

## Returning to School

(Key Information for Teachers)

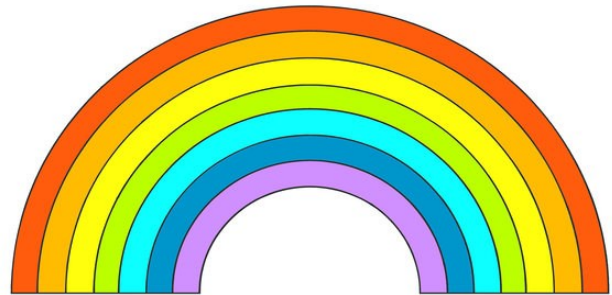
Jersey Psychology and Wellbeing Service

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Everyone has needed to change their established routines and structures during our response to Covid 19; the way they communicate with family, friends and peer groups has been impacted and opportunities and events have been postponed or cancelled.

Children will return to school having had different experiences of lockdown. They may be worried about the health or loss of a loved one or the financial implications COVID19 has had on their family. On the other hand, some will have found it reassuring to have had a slower pace of life and to have spent more time with loved ones at home. The diversity of response to COVID19 will be wide and may range from excitement, elation, feelings of reassurance, vulnerability or worry, particular for those who are preparing for transition.

Children may have very practical concerns – a missed medical appointment, a parent with housing or financial concerns. Respond to these as soon as you can by drawing on the agencies around you for help. This lifts a weight from them and re-enforces the trust they place in you.



It is important to recognise that most children will have some resilience, and that all their reactions will be normal responses to an adverse situation. Some will not require additional emotional support, following a period of adjustment when returning to school; instead this will feel like any other year when we all return from a lengthy summer holiday to begin a new academic term.

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Children build resilience with many experiences outside of the classroom and within their homes with their family. We know that staying at home has caused different challenges for children, for example, significant school events and exams have been cancelled and many children may feel they are behind on their learning. This may cause feelings of disappointment or worry and affect children in different ways. Although, these feelings can be difficult to cope with, it is important to keep in mind that the experience of staying at home can inform and begin to develop into important life skills and opportunities for problem solving. Research shows that helping children map out a sense of future with their hopes/plans and aspirations does indeed build resilience and instills hope to take the next steps forward.

## Returning to School

The behaviours that you will be seeing in the short term may not be typical for the children that you know. Letting pupils know that you have missed them and care about their wellbeing can provide them with the ability to overcome initial challenges of returning, and to settle quickly. Providing validation of their feelings or reassurance when needed will improve their resilience. Your knowledge of your children will play a powerful and important role in the way that you gauge whether they are settling well or are struggling.

Carpenter and Carpenter (2020) suggest that there are 5 key themes to consider when we think about the impact of children's sustained absence from schools: routines, structure, friendships, opportunities and freedom. These areas will underpin a significant amount of the work we do when settling students and should inform planning to determine how we support effectively.

- The routines and structures experienced by children and young people during lock down have presented significant change, as attending school has been temporarily paused for most, and the newness of physical distancing and home learning will have altered these factors at home also. Promoting new routines, putting structures in place at school, and offering reassurance to both students and families regarding what these look like will help to identify the 'new normal'.
- Friendships have been altered by children being unable to spend time with their friends, regardless of how hard parents and staff have tried to keep them in touch through technology. Just being back at school and amongst peer groups will be a relief for many of your pupils. Further thought to the social groupings in colour coded/bubble groups will also be meaningful. Applying general wellbeing sessions where students can reconnect through discussion of their feelings, and creating time at school for some fun will also prove valuable time for reconnecting e.g. Parachute games at break times. Your student council might also be a good source of support when thinking of ideas to recover and reconnect.
- Freedom and opportunities, such as missed school trips and activities, have been hard for children and their sense of freedom has been challenged as much of their actual freedoms during lockdown. Now is a perfect time to reflect with children on how COVID19 has helped them think about what they value in their lives and what new opportunities may have opened up for them. Wellbeing sessions with children to explore factors within our control and the power that lies in their decision-making capacity will help.



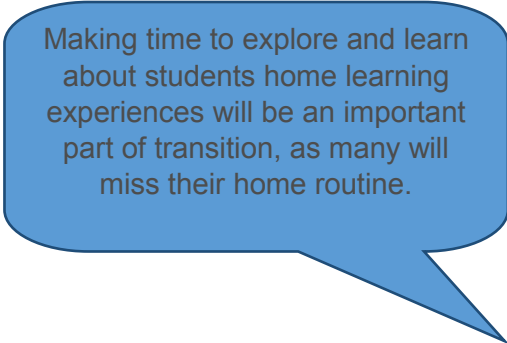
## Relationships and re-engaging

*'The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he/she will recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love' (Dr. Bruce Perry, 2007).*

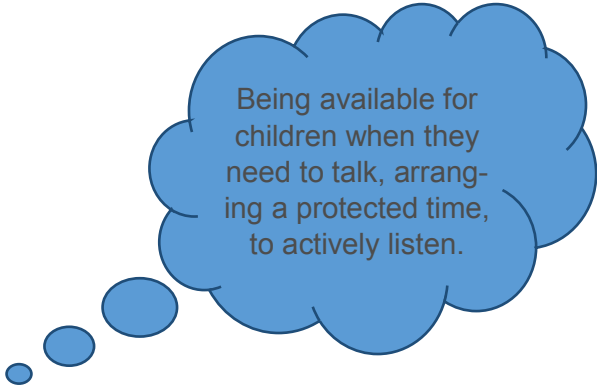
Relationships that were thriving before the school closures, may need to be invested in and re-formed. Creating a caring, warm and trusting environment for children can help with this process.

The school environment is a familiar and safe place for many children. Before learning can take place, old foundations need to be relaid to ensure the classroom has a supportive and caring climate. Focusing on re-building relationships between teachers/pupils and children with their peers will cushion the discomfort of returning for many and rebuilding trust will help to re-ignite the flame for learning in the classroom again.

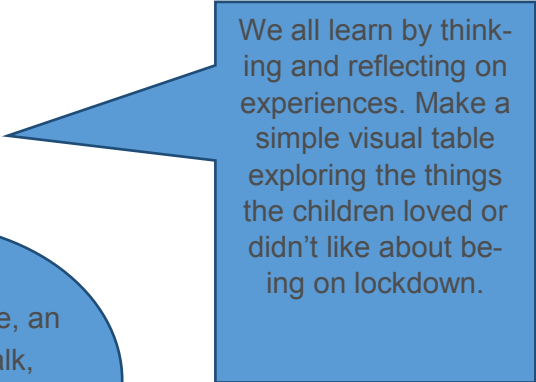
See below for some ideas for relationship building once returning to school.



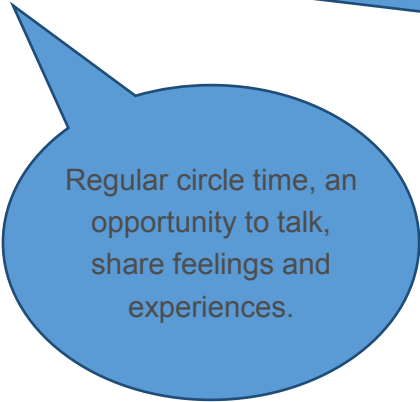
Making time to explore and learn about students home learning experiences will be an important part of transition, as many will miss their home routine.



Being available for children when they need to talk, arranging a protected time, to actively listen.



We all learn by thinking and reflecting on experiences. Make a simple visual table exploring the things the children loved or didn't like about being on lockdown.



Regular circle time, an opportunity to talk, share feelings and experiences.

## Routines and structure

Children have had varied home learning experiences during school closures. Creating a routine and structure for children returning to school helps to provide predictability. Routines/structure promote a sense of safety and containment for children.

Children need to feel safe in their school environment for them to begin to learn again. Many children will return with worries and uncertainty and may have questions they ask throughout the day (not just in circle time or 1-1 times).

Children may vacillate between happily engaging to feeling irritable as they try to make sense of what is happening for them. Teachers may see children display a range of emotions that may seem out of character for them. Children have varying abilities to express emotions, many will act out their feelings in their behaviours and others may repress their feelings whilst some will struggle to focus (See Window of Tolerance guidance for more information on how to offer support).



Establishing trust again with each other is important; reminded the children that you have missed them whilst they've been working from home; this might have more impact than you think!

Active listening and validation can help children to feel heard and understood. For example.... 'It is a big thing returning to school after all this time, its ok if you feel worried about this. That's understandable and normal to have these feelings.'

If a child continues to display worries or anxiety following the initial settling in period, which is impacting on their daily functioning whilst in school, they may require more intensive/focused well-being support from school based resources e.g. ELSA, before moving on to more targeted support from outside agencies (See Graduated Approach model for an overview).

## Promoting hope and empowering children



When children are empowered they feel more resilient to be able to cope with what they are faced with and the Covid-19 impact has undoubtedly changed the opportunities and sense of freedom that many would experience attending school. Acts of kindness throughout the pandemic have strengthened communities and helped them to cope. For example, even for the youngest children, creating rainbow drawings helped them to feel they were making a difference for their community. Evidence suggests that acts of kindness for others improves happiness and reduces worries. When children return to school, identifying projects that help others in the community is a strategy that can provide hope and resilience.

Children feel empowered if they can control aspects of their life and a sense of control reduces fear and worry. Continuing to educate children with simple safety and hygiene measures incorporated into their routine will promote a sense of control.

Keep children informed and let children's questions guide you. Answer questions truthfully about the pandemic but don't offer unnecessary detail or facts that can overburden or worry them. Providing developmentally appropriate facts and information can help reduce fears..

### Further reading

On-line on-line resource packs for adults, children and young people (gov.je); Also:

<https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

<https://www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/>

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Coronavirus-back-to-school.pdf>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/resources/school-resources/academic-resilience-resources/>

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

### Social Story - returning to school

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Coronavirus-back-to-school.pdf>

<https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/sites/kidshealth/files/pdfs/When%20the%20world%20went%20back%20L2%5B1%5D.pdf>

