their difficulties into small manageable pieces.
- Give guidance to children and families on sleep hygiene, media exposure and relaxation.

Resources/Activities

Art based activities for individuals or groups

- **Picture for calm:** Take a large piece of paper and write the word CALM on it so it's big enough to be coloured in. Then allow the child to colour it in with colours they like or find calming. Then invite them to draw images or symbols of things that bring them calmness or peace. Suggest they find somewhere in their room or working space to have it visible at all times.
- **Calm Box:** Collect things that create an inner feeling of calmness, perhaps a smooth pebble, feather or squishy toy. Put them all in a box and go to this when you're in need of calmness.
- **Keep a diary/journal once a day or week:** Put in it:
 - *One thing you liked about each day/week
 - *One thing you didn't like
 - *One thing you can control (e.g. I can control how I breathe, read, draw, sing, dance, write a letter/story, wash my hands)

Muscle relaxing and relaxing exercises for individuals or groups

- **Quiet Listening:** Close your eyes and stay as still as possible. Spend some time listening to all the sound inside the room. Stay very still and quiet and listen to any sounds outside the room. The more still and quiet you are, the more you will be aware of the sounds around you.

- **Melting Butter:** Imagine you are a tiny piece of butter lying on warm toast. Imagine that the floor is warm like toast and you are slowly melting into the toast. Feel your whole body becoming soft and gooey as you melt and relax into the warm toast. How long can you lie there for?
- **Find your chill switch:** Remember a time or place when you felt really good. Maybe laughing with friends or doing something that made you feel really proud or being close to somebody that you care about. Or a place that was really relaxing.

Close your eyes and imagine you are there again. Remember the colours, smells, noises, tastes. Imagine these getting even brighter and louder. Imagine you are there. Take a good look around. Squeeze your thumb and finger together while you think about that memory.

Next time you feel worried or sad, squeeze your thumb and finger together and remember your good memory. This is your Chill Switch! You can use it whenever you want to go to this place in your mind to feel good.

Breathing exercises for individuals or groups

- **Deep Breaths:** Close your eyes and sit comfortably with your back straight. As you sit there, spend some time observing your breathing. Feel the in-breath and watch what happens when you breathe back out. As you sit there, try to make your breath's longer. Take a longer breath in and then breathe out slowly and gently. As you breathe out, feel all your worries and problems are blowing away, leaving you feel relaxed and calm. Repeat this a couple of times.
- **Bubbles:** Imagine you are blowing bubbles of peace or happiness or love into the room. Take in a breath and imagine you have a pot of liquid bubbles. Slowly and gently blow bubbles into the room. As you blow out the bubbles, imagine they are filled with peace and the whole room is filling up with peace.

3. Promoting a sense of self and collective efficacy: Recovery is improved where a person believes they, and the group they belong to, are generally likely to experience positive outcomes.

Advice

- Remind yourself and the school community that you have all coped and can cope – it is important that children see that their protective figures can cope.
- Make the individual the expert on what they need – give children skills to express and achieve their goals.
- Teach emotional regulation skills and enhanced problem solving skills. Recognise and congratulate each other on the learning skills that the Covid-19 experience has led to (e.g. learning via the internet).

Activities/Resources

- Watch Xavier, one of our Dramatherapists, reading the story of Amrita – a tale of a young girl who makes change for herself and her community through her strength and bravery: <https://vimeo.com/406581668>
- The following books can help children identify their individual talents and strengths, and their capacity to work with others to achieve positive outcomes. Encourage children to think about what happened in the book, how the characters feel good about themselves and what kind of things they might do to feel good about themselves.
 - i) *The Lion Inside* by Rachel Bright
 - ii) *Giraffes Can't Dance* by Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees
 - iii) *Unstoppable Me!* by Dr Wayne W. Dyer

4. Promoting connectedness: Rebuilding attachment and mutual coping support, as well as sharing experiences, will support the early recovery process.

Advice

- Encourage the sharing of experience to help the processing and normalising of individual experience.
- Consider the use of language such as '**physically distanced**' rather than 'social distanced'.
- Encourage story-telling via books, poetry, music and games etc.
- Assist in restoring existing and recruiting new social connections across the pupil and staff body, even when children may be unable to return to school. Build skills for this where necessary. Be aware that negative and undermining connections can have the opposite impact to recovery.

Activities/Resources

- Watch Xavier, one of our Dramatherapists, reading the story of Stone Soup - a tale of creativity and how a community who had become suspicious of each other were encouraged to work together. Xavier also introduces some activities at the end of the story. These can be shared with children who are not currently in school to remind them they are still part of the school community: <https://vimeo.com/412082152>
- The following books can help children think about friendship and what it means to them. Encourage children to think about what happened in the book, how the characters developed and maintained their friendships whilst overcoming challenges and separations. Encourage children to talk about what it has been like to be separated from their friends.
 - i) *Madeline in London* by Ludwig Bemelmans
 - ii) *Frog and Toad Together* by Arnold Lobel

5. Promoting hope: Hope itself can become a victim of trauma with catastrophising, futility and hopelessness being experienced.

Advice

- Acknowledge the feelings but challenge exaggerated thinking; encourage looking to and thinking about the future. Focus on accurate risk assessment, positive goals and building strengths.
- Remind children of their strengths and hopes which they may have shared previously.
- Move from labelling and self-blame to problem solving.

Activities/Resources

- Watch Xavier, one of our Dramatherapists, reading the story of Grandma Spider - a tale of a community hoping for something better and the bravery of the most unlikely character who brought the hope to fruition. Following the story there are some activities in the video which children can join in with: <https://vimeo.com/417256415>
- The following books can help children think hopefully about the future and to see the capacity they have to create that hope. Encourage children to think about what happened in the book, how the characters managed their difficulties but kept hopeful for a better future. Focus on the internal resources the children have for creating hope.
 - i) *Because Amelia Smiled* by David Ezra Stein
 - ii) *Malala, a Brave Girl from Pakistan / Iqbal, a Brave Boy from Pakistan* by Jeanette Winter

3) Behavioural strategies for trauma impacted pupils

- **Create a predictable environment:** Ensure expectations and structure are clear and well communicated.
- **Provide a safe space:** Designate a quiet, safe place for pupils to go when they feel overwhelmed. The space should be comfortable and away from others.
- **Promote active listening and demonstrate empathy:** Maintain consistent expectations and behaviour plans that are based on rewards systems (not punishment); promote collaborative problem-solving with pupils.
- **Work with the whole community:** Involve parents and carers in their child's education and strive to understand the child from a systemic perspective, understanding the whole of their lives.^v

4) Presentations which indicate a child is not settling down well and may need individual or specialist support^{vi}

The majority of children will settle back into the school community with time and support. However, some may need additional or specialist support. Further support should be sought where the following symptoms become present and persistent.

- Bed wetting
- Clinging
- Anxiety
- School refusal
- Less emotional regulation
- Withdrawal or Arguing / Fighting
- Complaints of physical symptoms
- Sleep disturbance
- Event specific fears
- Traumatic play or themes present in writing, drawing and pretending

5) Further Reading/Useful resources

Organisations offering support/resources for children, schools and families:

Anna Freud Centre

<https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind/>

Catholic Children's Society/ConnectEd

<https://www.cathchild.org.uk/covid-19-support-for-primary-schools/>

Mentally Healthy Schools

<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/>

Place2Be

<https://www.place2be.org.uk/our-services/services-for-schools/mental-health-resources-for-schools/return-to-school-resources/>

Maudsley Charity – Families Under Pressure

<https://maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure/>

Relax Kids

<https://www.relaxkids.com>

Recommended books/stories to help children talk about their feelings:

The Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside

The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers

Sad Book by Michael Rosen

The Colour Monster: A Story About Emotions by Anna Llenas

In My Heart – A Book of Feelings by Jo Witek

Coronavirus: A Book for Children by Elizabeth Jenner, Kate Wilson, and Nia Roberts

References

ⁱDe Thierry, B.2017.The Simple Guide to Child Trauma. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

ⁱⁱhttps://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/CentreforMentalHealth_Briefing56_Trauma_MH_Coronavirus_2.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/whole-school-approach/>

^{iv}These five areas are based on Hobfall, et al. 2007. Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Interventions: Empirical Evidence. Journal of Psychiatry.

^v<https://www.teachertoolkit.co.uk/2017/12/05/trauma-informed/>

^{vi} City and Hackney CAMHS Alliance. 2020. Promoting Resilience When Re-Integrating Students and Staff Post Covid-19.