

A focus on child emotional wellbeing as schools return

Some thoughts for parents and schools

With children across our boroughs due to return to school in September, it's time to think about child and family emotional wellbeing again. We have been working very hard to ensure that our young people and families have been well supported during the time we have been in lockdown, and it will be really important to think about how we help families and schools navigate this next step.

We have become very used to socially distancing and so to think about having physical contact again and that being okay can feel anxiety provoking. However, the routine, structure and play with other children will be beneficial to most children, especially those children from more vulnerable households.

Preparing your child positively can feel very difficult as a parent, you don't feel positive yourself. There have been a wide variety of experiences in families during lockdown, with some children and families enjoying the tranquillity a peace, and others experiencing high levels of trauma.

Given the current circumstances, it would be very normal for parents to feel anxious; however, it is also important to try to limit how much of this anxiety is passed onto our children.

It is easy to assume that children will have difficulties returning to school, but many children will likely manage the transition without any significant problems.

Difficulties with separation after this time is likely to be one of the most common issues we see arising after their time at home. Some anxieties are likely to be higher also and keeping an eye on these initially, whilst trying not to make a big issue of them, is a hard but ultimately useful balance to strike.

With this in mind we have created some top tips for parents in preparing their child during the summer holidays to return to school.

Tips for preparing yourself and your child.

- **Frame the return to school in a positive light.** Talk about seeing friends again and that the people in their class will be largely the same even if their teacher has changed.
- **Watch class transition blogs more than once.** This may facilitate a conversation with your child about their thoughts and you can help to prepare them using these videos.
- **Talk to your children and explain how school will be different when they go back.** Based on the information you've been given from school.
- **Try to remain calm yourself as much as you can.** Try not to have too many worried conversations in front of your children. Save these for after bedtime. Talk to a loved one or friend who you find helpful and reassuring.
- **Limit exposure to the news and social media (especially for younger children).** This is more likely to make you and your children feel worried and unsafe.
- **Let your child know what they will be doing.** Most schools have sent out information about what will be happening in September. Try to keep to the facts and talk them through what will happen. Use visuals or a calendar to help them understand what will

- happen when. For children with additional educational needs, visuals and social stories may be particularly helpful.
- **If your child does struggle with separation**, let them know that this is really normal after being at home for so long. Talk through what will happen and when you will be back to collect them.
- **Allow your child to talk about their feelings** and voice their worries, whatever they may be. These are strange times and their minds and imaginations may run away with themselves. Listen, validate (“it’s completely normal to feel like that at the moment”) and reassure them that you are there and will make sure they are safe. If there is lots and lots of worry talk going around in circles, use activities to distract them and move on if possible.
- **If your child is having a difficult time, try to safely name their feelings.** For example, “I can see that you are feeling angry / upset / sad. It is really hard right now and I completely understand why you might be feeling like this”.
- **Talk to your children and explain that school may be different when they go back.**
- **Make sure there is time for fun and play.** This will provide distraction from worries and remind them that their world is still safe.
- **Do something to look after yourself.** This might be something as simple as reading a book or watching part of a box set. Try not to use all of your spare time with keeping on top of the house work or business work. This will help you manage your stress and remain as calm as possible.
- **Try to keep or start a routine over the next few weeks** as this will provide a sense of safety. This should include regular getting up, mealtimes and bedtimes. Routines will help adults and children alike.

Coming home from school

It is also going to be important for parents to think about what their children may need on coming home from school, which may feel like a different environment to their usual experience initially. This may include:

- Time to reconnect with family,
- For children to have physical contact time including hugs, parent-child interactive games, and time to play with someone who can be physically close.
- Jumping on trampolines may be helpful if available.
- It may also be useful for parents to prepare themselves for different behaviour from their child on coming home from or going to school.
- You may find that they are more upset or find it harder to manage their emotions.
- For younger children, there may be more bed wetting or daytime wetting accidents. This should improve by itself over time as they settle more.
- Using a no-blame approach and allowing time to calm with some listening, validating and reassuring, will help them navigate through this time.

Where parents or schools really are worried, having conversations with their school health advisors / getting advice services may be really helpful. Resources for schools can be found in one handy place for the GM footprint at <https://hub.gmhsc.org.uk/mental-health/covid-19-resources/>