**MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION**

**Returning to school after the coronavirus lockdown**

**Page last reviewed: 1 June 2020**

The Mental Health Foundation is part of the national mental health response during the coronavirus outbreak. Government advice designed to keep us safe is under constant review and will be different depending on where you live: [more details and up to date information here](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/four-nations-advice).

The coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown is an unprecedented situation in modern times. It is hard to gauge the full impact that the situation is having on children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing.

Pupils’ experiences of the lockdown period will have been very varied. For some, it will mostly have been a safe and enjoyable time. For others, it will have been challenging or traumatic. Schools and teachers are used to supporting their pupils through challenges that they face in life – the current situation will amplify those situations many times over.

This short guide aims to outline the scale of the challenge that schools are facing and provide practical advice and support for teachers supporting pupils as they return to school.

**The challenge facing schools and pupils**

As teachers and school leaders, you will likely be aware of the complex and traumatic experiences that their pupils may have had during the lockdown period. However, it is worth laying out the full range of challenges schools face as pupils return, to underscore the need for patience, flexibility and support for the staff managing the transition back to school.

Although we have limited experience and evidence in responding to a situation of this magnitude, the evidence we do have suggests that when schools reopen, the need for pastoral support, safeguarding and wellbeing services will be high. Some of the particular challenges are outlined in more detail below:

**Loss and bereavement**

Some children and young people will have relatives or friends who have died during the lockdown, due to coronavirus or other illnesses. Still more will have been aware of a relative or friend being seriously unwell or hospitalised. For other young people, there will have been other types of loss – for example, parents who have been furloughed or lost their job, a home and/or school move, or they may have experienced long-term isolation from important figures in their life such as grandparents.

Regardless of the type of loss, many will be experiencing this with a sense of grief. The way that children and young people respond to those feelings of loss and grief will differ widely – some may seem sad or withdrawn, others may appear anxious or angry.

Some useful resources on bereavement, loss and grief are listed below:

* Our piece on [loss and change](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/change-loss-bereavement) provides some advice for managing difficult feelings
* Young Minds have a piece which addresses [loss and grief specifically from a young person’s perspective](https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/feelings-and-symptoms/grief-and-loss/)
* Cruse Bereavement Care have a [range of resources](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-schools) for schools that may be helpful for supporting pupils who have been bereaved
* Cruse also has information and advice for [parents and guardians](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents)

For children and young people who were receiving support for mental and physical health problems, this will likely have been disrupted or cancelled. This loss of an important source of support may mean children and young people with pre-existing conditions are struggling. A recent [survey from Young Minds](https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/) showed that 80% of young people with an existing mental health problem felt their mental health had worsened during the first weeks of the coronavirus pandemic. Our piece on [living with pre-existing mental health problems during COVID-19](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/Coronavirus/pre-existing-mental-health-problems) provides advice on how to look after yourself during this time.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health have [guidance on supporting children and young people living with a range of health conditions](https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-resources-parents-carers#condition-and-situation-specific-resources-for-families-and-children).

**Challenging experiences at home**

Many children and young people entered lockdown in already challenging home environments. These challenging circumstances will likely have been amplified by families being quarantined at home together. Others will have faced these challenging experiences for the first time. These might include, but aren’t limited to:

* Domestic violence
* Abuse or neglect
* Family conflict
* Financial concerns, e.g. loss of employment for parents and guardians
* Worry about relatives who are key workers and continuing to work
* Caring responsibilities for family members
* Hunger and lack of nutrition
* Insecure housing, e.g. those living in residential care, hostels or refuges.

The scale of the challenge isn’t yet clear, but with domestic violence charity Refuge [reporting a 700% increase in calls to their helpline](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/09/uk-domestic-abuse-helplines-report-surge-in-calls-during-lockdown) and 900 counselling [calls to ChildLine](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/news-opinion/childline-coronavirus-counselling/) about coronavirus made before mid-March, it is likely that significantly increased pastoral care resources will be required well beyond the initial return to school process.

**Inequalities**

A key challenge as schools open again will be identifying what children’s’ experiences of lockdown have been and the volume of safeguarding concerns that are likely to arise as children begin to open up to their teachers.  Given the nature of the coronavirus pandemic, it’s important to remember that these concerns could arise in relation to any child, not just those previously identified as vulnerable, and that many children will have had a range of challenging experiences.

The vast range of experiences that children and young people have had during lockdown is a challenge in itself. Inequalities experienced during the weeks of school closure will be felt for the foreseeable future, as gaps in attainment, physical and emotional health will have widened. Planning to provide extra academic, as well as pastoral support will be needed.

**Uncertainty about the future**

The sudden and unprecedented changes that the lockdown imposed on everyone are likely to have left many children and young people feeling uncertain about the future. For some, this will be a fear of a second lockdown, for others it will be a general sense that things that used to feel safe and predictable, such as school, may no longer be something they can rely on.

There may be a lack of confidence amongst young people in the adults in their lives. As they have seen adults struggle to agree about how to manage the crisis, their sense that they can rely on adults to keep them safe may have been diminished.

**Transitions**

As the lockdown period is likely to span the end of one school year, the usual preparation that would be done with all pupils for their transition to the next school year will be lacking. This will be particularly challenging for children who were starting school, moving from primary to secondary school, and those who are leaving school.

Read more information and access resources to support pupils during transition periods on the [Mentally Healthy Schools website](https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/school-based-risk-factors/transitions/).

For those who were approaching the end of their time at school – whether they were awaiting transitions to college or university or looking for work –  the impact of the virus and lockdown period on admissions processes, exam results and employment prospects remains unclear, and many pupils are likely to worry about their future.

Our [guidance for young people](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/coping-coronavirus-guide-young-people), written with our MHF Young Leaders panel has specific advice for school leavers.

**Friendships and bullying**

Over a lengthy period of social distancing, friendships many have become strained or deteriorated. Many young people will have communicated with friends over social media, while others will have had little contact with their peers. As peer groups are an important source of support for young people, this may mean that many will have lacked a vital source of support in managing the stresses of the lockdown period.

The nature of the crisis itself – around a contagious illness – is a potent opportunity for bullying to arise. Social distancing and handwashing measures are likely to still be necessary for some time and could provide fuel for bullying around potential “contagion”. It is important to be aware of the rise in incidences of racism around coronavirus. Pupils from Asian backgrounds may well have experienced racism and bullying about the perceived origin of the virus in China.

**Safer at home**

For some children and young people, unfortunately, school does not feel like a safe place to be and the lockdown will have been a welcome respite. For these pupils, the challenge of returning will not be what has happened whilst school was closed but the prospect of coming back. This may particularly be the case for pupils with physical and learning difficulties, whose needs may be more easily met at home.

**Supporting pupils to return to school**

As a teacher, you are likely to be already aware of the experiences that your pupils are having, and as schools reopen, the specific challenges that your school community is facing will become clearer.

Supporting your pupils through this transition will draw on many of the skills you use day-to-day to provide emotional and academic advice and guidance. The following two sections aim to build on your knowledge and experience, offering you further guidance on things to keep in mind when planning the transition and talking to pupils, followed by more practical tools and strategies to rebuild relationships and support pupils.

**Things to keep in mind**

* **One size will not fit all** – different pupils within the same class will have had very different experiences of the lockdown period. They will also have varying levels of coping skills and resilience in dealing with those experiences. Having an open mind about what pupils may be going through and how they will be coping with it will be important.
* **You are part of a team** – some of the challenges facing you as a teacher may feel overwhelming, but other teachers in your school, community and around the world are facing the same issues. Observing appropriate limits around pupil confidentiality, draw on other teachers and school leaders for support and guidance. Share what you are learning with them.
* **Your team is wider than just your school community** – other agencies, third sector organisations and community groups may be able to offer support.
* **Different emotional responses** – given that there are many kinds of loss that pupils may have experienced over their time away from school, you may see different kinds of emotional responses. Children and young people will respond in different ways to challenging experiences. The same child may display different responses from day-to-day.

Read more about children and young people’s responses to grief [here](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents/children-and-young-peoples-emotional-responses).

* **Don’t dismiss concerning behaviour** – when something momentous happens, it can be tempting to see everything in that context. However, whilst the return to school is likely to elicit some challenging behaviour from some pupils, we shouldn’t ignore signs that something more serious is going on. Our Head of Programmes, psychotherapist Jane Caro highlights some signs that you should refer a pupil for extra mental health support:
	+ A significant change in mood that lasts longer than a few days. Signs may include low energy, withdrawal from social contact with friends, difficulty concentrating in lessons, being tearful.
	+ A significant change in weight – either increase or decrease – as appetite is often affected by mental health struggles.
	+ Tiredness lasting for more than a few days – may indicate changes in sleep patterns which can be linked to mental health concerns.
	+ Angry outbursts that seem out of character.
	+ Secretive behaviour, for example around mealtimes or PE lessons. You might notice signs that the young person is avoiding their body ‘being seen’ in a way that is unusual for them.
	+ Any signs of self-harming behaviour e.g. visible signs of cutting or bruising on the skin.
* **Learning might have to wait** – pupils may not feel able to jump straight back into learning immediately when they return to school. Disrupted ability to focus is a common experience for children and young people who have experienced bereavement or trauma. Immediately returning to scheduled lessons might lead to disruptive behaviour as pupils get used to seeing each other again. Finding time to allow them to work through these conversations and get ready to learn could be helpful, if you are able to schedule them in. However, it is also important to acknowledge that some pupils, particularly those who are entering exam years, may be anxious to start learning again and make sure they are making up for lost time.

Whilst we anticipate that lesson time might feel challenging for pupils as they are asked to focus on learning again, it is also important to remember that unstructured time in school (break and lunch times, before and after school) may also be a difficult time for some children.

* **Attachments have been disrupted** – Children and young people may have experienced disrupted attachments during the lockdown – separation from parents and grandparents, for example. Attachment is a concept that we often think of in relation to infants, but it is relevant throughout our lives. Even older pupils have attachment relationships with key adults in their lives, as well as their friends and peers. If these relationships are strained, disrupted or suspended completely, children and young people will likely experience a level of emotional distress.

You may not think of your relationships with your pupils in those terms but taking steps to rebuild the attachment that has been disrupted may be helpful. This could include spending more time with classes you have particular responsibility for (e.g. tutor groups) or providing unscheduled time for pupils to talk to staff and each other and rebuild relationships.

If you have time before school starts again, you could read more about attachment. A good starting point might be the [Mentally Healthy Schools website](https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/attachment-and-child-development/).

* **Trauma** – it may sound like dramatic language to use, but the coronavirus situation has been a shared experience of trauma for communities as well as for individuals. There is a need to process and understand exactly what has happened, to grieve the losses that the community has experienced, and to work together to find a way to move forward. Children and young people who are returning to school following traumatic experiences such as bereavement or abuse will need to be supported by teachers and schools that are actively listening, understanding, and responding in appropriate ways.

Trauma-informed care is an approach aimed at creating an environment within schools and organisations that reduces harm and promotes healing for individuals who have experienced trauma. You can find some useful resources and information about this approach at the  [Trauma-informed Schools’ website](https://www.traumainformedschools.co.uk/).

Additionally, resources to support communities after natural disasters or episodes of violence may provide useful ideas for responding, such as the [Emerging Minds community trauma toolkit](https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/).

**Practical tools and strategies**

* **Acknowledge what has happened** – whilst dwelling on the coronavirus situation may not be helpful, it is important that we acknowledge the scale of what we have all been through over these past few months. It is important to find a balance between respecting the enormity of the situation, the sacrifices that people have been asked to make and the losses they have experienced without sensationalising or dwelling on the situation. Indeed, you may need to go further and offer a clear and sensitive explanation of what has happened and why – some pupils may not have been well informed by their caregivers about the situation. Clarity about what has happened and what the ongoing risks are may be helpful.

**What to try** – lots of resources were produced for talking to children of different ages about the coronavirus. You might want to use one of these to start a conversation amongst pupils about their experiences.

* + **Early Years:**[Sesame Street](https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/health-emergencies/) have some useful videos and resources for younger children about health emergencies and dealing with worries.
	+ **Primary school:** You could read [Axel Scheffler’s book](https://nosycrowcoronavirus.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/Coronavirus_ABookForChildren.pdf) about coronavirus together. It’s free to download here.
	+ **Secondary:**[YoungScot](https://young.scot/campaigns/national/coronavirus) have a wide range of articles for young people about coronavirus, including clear explanations of the situation and “jargon busters” of some important terms.
* **Let them talk** – the return to school may be the first contact that pupils have had with each other in many weeks. Launching straight back into the usual timetable is likely to be challenging, as pupils have had a long period of time away from the usual daily routine. They may also have lots of thoughts and questions about the time away from school.

Of course, there is also a need to make sure pupils begin catching up on work they have missed. Gradually phasing in lessons, balancing more academic lessons with creative and vocational ones, could be one approach.

**What to try** – if you have the option to go off-timetable for some or all of the initial return to school period, you might want to do this. This will allow pupils to refamiliarise themselves with the rhythm of the school day.

* + **Primary school** – extended “circle time” check ins as a whole class can be a helpful way to share experiences and re-establish skills like listening to others, turn-taking, and concentration.
	+ **Secondary school**– you could extend registration or form tutor periods, if you have them, to allow pupils to reconnect. You could also adapt activities that you usually do during the primary to secondary transition process for other year groups, such as “getting to know you” activities.
	+ **All ages** – if you’re working with small groups or 1-1 with pupils who may need more support, our [Time for Us](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHF-Scotland-Parents-Pack.pdf) activity pack may be a helpful starting point. It includes activities designed to get children and young people thinking about what they find stressful, the coping strategies they have and their support system.
* **Offer individual opportunities to talk** – doing things as a group may help repair lost connections, it is important to make sure that pupils who need it have a chance to talk to you individually. Even those who have had a relatively straightforward experience of the lockdown may appreciate the chance to reconnect.

More importantly, there may have been things that happened at home that you don’t know about. Remember, children and young people may start talking about a topic, then stop again, only to resume later. Make sure there are ongoing opportunities for them to come back and resume the conversation.

**What to try**

* + If you have a class that you work with regularly, e.g. in primary school settings, or secondary tutor groups, you might want to schedule 1-1 check ins with each pupil.
	+ Alternatively, you could make an “office hour” available for pupils to come and see you if they choose. Even if you are not a form tutor or head of year, you may be the person that some pupils feel most comfortable talking to about their experiences.
	+ Keep offering these opportunities over the weeks and months after school starts again, not just in the first few days – it may take time for pupils to feel confident talking to you about their worries.
	+ Ask ‘open’ questions which allow the child or young person to respond in a way that feels right for them rather than closed, yes/no questions that tend to have an obvious “right” answer and which can stop the child or young person elaborating on their answer.
	+ If possible, try to initiate potentially difficult conversations at a time when you have time and energy to respond appropriately and sensitively. Children and young people will pick up on queues that we’re rushing or don’t really have time to listen to everything they want to tell us.
* **Be positive** – whilst it is incredibly important to acknowledge the challenges and losses that we have all experienced due to the virus, a positive approach to the future will likely be helpful. Focusing on building strong relationships and looking to the future with confidence may help alleviate some of the worry that pupils will experience.

**What to try**

* + You could initiate a discussion amongst your pupils about positive things that have come out of the situation. Acknowledging that lots of bad things happened, encourage them to look for good things that happened. Ask them to consider how we might keep some of those good things going as life slowly returns to “normal”. For example, people used their cars a lot less and pollution went down - we could commit to walking and cycling more. It is important to emphasise that recognising the positive does not invalidate or downplay the negatives.
* **Build connections** – one thing that pupils may have lost over the extended break from school is a sense of belonging to the school community and connection with others. Whilst we all experienced the lockdown period alone, in our homes, it was a situation that nonetheless affected everybody in society. An activity that the whole class – or even the whole school – can take part in might help rebuild pupils’ sense of connection to each other and the school.

**What to try**

You could also try some of the art activities below, as a whole class or school.

* Activities that involve all pupils, and allow them to focus on their strengths, will be particularly helpful. Try creating a scavenger hunt for them to complete in teams, with different activities and puzzles – some might involve writing, drawing, physical challenges, problem solving or logic.
* If you have new pupils joining your class – for example, incoming first year pupils in secondary schools – you might final alternative ways to build connection. A postcard to each pupil from their future form tutor, or video “interviews” with their new teachers could be helpful.
* **Look to the arts**– the creative arts can often help us express feelings that we struggle to put into words or help us feel less alone in difficult feelings. Pieces of music, visual art and drama that reflect some of the feelings that children might be having can be a useful way to start discussions – they don’t have to be about coronavirus specifically. Creating art can also bring people together.

**What to try**

* Creating a piece of art as a whole class (or even as a whole school) can help build connections and create a sense of belonging. Something simple like a picture made up of individual handprints is easy for pupils of all abilities to access. It can be displayed in the classroom as a physical reminder of the class’s joint identity.
* Using art and music in the classroom when talking about feelings might be helpful. Mindful Music have some songs on their website for younger children that you can use when talking about worries: <https://www.mindfulmusic.london/resources>.
* Singing as a group can help people feel connected – try a song you all already know, follow a “singalong” video on YouTube or even encourage pupils to get creative and write new lyrics, based on their experiences or how they are feeling, to the tune of a popular song they already know.
* **Be mindful** – pupils may be dealing with more worries, thoughts and stress than usual when they return to school. Mindfulness is a useful skill to help them manage those feelings. Some skills can be practiced as a class, such as breathing exercises. You can also explain to them about the importance of learning to focus on what is happening right now – dwelling on the past or speculating about the future can make worries worse.

**What to try**

* Lead the class in a short breathing exercise and remind them that they can use this (without closing their eyes) to help them focus if they feel worried.
* Have the class think of a list of things they can do when they are feeling worried and display it somewhere in the classroom. This might include “write my worry down”, “think about someone that makes me feel safe” or “notice my senses – what can I see, hear, taste, smell or feel?”
* Use a “timeout” system more flexibly, where pupils can take some quiet time to read or rest when they need it. In secondary schools, if you have a quiet space for pupils to use, you might consider making this available to all pupils, more of the time, in the initial return to school period.
* Have a “worry jar” in the classroom, or a postbox on your office door where pupils can let you know what’s bothering them.
* Look after yourself – teachers, like many frontline workers, are asked to take responsibility for the wellbeing of others. In these particularly challenging times, this can cause huge strain on your own mental health. To best support your pupils, it is also important that you take care of your own wellbeing.

**Tips for Parents & Caregivers – preparing your child to return to school**

* **Start talking** - your child might have worries about returning to school. You can explore these and help them think of ways to manage them using our [Time for](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHF-Scotland-Parents-Pack.pdf)Us pack or the resources on  the [Family Links website](https://www.familylinks.org.uk/free-downloads-for-parents).
* **Sleep routine** – help your child return to their normal sleep routine in the weeks before school starts again. Our “How to…” guide [on improving sleep](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-sleep-better) could be a good place to start.
* **Talk about school**– start to talk through the daily routine that they were once so familiar with. It doesn’t have to start as a conversation about worries, but these might arise as you talk.
* Model coping strategies you use when feeling stressed such as reconnecting with friends before returning, doing regular exercise or using breathing techniques. If it applies, you could share your own worries and feelings about returning to work and ways you are managing these feelings.
* **Make yourself available as much as possible** – they may want to come and “debrief” but maybe not when you expect. Create space for talking in different ways, such as going on a walk together or baking together – there may be less pressure in these circumstances than when sitting face-to-face.
* **Look at the positives** – as schools reopen, other things will too. It might be helpful to talk about things the child is looking forward to, like their favourite shop reopening, seeing friends in the park or getting ice cream from their favourite café.

**Tips for School Leaders – supporting your school community**

* **Be bold** – if you can, think radically about the positive aspects of the lockdown situation that you’d like to retain. Take this chance to embed different ways of working in your school environment. During Mental Health Awareness Week, we encouraged leaders to think about how they could put kindness, dignity and wellbeing at the heart of their institutions, and we would encourage school leaders to do the same. What would this look like in your school?
* **Pastoral care**– make time over several weeks for pupils to connect with adults and ensure staff are effectively supported with clear processes in place for reporting safeguarding and pastoral issues, or for signposting to other external sources of support.
* **Training** – take stock of where there might be gaps in knowledge and confidence around child and adolescent mental health amongst staff. You could provide learning resources, such as those on FutureLearn or other online platforms, and time for staff to complete them, until formal training can be implemented.
* Highlight available support both within school and in your local community and share this as widely as possible with pupils and staff. Identify organisations that might provide counselling or advice for frontline workers, as well as mental health and wellbeing support for pupils.
* **Work together** – there may be support available from statutory agencies or third sector and community organisations that you can draw on to implement some of these suggestions. You might even find that parents in your community have their own training or resources that they are happy to share with the school. Spending time mapping the support available and building relationships with these groups may be a good starting point.

**With thanks to our colleagues for reviewing this guidance:**

* Andy Langford - Clinical Director, Cruse Bereavement Care
* Medway Primary SENCO group
* Dover Primary Leaders' Group
* Terry Bennett & Darren Rubin, St John and St Paul Federation, Tower Hamlets
* Kevin Smart & Rebecca Smith. Leadership Advisors Medway LA
* Dr Robin Precey, Canterbury Christ Church University
* Teachers from our Peer Education Project schools