Education & Children's Services
Educational Psychology Service

Fife
COUNCIL

Return to School

Advice for Schools and Nurseries

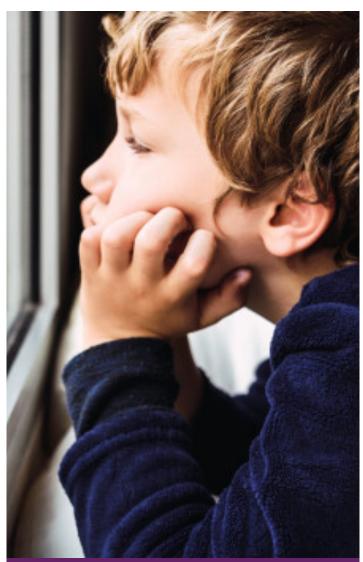**Using Psychology to Support a Positive Return to School**

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.

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.

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.
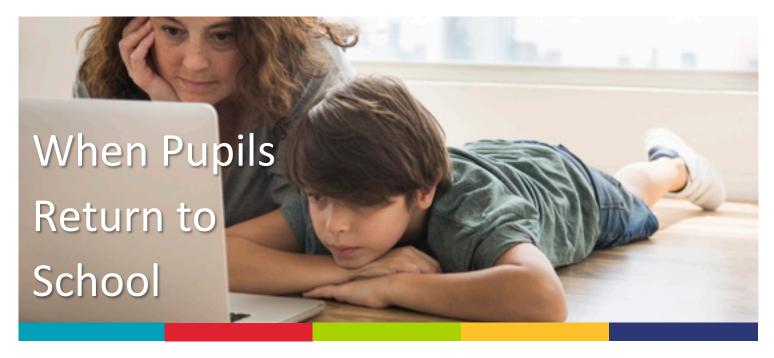
Bereavement and Loss

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

- Encourage pupils to keep in touch with you and their classmates by GLOW, TEAMS, SeeSaw or other available platforms.

- Consider putting a virtual tour of the school on your website. This will be useful for new and current pupils.

- Have a virtual meet-the-teacher on your school website. Invite pupils to send in questions via GLOW or other available platforms.

- Encourage families to share key information about their children so you can begin to build relationships and understanding.

- Consider asking pupils to complete an 'All About Me' passport where key information can be shared with school staff before a return to school.

- Consider how you will find out about pupils who have been particularly affected by Covid-19, for example experiences of bereavement and loss, trauma and domestic abuse, and plan for what support they may need in addition to universal support.

- Send out a school newsletter to families with a welcome back message and some information on what the first few days back at school will look like. Share the steps that you will be taking to support pupils on their return. Include up to date information on staffing etc.

- Ensure a range of communication to reach all families

When Pupils Return to School

- When schools re-open emotional wellbeing for all will be the priority. Offer pupils kindness and comfort, ask them what you can do to help and give information. Provide parents with as much information about changes to the environment or routine before they come back so children are prepared for any differences.

- Don't overwhelm pupils by stressing the amount of work they need to catch up on. This is not a priority and pupils cannot learn when stressed and anxious.

- Though you may feel the pressure to jump straight into academic work in order to make up for lost time, it is important to be mindful that pupils have been out of a classroom and formal teaching for some time. Build up the intensity of the school day slowly with short tasks followed by movement breaks and fun activities aimed at settling pupils into school life, new routines and promoting positive relationships with staff and pupils. Focus on what children have learned and positive experiences they have had, for example, caring for someone, becoming aware of key workers and how they helped us.

- Pupils will need time and support to re-connect with key adults in school and to re-establish social relationships. Take this into account and plan accordingly. Have photos up on the wall of the whole class. It may be that class groups are split into smaller groups initially, so it will be important to keep a sense of identity for the whole class.

- Pupils will need time with each other to re-adjust to social demands, noise and relationships generally. Provide pupils with structured and unstructured opportunities to share their experiences whilst not at school and discuss any worries about coming back to school. Soft starts? Circle time? Peer support? Kitbag? Worry box?

- Re-establish structure, stability and predictability so pupils feel secure. We want to create as much predictability as possible in a time of unpredictability as this helps create a sense of safety for children.

- Plan for pupils to spend some time with last session's class/teacher to say goodbye.

- Recognise that many of your pupils will be feeling anxious about returning to school. Acknowledge and validate these feelings and explain that they are completely normal given the circumstances. You may wish to share that you are feeling anxious too and let pupils see and hear you managing this calmly. For example "I am feeling… because… and when I feel…I can…"

- Regular, planned contact with a trusted member of school staff using coaching conversations is likely to be successful in supporting many pupils to find their own solutions to overcoming their emotional wellbeing difficulties.

- Staff need to be prepared and confident in how to respond to pupils who might open-up to them about different experiences linked to trauma, bereavement and loss. The Educational Psychology Service has information about supporting children with bereavement and loss on their website, which may be useful.

- Identify specific pupils who will need additional support and plans and consider what their individual needs are.

PACE

An approach to supporting young people who have experienced trauma

PLAYFULNESS

ACCEPTANCE

CURIOSITY

EMPATHY

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

- Educational Psychology Service Website - 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/

Improving life chances for all
www.fife.gov.uk/educationalpsychology