

# Promoting Positive Transitions during and after the COVID-19 crisis:

Guidance on supporting children and young people to  
start or return to school



Northamptonshire  
**Educational Psychology Service**

# Promoting positive school transitions during and after the COVID-19 crisis:

## Introduction

Change is a normal part of everyday life and can provide opportunities for personal growth and enable adults and children to develop their sense of self-efficacy and resilience. The majority of children and young people attending our schools and settings across Northamptonshire will be able to cope well with change even in the face of adversities brought about as part of the COVID-19 experience. However, psychologists predict that there will be a significant minority of pupils who will feel anxious about returning to school after the prolonged period of social distancing due to the Public Health crisis. This document provides best practice guidance for schools and settings on how to support all children and young people to manage their transitions successfully. Advice is particularly relevant for those children and young people who are starting or moving to a new school or educational setting and are identified as vulnerable, have a disability and / or special educational needs.

## Why is transition important?

It is important that children and young people are supported to experience a successful transition back to school, or other educational setting, recognising that transition is a process and not a single event. We know that an individual's experiences of transition can have a powerful and long-lasting effect on academic outcomes (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Gutman, Sameroff & Cole, 2003), as well as impacting on their self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. Whilst transition can be a time of great excitement and opportunity, children and young people can also experience:

- A loss of attachment to familiar people, friends, the environment and objects within that environment
- Role and identity uncertainty
- Entry into an environment that is less predictable
- A perceived loss of control
- A feeling of being de-skilled and less valued
- Uncertainty about the future

## What can we do to support children and young people on their return?

Recent research from Oxford University found that a fifth of primary aged children have felt scared to leave their home during the COVID-19 situation (Weale, 2020). With this in mind, it is important to focus on what emotional comfort and support is needed by those returning to school or setting. Research by Hobfoll *et al.* (2007) identified five key principles that support recovery following a disaster or serious incident. These principles will be important to consider when supporting members of staff, children and young people upon their return to school. The five principles are:

1. **A sense of safety:** It is important that adults, children and young people feel safe upon their return to school or setting
2. **A sense of calm:** Children and young people are likely to experience a range of big feelings including both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. It is important that these

feelings are normalised and that support is provided to help them manage their emotions and return to a state of calm

3. **A sense of self- and collective- efficacy:** Children need to feel they have some control over what is happening to them, and a belief that their actions are likely to lead to generally positive outcomes (Bandura, 1997). They need to feel they belong to a group that is likely to experience positive outcomes and this is known as collective efficacy (Antonovsky, 1979; Benight, 2004)
4. **Social connectedness:** It is important that adults, children and young people feel they belong and have a social network which can support them within their school or other educational setting
5. **Promoting hope:** Whilst life may be difficult at the moment, it is important that adults, children and young people feel the situation will improve in the future. Staff and pupils need to be provided with reassurance and understand that in the longer term they will feel positive again

### Creating a sense of safety

Many adults, children and young people will be worried about returning to school or other educational setting and be feeling unsafe about being in such close proximity to others again. There has been extensive media coverage around increasing hygiene and social distancing practices and children and young people will be aware of this. It is therefore vital that schools and settings create an environment where all members can feel a sense of safety and able to cope with their emotions. The following can help to promote a sense of safety:

- **A clear structure and expectations for everyone;** staff, pupils, parents/carers and visitors
- **Continue with routine activities**
- **Be explicit about physical safety;** the location of rooms, people and activities. Be clear about when and where lessons and meetings will happen and to whom pupils can speak if they are uncertain or need to talk
- **Use transitional objects to support the children to feel safer.** This can help pupils to feel connected to someone who cares about them
- **Offer kindness and comfort,** ask pupils what you can do to help them and give information
- **Provide a safe place to talk and distraction activities** if pupils are not able to talk
- **Keep pupils involved and included.** Give children a voice and listen to them
- **Staff need to be aware of, label and acknowledge their own feelings.** This is important before adults offer support to pupils in co-regulating their emotions. Validate feelings and address the fears and anxieties of pupils
- **Watch with curiosity and empathy.** Behaviour is a form of communication and careful observation can help the adults to understand how the pupil might be feeling, particularly when the child or young person has not yet developed the vocabulary or language skills to express themselves clearly. Be curious about what the child's behaviour might mean

### Promoting calm

Some children and families will be experiencing a heightened sense of anxiety about the transition back to school or other educational setting once the social distancing regulations

around COVID-19 are relaxed. Supporting children, young people and parents/carers with these anxieties will be important for successful transitions. You may wish to consider the following:

#### *Before children return:*

- **Offer pupils a virtual tour** of their classroom and school or setting
- **Introduce teachers or form tutors using video technology** to prepare pupils for the educational environment. Offer virtual question and answer sessions
- **Acknowledge and directly address concerns.** Contacting families or having virtual meetings can give an idea about what their concerns might be. Provide clear information about the type of support and strategies you plan to provide for the pupils on their return
- **Identify which pupils may require extra support** at the time of transition, such as children who have previously experienced emotionally-based school avoidance. Consider what their individual needs might be
- **Offer affirmation messages**, e.g. 'we look forward to meeting you' and 'our priority is to keep you safe'
- **Signpost parents/carers to resources** which they can use at home with their children to reduce potential anxieties

#### *When the children return:*

- **Spend time welcoming the children back** and build in time for discussions about their thoughts and feelings
- **Make use of emotion regulation strategies** in the classroom such as calm corners, regulation stations and relaxation resources
- **Model emotion regulation** and how to stay calm. Co-regulation will be important in promoting calm in the environment. Hold whole-class sessions, such as mindfulness exercises and ensure that all staff take part
- **Provide additional pastoral care** for those who require it, either individually or in small groups. This might include opportunities to leave the classroom if pupils become overwhelmed, or having access to an identified key adult who is available if they need to talk
- **Promote frequent check-ins** within small groups throughout the week  
e.g. <https://www.carrmanor.org.uk/coaching/>

### **Promoting self- and collective- efficacy**

During the COVID-19 crisis, some of the children and young people may feel a lack of control over what has happened to them, and may doubt the impact their own actions can have. It is therefore important that a sense of self-efficacy is developed on their return to school or other educational setting. This can be promoted in the following ways:

- **Provide children and young people with responsibilities** such as specific jobs or tasks
- **Work with children and young people to set their own targets and goals**
- **Help children and young people to regulate their emotions** (see above). Enable them to have greater self-control and management of any unpleasant thoughts or feelings they may be experiencing

- **Teach children and young people problem-solving skills** which they can apply when facing difficult situations or when trying to overcome a problem. Help children and young people to recall times when they have coped with change in the past
- **Use cognitive behavioural approaches** to help children and young people recognise the link between their thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Carefully challenge unhelpful thoughts which may be impacting on their feelings and behaviours
- **Create a sense of community within the classroom.** This can be achieved through involving pupils in the planning and implementation of activities, and social activities that create a sense of belonging. Communal language such as 'our school' or 'our project' is also helpful
- **Obtain the voice of children and young people** in the school, and identify what they feel will support them within the school environment

### Promoting social connectedness

Reinforcing connectedness to the school or educational setting and peers will be crucial for the pupils during this period of transition, and will enhance their enjoyment and genuine connection to the community. Facilitating a sense of connectedness where pupils feel they are genuinely cared about, wanted, listened to and supported can positively impact on their engagement, achievement and emotional wellbeing (Keay, Lang and Frederickson, 2015). Some children and young people are likely to have been in contact via social media, however, most will have experienced a range of losses during their prolonged absence including close contact with friends, staff and recreational activities. Schools and settings can promote social connectedness in the following ways:

- **Provide peer to peer programmes:** to help the pupils reach out to each other and facilitate connections, e.g. buddy and befriending schemes which can support children to build friendships and a sense of belonging
- **Use Circle Time or Tutor periods:** to promote a collective understanding of how to support each other and encourage small acts of kindness
- **Build relationships or reconnections with key adults:** for some children and young people, it may be beneficial to assign a specific staff member to support their transition. This aims to establish trust and rapport and promotes a feeling of safety and being supported through the transitional period. Ensure that staff who are supporting the most vulnerable children and young people in school are emotionally stable and resilient
- **Social connectedness programmes:** develop the use of areas in school to increase interaction among pupils and staff. This could involve facilitating discussions on various health and mental health related topics pertinent to the crisis
- **Engage pupils in extracurricular / out of school activities:** activities and games could be provided in order to re-establish relationships between peers and staff, possibly with some flexibility around school hours
- **Support pupils through peer conflicts:** relational approaches that are supportive rather than punitive would benefit both staff and pupils' understanding of emotions and possible causes for challenging behaviour. This could include the use of Restorative Approaches
- **Model the behaviour you want to see in others:** on return to the school or setting, it will be important for staff members to model a sense of community to support pupils to develop and maintain attachments. Using communal language such as 'our school', 'our project' will help to develop a feeling of social connectedness and belonging

## Promoting a sense of hope

'Active hope' is a practice, it is something we **do** not something we **have** as a personality trait. Recovering from the COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity like no other to engage the whole community in thinking about what really matters. 'Are we the same or have we changed?' and 'What matters most to us now and how do we live with that?' (Meredith, 2020). 'Active hope' is rooted in our ability to create and sustain resiliency, first in ourselves and then for the children and young people in our schools and settings and communities. It is founded on principles of Relational Practice, rooted in hope.

- **Adults need to create protective factors** in the educational environment as their pupils return and they need to build them intentionally
- **Resilience is influenced by the relationships and connections between staff** at all levels within the organisation. The educational environment is one of hope when it moves from being reactive to being responsive (McKnight, 2020)

## Managing transitions between settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

Some children will be moving from early years settings to primary school, from infant to junior school or between primary and secondary school in September 2020. These are very important transition periods and children, young people and parents/carers may have additional concerns around this given the uncertainty of the current situation. We need to plan carefully for this process for all pupils and particularly for some groups of children with additional needs or vulnerabilities. Here are some possible considerations for each stage of transition.

### *Planning for transition between all settings*

- **Having friends in the same class** helps children to adjust to being in a new setting and creates a sense of continuity for them when everything else has changed. Ask parents/carers or staff at the child's previous setting about friendship groups. Staff could also ask the children themselves if they are transitioning from primary to secondary school
- **Predictability and routines** are important, especially when children are first settling in to their new school. For children entering their Reception year, times of sustained play will still be essential. Providing timetables in advance could be helpful for children moving to secondary school
- **Listening to children** provides the opportunity for children to voice their concerns or ask questions. Younger children may find exploring feelings and ideas about transition easier through play-based activities and stories. Therapeutic stories such as those written by Margot Sunderland are also helpful. Check-ins in small groups may be a useful way of exploring thoughts and feelings with older children
- **Recognise the importance of acknowledging feelings.** The Emotion Coaching acronym CONNECT is helpful guidance when helping to support children with anxious thoughts and feelings. See the web links provided below for different early years and school-age versions
- **Using a trauma-informed approach** can be very helpful throughout the transition process. More children than ever will be living with anxiety as a result of the pandemic and this will affect their ability to learn. This may include children who were not previously identified as experiencing anxiety. Staff need to have an awareness that children's learning and development may have been impacted by the crisis, especially for the youngest learners and they may not be where they were predicted to be in their attainments

### *Planning for transition into an infant or primary school*

- **Introduce relaxed/staggered starts:** these will be even more important under the current conditions. It could help to have children engage in continuous provision as they arrive. They may have experience of this from previous settings and it provides more options for parents/carers and the child to separate in a way that works for them
- **Adopt an individualised approach to separation:** flexibility to meet the individual needs of children and families will be essential. Be aware that separation may be more difficult following the COVID-19 social distancing measures. An understanding of attachment styles is helpful and the web links below provide further information
- **Understand the role that transitional objects play:** physical and virtual transition objects may be used such as a kiss or smile to keep in the child's pocket. Respond sensitively to any transitional objects that a child needs and work with parents/carers to find the best way to make use of these
- **Plan hellos and goodbyes:** parents/carers will need to feel connected with and supported by staff at this difficult time. This is most often the case at the beginning and end of sessions. Practitioners will need to recognise and empathise with the anxieties that parents/carers and children have, rather than dismiss them

### *Planning for transition to junior or secondary school*

- **Plan an end of year celebration.** It is possible that children will be leaving their infant or primary school without all the usual celebrations, such as a leaver's assembly. Saying goodbye to friends who may not be attending the same junior or secondary school as them will be important for pupils, as will saying goodbye to teachers. Perhaps a celebration could be planned for the Autumn term instead to allow for this
- **Consider building peer relationships** which may have ordinarily begun during 'move-up days' or events. This might need to be built into the beginning of Year 3 or Year 7 instead through activities in class, tutor periods or after-school events
- **Have a virtual worry box** or build in time for concerns to be addressed. Children will no doubt have questions and staff from the infant and junior or primary and secondary schools could work together to address these now in a virtual format
- **Consider repeating aspects of the curriculum between year groups.** Much of the curriculum that Year 2 and Year 6 pupils would normally be accessing at this time of year may only have been accessed on a limited basis or not at all for some children. Infant and junior or primary and secondary schools will need to work together to make sure there is some continuity of the curriculum and to ameliorate gaps in learning, whilst still providing some novelty for pupils in their new year group

### **Supporting children with additional needs**

This section highlights further information you may wish to consider when supporting transition for those children and young people with more complex needs, such as those in the care of the local authority, identified as vulnerable, disabled and / or with special educational needs.

### *Supporting transitions for Children in Care*

Children who have had unsettled or traumatic early life experiences are likely to respond to starting school in ways that are different from other children of their age.

Major transitions, such as the start of a new school year or moving to a new school, as well as minor transitions such as moving from classroom to classroom or from school to home at the end of the day, can be challenging for many children living in foster care. When a child

has had times in his/her life when they have felt unsure or unsafe and lacked a sense of a 'secure base', a transition can trigger the anxiety and fear they have felt before (Fursland, 2013). The following advice and considerations apply to a variety of situations, including children currently living in foster care, adopted children or those that have been in care and now returned to their birth family. Staff will need to:

- **Have an awareness that due to periods of frequent or prolonged stress, the child's development may be affected in significant ways and they may have emotional responses typical of a much younger child.** This will need to be taken into account when planning transitions. Teaching and learning approaches will need to match the emotional developmental level of the child
- **Understand that engaging in learning feels risky. The child may try to avoid risking failure and damage to their self-esteem.** No matter the age of the child, their efforts in engaging with learning should be recognised and praised
- **Consider extending the transition process.** A child may take longer to feel safe and comfortable within the school environment
- **Share information about the child.** School staff need to involve the parents/carers and key school staff in this process so that the individual child and their context can be understood as much as possible before they start or return to school. Wherever possible, involve the child in this, asking them what they would like their new school to know about them. Remember that the child is so much more than their care status and it is important to capture their strengths, interests and achievements alongside their story of coming into care
- **Create positive relationships with a key adult within the school or setting.** Staff should set aside time to spend with the child and engage them in preferred activities and provide emotional co-regulation. Sensory and physical activities, rather than talking, would also be good strategies to use at the start
- **Establish clear routines and consistency.** These are important for all children and even more so for children who have experienced traumatic backgrounds. It will be essential to support children in learning which behaviours are expected in a new situation, such as moving to a new school, due to the different coping strategies children in care may have developed (Graham-Bermann, 1998)
- **Focus on ways to help the child feel safe.** This needs to be considered before transition to the school or setting as well as during and following the move. Remember that a child who has experienced prolonged episodes of stress, been used to fending for themselves or been hurt or ignored by adults will not see the school environment in the same way as a child who has come from a more settled home life
- **Begin preparation in plenty of time and support independence.** A pupil transitioning from primary to secondary school, for example, may need to have several practice runs at travelling to their new school. It is also a good idea to begin cultivating positive relationships with other children attending the same school

#### *Supporting transitions for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*

Children with ASD will need additional opportunities to process their transition back to a school or other educational setting. The following strategies are recommended:

- **Make use of a Social Story or other visual supports and share these regularly with the child or young person**
- **Share virtual tours, photographs or maps of the new school or setting** and allow children to access these repeatedly

- **Allow time for the pupil to readjust to the physical and sensory environment.** Be aware that children and young people with ASD are likely to experience additional anxieties around returning to their school or setting after the COVID-19 pandemic. There will have been many rapid changes to their routine and everyday life. Even if they have been attending this will have been a very different experience from usual including changes in their physical and sensory environments
- **Ensure children feel safe.** Some children and young people with ASD may also have health-related anxiety and this will have been heightened by the current situation
- **Give consideration to different ways that timetables can be displayed for individuals.** Does the pupil need information displayed in a different format?
- **Create daily checklists** so that children and young people can make sure they have the correct equipment for the day and this will help to promote their independence (refer to the Young Minds resource below)

### *Supporting children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs*

A study by Young Minds (2020) sought the views of young people with identified mental health needs to explore the impact of COVID-19 on their emotional wellbeing. The study identified that:

- For some children the COVID-19 situation meant that they did not have access to their usual support networks and strategies. **Support networks will need to be rebuilt for pupils and it will take time for them to be effective again**
- 83 per cent of young people who already had mental health needs said the Coronavirus had made their mental health condition worse in varying degrees. **Children returning to school may need more support than they did before, and children who were previously coping may now not be**
- Some young people experienced anxiety, panic attacks, problems with sleep, and urges to self-harm, especially those who had previously self-harmed. **It is important to be aware of these anxiety related issues and the risks of self-harm when the pupil returns**
- Many young people were anxious about family members being ill or themselves passing COVID-19 onto more vulnerable family members. **The return to a school or setting may well heighten concerns about becoming ill or infecting others and this will need to be carefully managed**
- COVID-19 appears to have had a big impact on those already suffering with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) in terms of their focus on hygiene and handwashing rituals. **Children and young people displaying OCD behaviours will need understanding and additional support**
- **Primary and secondary school staff need to be in contact before transition to share information.** It will be vital for primary school staff to pass on the wealth of information they have learned about a pupil with SEMH needs to secondary staff where there is a change of school, including which particular strategies have been helpful
- Staff will need to consider children who may have been able to manage at primary school but for whom secondary school is predicted to be a challenge. **Be aware that many more children may have developed anxiety as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for this in advance**

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## How can Northamptonshire Educational Psychology Service (EPS) support schools and settings during this period of transition?

When	What support can the EPS provide?
Before the children return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation with leadership teams regarding organisational level issues for the school or setting, such as developing strategies / an Action Plan in preparation for children and young people returning, focusing on trauma informed, relational or person centred planning approaches, e.g. Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATHs) in order to work towards their 'dream/vision'</li> <li>• Training/workshops to schools/settings focusing on psychosocial support tools such as 'The Tree of Life', underpinned by Narrative Therapy. This aims to support communities such as schools in overcoming difficult life experiences to develop a sense of social identity and connection. Specific guidance could be offered on supporting vulnerable children and young people including those with SEND and Children in Care</li> <li>• Guidance for parents/carers about managing anxiety and their pivotal role in supporting the return to school/settings for their children</li> <li>• Telephone consultation for staff, providing them with a space to discuss their own needs/ feelings and concerns</li> </ul>
Initial support, i.e. the first two weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation with leadership teams regarding organisational level issues for the school or setting</li> <li>• Anonymous discussions regarding children and young people whom staff are particularly concerned about</li> <li>• Supervision/coaching for school or setting staff to allow them space to discuss their own needs/feelings and concerns</li> </ul>
Longer term support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation with leadership teams regarding organisational level issues for the school or setting</li> <li>• Parent/carer workshops on managing anxiety and supporting children who may be experiencing difficulties upon their return to school or setting</li> <li>• Regular coaching/ supervision sessions with staff to provide opportunities to reflect upon and discuss areas of concern</li> <li>• The use of Solution-Focused group discussions e.g. Solution Circles to explore difficulties staff may be experiencing</li> <li>• Intervention work with particularly vulnerable students e.g. those experiencing emotionally-based school avoidance facilitated by the Psychology Assistants</li> <li>• Training on a range of topics relevant to supporting transitions and emotional wellbeing including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'Activating Resilience and Coping Skills': A Cognitive Behavioural Approaches programme for children and young people experiencing anxiety</li> <li>○ Attachment</li> <li>○ Emotion Coaching</li> <li>○ Emotional regulation including Mindfulness, Anxiety and Creating an Emotional Regulation Toolkit</li> <li>○ Peer mentoring</li> <li>○ Promoting positive transitions</li> <li>○ Protective Behaviours/Loss, Separation and Bereavement</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>For more details about possible training, please visit: <a href="http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/TaMHSupdate">http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/TaMHSupdate</a></p>

Please find further information on [Northamptonshire EPS](#) and [EPS COVID-19](#)

## Useful resources

- Useful resources for schools to support transition including downloadable letters for using with children : <https://www.tes.com/articles/transitions>
- Information and resources linked to the MindUp programme, developed for families to use at home: <https://mindup.org.uk/families/>
- NHS information and guidance for mindfulness, with some useful links for adults <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/>
- Free mindfulness app and resources – for adults or young people: <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>
- Calming breathing and stretching exercises for children based on yoga: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyvuaL\\_2avY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyvuaL_2avY)
- Understanding anxiety- a child friendly video explaining how the brain works: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so8QN9an3t8>
- Information on Person Centred Planning including Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATHs) : <http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-reviews/>
- <https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/school-based-risk-factors/transitions/>
- <https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>
- <https://marymered.wordpress.com/>
- Transition tips for children and young people with SEND <https://youngminds.org.uk/resources/school-resources/transition-tips-for-pupils-with-send/>
- Northamptonshire EPS – includes CONNECT guidance: [EPS CONNECT guidance](#)

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