



Education & Children's Services  
Educational Psychology Service



# Return to School

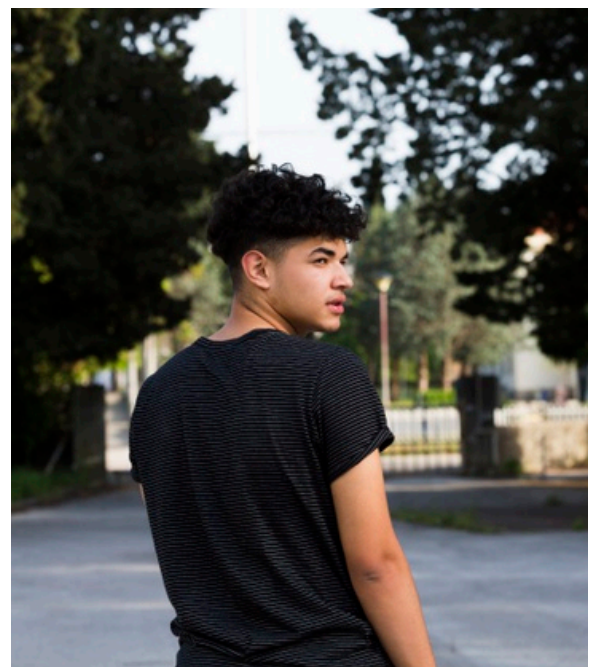
Transition to Secondary School  
Advice for Education Staff

Using Psychology to Support a Positive Return to School



On 23rd March 2020 the United Kingdom went into lockdown in response to Covid-19. All schools closed and children began home learning. Apart from taking some daily exercise as a family group, children have been confined within their home environment. Interaction with extended family and peers has been limited to those with access to social media. This has become the new norm for our pupils.

There is no indication yet when restrictions will be lifted. However, children will return to school at some point and it is important to consider what will help ease this transition when the time comes. Transitions are very important for children and young people and can be a challenging and anxiety provoking time, particularly when the child or young person is vulnerable or has additional support needs that require understanding and support over the transition. It will be important to plan carefully for transition back to school after social distancing due to Covid-19. One thing is clear; on returning to school after social distancing and isolation children, families and communities will need considerable support to deal with illness, loss and bereavement, manage mental health and support friendships and relationships. This leaflet sets out some ideas to consider when planning for a positive return to school.



While there is no current research on how best to reintroduce children to formal school learning following the lifting of Covid-19 lockdown measures, psychology can highlight broad themes from studies where pupils have returned to school following a long absence.



## Risks Experienced by Children

Pupils will have had a variety of experiences during lockdown, with some children living in particularly difficult and risky situations. Pupils may have been affected by a range of child protection concerns, for example, pupils who have witnessed domestic abuse during lockdown or have experienced abuse themselves may be likely to present with high levels of anxiety, attachment difficulties and problems settling to learn. Government statistics indicate that there is a surge in domestic abuse incidents with Refuge, a leading domestic abuse charity, reporting a 700% increase in calls in one day since lockdown commenced. Multi-agency planning will be required to support these children going forward.

## Resilience

The key finding is that most children are RESILIENT. Good communication, caring staff, effective planning and the safety and predictability of routines will effectively support most children back into schools. Most pupils will require no formal intervention but will benefit from the support naturally given by family and friends as well as other key adults in their lives.

## Anxiety

Research indicates that some children will require additional support to manage ANXIETY in the shorter term. Children are highly attuned to parental anxieties. Given the economic impact of the pandemic, many adults will be anxious about their jobs/sources of income and ability to pay household bills. TV and media reports can also have a cumulative effect causing concerns about present and future health. Creswell, University of Oxford, (2020) reports from a survey of 1500 parents that 17% of younger children are currently afraid to leave home and 16% of children are worried about the amount of money coming into the house. Additional planning for highly anxious children will benefit and support them into school.

## Relationships

Many children will be anxious about the loss of RELATIONSHIPS. The relationships in school that pupils have built over the years with key adults, as well as peers, may have become more fragile during social isolation. Pupils will require time and support to reconnect with and rebuild these trusting relationships.

## Bereavement and Loss

Children will require support to cope with BEREAVEMENT AND LOSS. It is probable that most children may return to school knowing of someone who has died. Some will have faced the death of a significant person in their lives. The Educational Psychology Service has produced Bereavement and Loss guidance for professionals available on the GIRFEC website or from your link EP. The Educational Psychology Service website has additional information on Bereavement and Loss for Parents/Carers and Young People, including Bereavement and Loss during Covid 19.

A minority of pupils are likely to require intensive interventions and long-term support.

# Before Pupils Return to School



Anticipating the possibility of schools not returning before the summer break, and despite uncertainty about what return to school will look like, schools across Fife are gathering ideas based on principles of research for how to manage transitions virtually for children starting secondary school. The following is meant to serve as a reminder of areas staff may want to consider when putting together their school P7-S1 transition package.

**Social connectedness is strongly linked to positive outcomes such as being motivated to learn and good mental health. It is important to continue with this during a time when schoolwork is being done at home.**

- Consider virtual ways for pupils to connect with both staff (e.g. Guidance Teacher) and peer groups so that pupils feel they have started to build relationships with staff and friendships before starting school such as:
  - Have a virtual meet-the-teacher on your school website or ask teachers to upload a brief personal statement that pupils can read to get to know their teachers.
  - Consider the possibility of establishing a virtual buddy system – pupils may feel more comfortable asking questions about the high school an older peer.
  - Think about peer groupings. Maintaining known social connections could be a protective factor and beneficial at a number of levels for pupils during transition.
- Consider asking pupils to complete an ‘about me passport’ or person centred plan where key information can be shared with school staff before a return to school.
- Consider gathering some information from your pupil group through online questionnaires so that the transition can be developed in partnership with parents and young people.
- Consider how you will identify pupils who have been particularly affected by Covid-19 and the lockdown – points to consider include experiences of bereavement, trauma and loss, domestic abuse and plans for what support they might require in addition to universal support.
- Identify who may require extra support at transition – e.g. children who have previously experienced emotionally based school avoidance – and consider what their individual needs are.
- Share pupil information with school staff so they are planning how best to support learning for groups during this time and beyond.

## Supporting transitions

- Create and upload a virtual tour of the school on your website – this will give pupils the opportunity to become familiar with the school building and may lessen anxieties linked to getting lost or worries about how to manage transitions between classes.
- Offer affirmation messages e.g. ‘we look forward to meeting you’ and ‘our priority is to keep you safe’.
- Continue to develop your partnership with parents and ensure your communication is clear and reassuring.



### When pupils return to school

- When schools re-open, emotional wellbeing for all will be the priority, not just those making the transition from primary to secondary. Reassurance will be required that the time working at home does not mean they have fallen behind.
- Communicating with pupils about Covid-19, lockdown and pupils’ experiences will be important and careful planning of how this should be carried out is required.
- Create a sense of safety; some adults and young people may be worried about returning to school, and feel unsafe about being in close proximity to others following the extensive media coverage about hand and respiratory hygiene and social distancing. It is therefore vital that schools create an environment where they are able to cope with their emotions and feel safe. The following can help to promote a sense of safety:

- Create a clear structure for everyone: staff, pupils, parents and visitors. Continue with established routine activities as stability and predictability helps us feel safe
- Be explicit about physical safety, where rooms, people and activities are. Be clear about when lessons and meetings are going to happen and who pupils can go to, be with and talk to in school
- It is likely that physical transitions will be reduced considerably (initially) but it is important to remember that the transitions that remain are likely to be anxiety provoking, so pre-warn pupils of each transition during the day using a calm and consistent approach
- Spend some time welcoming children back and build in time for discussions about their thoughts and feelings and try to address any fears or anxieties as far as possible
- Provide a safe place to talk and distraction activities if they are not able to talk
- Consider ‘emotional contagion’ - we all have mirror neurones that prompt us to ‘mirror’ the emotions shown by those we interact with and as class teachers you are in effect ‘superspreaders’ of emotion. Try to ensure that you remain calm, contained and predictable during such discussions
- Keep pupils involved and included – give them a voice
- Focus on what pupils have learnt rather than what they have not. Ask for their feedback on how they feel the day has gone, as this instils a sense of control in pupils, which boosts resilience
- Watch and listen – their behaviour is communicating something they may not have the words for
- Due to social distancing, you may be frustrated at your inability to use touch as a means of reassurance when a pupil is struggling to cope but remember the power of your voice! Use intonation, stress and rhythm in your voice to convey emotion, to engage and reassure.

# Staff Returning to School



- Staff need to feel prepared and confident in how to respond to pupils who might open-up to them about difficult experiences linked to trauma, bereavement and abuse when the subject is discussed. You might want to re-visit policies and guidance linked to these as well as newly developed guidance (e.g. Fife Council Educational Psychology Service leaflets on bereavement during the Covid-19 pandemic).
- Make sure you have staff support networks and a safe space for staff too.
- Pupils will come back to school with a wide range of experiences of Covid-19 and lockdown and their needs will vary accordingly. Some children may require a more individualised and personalised approach within additional and intensive levels of support.
- Returning pupils will need time to re-connect with key adults and to re-establish social relationships.
- New pupils will need time to connect with key adults and opportunities to build positive social relationships with new peers.
- Though you may feel the pressure to jump straight into academic work in order to make up for lost time, we need to be mindful that pupils have been out of a classroom and formal teaching with different experiences for some time. Build up the intensity of the school day slowly with short tasks followed by fun activities aimed at settling into school life, new routines and promoting positive relationships with staff and peers.
- For S1 pupils, consider how you can give them the opportunity to say 'goodbye' to peers and teachers in their primary school – they might not have had a chance to do so before lockdown.



# PACE

PLAYFULNESS  
ACCEPTANCE  
CURIOSITY  
EMPATHY

**An approach to supporting young people who have experienced trauma**

Be PACE-ful: The PACE approach is a way of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving that aims to make children and young people feel safe. It is particularly effective in meeting the needs of children and young people who have experienced trauma. Given the current situation it will be important for us to consider the PACE approach in our practice when children and young people return to school.

## Links to Useful Resources

### General Advice

- Fife Council Educational Psychology Service - <http://www.fife.gov.uk/educationalpsychology>

### Managing Anxiety

- GIRFEC, Emotional Wellbeing Page - <https://girfec.fife.scot/emotional-health-and-mental-wellbeing/>
- PACE Information - <https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>
- Anxiety is Normal Toolkit – contact your link Educational Psychologist. Soon to be added to the Educational Psychology Service website
- Coaching Conversations - Contact your link Educational Psychologist. Soon to be added to the Educational Psychology Service website

### Bereavement and Loss

The Educational Psychology Service website has information on bereavement and loss leaflets for parents, carers and young people, including bereavement during Covid19.

- Child Bereavement UK - <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>
- Winstonswish - <https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/>

### Domestic Violence

- Safer Scotland - <https://safer.scot/>

# Appendix

## CHECKLIST FOR RECOVERY PLANNING

How to help the children and young people feel:

### SAFE

- Warn parents and pupils that things will be different and provide a clear, daily predictable routine/timetable
- Reduce the number of transitions in a day and provide a signal/warning of transitions throughout the day
- Provide a video or photos and explanation of the recommended safe spaced classroom
- Ensure there is identified support in place for vulnerable pupils
- Create a safe space with details as to where it is and how a pupil can access it
- Be curious and provide validation of any feelings of anxiety. Refer to PACE information.

### CALM

- Ensure you as staff are calm and provide opportunities to share and provide support for each other
- Focus on what they have learnt rather than what they have not  
Regularly monitor wellbeing (1 – 10 scale of how you are feeling today) and check they each have someone they can talk to if they need to
- Teach relaxation strategies
- Create frequent opportunities to talk about and express emotions
- Use your voice and relaxed body language in order to convey calm.

### SELF/COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

- Focus on their strengths individually and as a group  
Encourage a sense of control in them by asking for their feedback each day on how the day /session went and what might improve it
- Give them responsibilities – again ‘control’ through doing.

### A SENSE OF CONNECTEDNESS

- Before – send an introduction and welcome back video/messages, “looking forward to seeing/meeting you”
- Identify key adults for CYP with ASN and connect prior to and during recovery
- Promote through role modelling – kindness and understanding
- Focus curriculum-wise on relationships and community.

### HOPE

- Consider as a class ‘How have we changed for the better?’
- What are we looking forward to?
- What opportunities do we have now that we didn’t have before? e.g. more outdoor learning opportunities?
- Re-visit and even re-write the school aims with emphasis on the future and what can be achieved.

