

# Transitioning back to school following the COVID-19 pandemic: Nurture, Relationships and Emotional Wellbeing

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Milton Keynes Educational Psychology Service and the  
Inclusion and Intervention Team



## Table of Contents

<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Children and family views .....</i>	<i>4</i>
Feedback from children: .....	4
Feedback from parents and carers: .....	7
<i>Prioritise wellbeing and relationships:.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Staff Wellbeing: Information for Senior Leadership .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Staff Wellbeing: Information for all Staff .....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>A Recovery Curriculum, focusing on healing.....</i>	<i>12</i>
A sense of safety .....	13
A sense of calm .....	14
A sense of self and collective efficacy.....	15
Social connectedness.....	16
Promoting hope .....	17
<i>Transitioning to Schools and Settings: Creating Comfort .....</i>	<i>18</i>
Relationships and wellbeing .....	18
Creating comfort and being creative with play .....	18
The importance of play .....	21
Visuals to support transition.....	22
Managing emotions and anxiety .....	23
Build in regular sensory breaks.....	24
Maintaining regular contact with key staff.....	25
Considerations for Children and Young People with Sensory and/or ICT Needs .....	27
<i>Further Considerations for Secondary Transition .....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Support for parents .....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>References.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Appendices: Useful Resources.....</i>	<i>33</i>

# Introduction

*“Physically distant but emotionally close” (Dr Bruce Perry, 2020)*

This resource, which collates ideas and materials from various sources, aims to support children and young people, parents, families, school staff and professionals with the reintegration of children and young people back to school, with a particular **focus on wellbeing**. At the time of writing, a particular focus has been given to transition stages which have been named in Government guidance as the first groups to return. These are Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6. However, the principles can be applied across schools and settings, including for example: child minders, special schools and independent education providers.

Staff are well versed in the planning and preparation of transitions for each age and stage of child and will have awareness of what helps and hinders a successful transition. In light of the current pandemic, the aim of this guidance is to hone in on key principles and ensure appropriate consideration has been given to the transition approach in this current context.

It is acknowledged that children and young people, families and the adults in the school or setting community will be experiencing the current situation in different ways. While some children, young people and families will be directly impacted and may be experiencing feelings of loss and grief, other children may have had a positive experience of having extra time at home with loved ones (and may have experienced less stress due to reduced expectations/perceived pressure of school). It is important to hold in mind as many narratives, experiences and interpretations of the current situation as possible.

## Key messages:

- **The wellbeing of children and staff** is paramount during this uncertain time.
- **A focus on restoring relationships**; this focus needs to be an ongoing, conscious and planned effort.
- **Children and staff need to feel safe**; feeling safe is a prerequisite to being able to learn. We need to place safety and relationships at the heart of the school ethos and culture.
- **Everything is uncertain at the moment – that’s okay**. It’s okay not to have all the answers, or a concrete plan. We need to be comfortable with being wrong, not knowing, taking the wisdom of all the people around us.
- Everything is NOT normal. Expectations and wishes of returning to normality are likely to be high for pupils, staff and parents; this will need to be managed.
- **Everyone will have their own experiences of lockdown** (both positive and negative). All experiences and feelings are valid and will need space and time to be shared.

At Milton Keynes Council we have based the guidance on some key principles grounded in theory and research for what we believe should be the focus for schools and settings when children return:

1. **Prioritise wellbeing and relationships: an anxious child is not a learning child!**
2. **Staff wellbeing**
3. **A Recovery curriculum, focusing on healing**

## Children and family views

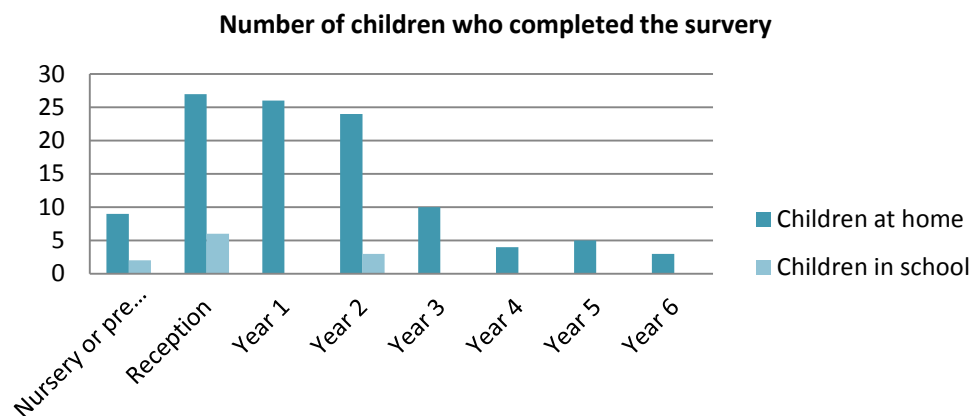
**Children, Parents and Carers from Milton Keynes shared their experiences of coronavirus and their thoughts about returning to schools or settings.**

At Milton Keynes Council we asked children and their parents or carers to fill out a survey around going back to school, nursery or preschool. We wanted to know how children felt about being at home or at school or setting, what they liked, what they found difficult and what helped. We also wanted to know how parents felt about their children being at school or setting, or at home and what their thoughts were about all children returning to school.

We want to give a huge thank you to the children and families who filled in the survey, it is a pleasure and a privilege to share your thoughts and present your ideas.

### Feedback from children:

Overall, 108 children who will be returning to school, nursery or preschool and 11 who are waiting to be joined by their peers answered the survey.



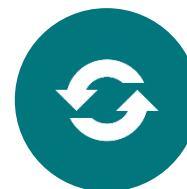
### Key themes from the survey:



RELATIONSHIPS



SAFETY



CHANGE

## Relationships

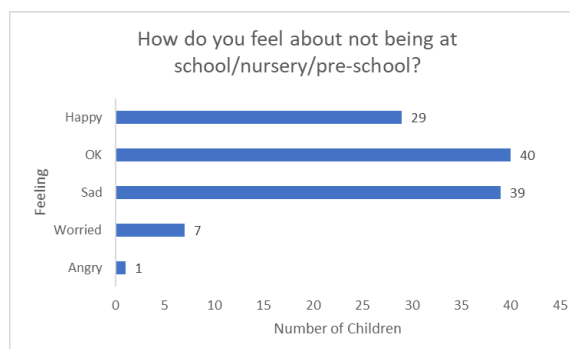
- 39 Children at home felt sad about not being at school/nursery/pre-school and gave reasons of missing their friends and teachers
- 10/11 children currently at school were happy because they were able to see their friends
- The children who felt ok at home still missed their friends but liked working at home and spending time with family
- Some children shared that technology has helped them to stay connected e.g. Zoom

**"I like studying at home but I miss my friends"**

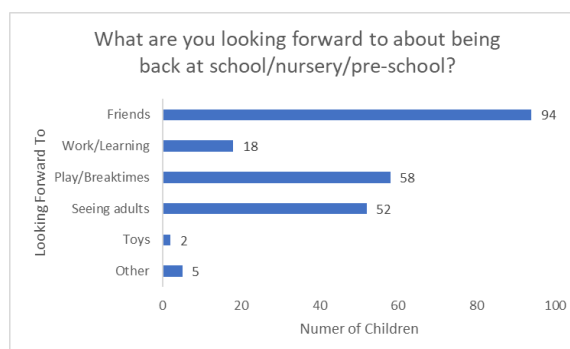
- 94 of the 108 of children said that they were looking forward to seeing their friends when they go back to school
- Children's' favourite activities included PE, maths, art, science and writing stories

**"I miss my teacher and my friends"**

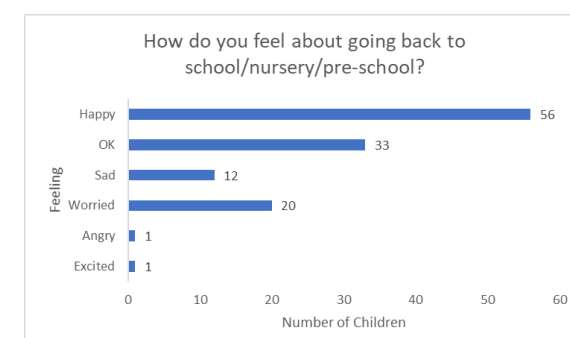
- Almost all the children who chose only 'happy' and 'excited' feelings links back to what seems to be the main theme here: seeing friends and teachers
- From the children who are at school/nursery/ pre-school and awaiting their peers joining them, 8 out of 11 said that they felt happy about everyone going back to school because they miss their friends
- 10 out of 11 of these children also said that everybody going back to school would be easy for them



Graph 1: How children who have not been attending school/nursery/pre-school feel about not being at their setting.



Graph 2: What children who have not been attending school/nursery/pre-school are looking forward to about returning to their setting.

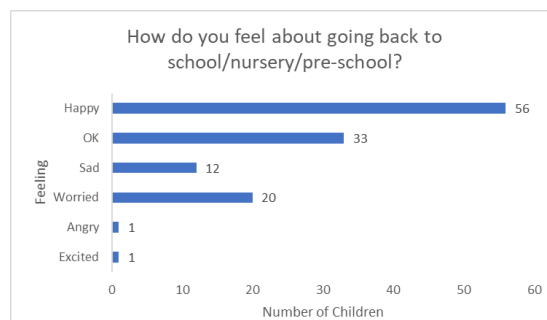


Graph 3: How children who have not been attending school/nursery/pre-school are feeling about returning.

## Safety

- Some children reported feeling ok at home because they feel safe
- NB: responses suggest children may not be aware or prepared for the “new normal” when returning to school under social distancing measures

“Hugging my friends and kissing them”



Graph 3: How children who have not been attending school/nursery/pre-school are feeling about returning.

- Most children felt happy about returning to school but a number of children are feeling worried
- All of the children who chose only ‘worried’ and ‘angry’ related their feelings to the fear of the virus and getting sick

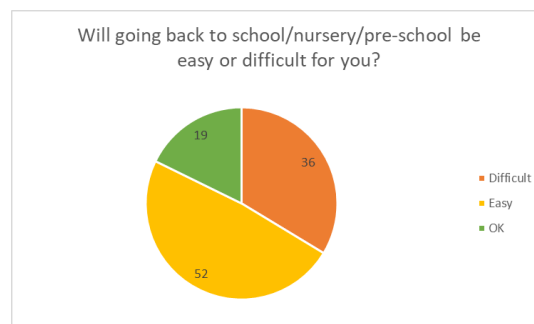
“Because some people might be sick and they might be coughing”

“I’m scared the virus will come back”

## Change

- From the children who have not been going to school/nursery/pre-school, 52 said that it would be easy for them
- A common theme for children who thought it would be difficult or OK was a fear of change
- When asked what would make things easier children suggested:
  - talking to their teacher
  - information about being safe
  - having a timetable
  - knowing what school will be like when they return
  - having the same teacher
  - being able to sit with friends
  - wearing masks

“Everything won’t be the same as going on a normal school day”



Graph 4: How easy or difficult children who have not been attending school/nursery/pre-school think it will be to return.

“Because of coronavirus, I cannot sit/stand next to my friends”

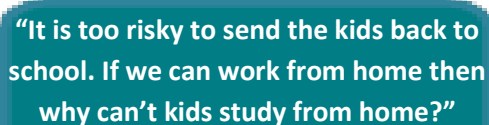


### Feedback from parents and carers:

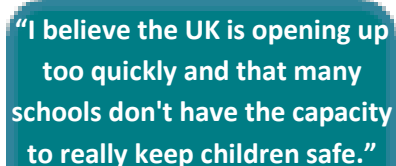
Parents/carers of the 108 children who will be returning to school/nursery/pre-school and 11 who are waiting to be joined by their peers answered the survey.

We asked parents and carers how they feel about their child going back to school/nursery/pre-school on a scale from 1 (not at all happy) to 5 (extremely happy).

- From the parents and carers of children who will be returning to school or setting, the majority selected 3 on the scale
- 38 parents selected towards the 'not at all happy' end of the scale, reasons given:
  - The virus still being present
  - It being too soon for schools to reopen

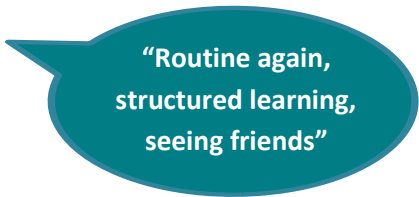


"It is too risky to send the kids back to school. If we can work from home then why can't kids study from home?"

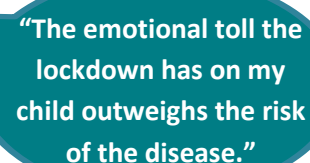


"I believe the UK is opening up too quickly and that many schools don't have the capacity to really keep children safe."

- 24 parents or carers selected towards the 'extremely happy' end of the scale, reasons given:
  - Structure and routine
  - Emotional impacts of not being at school and seeing friends
- Out of the 11 parents or carers whose children go to nursery or pre-school, only 1 of them voted towards the 'extremely happy' end of the scale
- Out of the 11 parents whose children have been going to school, 9 voted towards the 'extremely happy' end of the scale, the remaining 2 voted in the middle of the scale



"Routine again, structured learning, seeing friends"



"The emotional toll the lockdown has on my child outweighs the risk of the disease."

When parents were asked what would help their feelings around children returning to school, the two main themes were a **gradual re-entry** and **clear social distancing and hygiene guidance**.

## Prioritise wellbeing and relationships:

*“An anxious child is not a learning child!”*

*“Those five losses, of routine, structure, friendship, opportunity and freedom, can trigger the emergence emotionally of anxiety, trauma and bereavement in any child” (Barry Carpenter, 2020)*

Focusing on children and young people’s social and emotional wellbeing will be vital during this time. We know from neuroscience research that the brain prioritises the need for survival and sense of safety over higher order skills needed for learning (Cozolino, 2014). Therefore, both adults and children returning to schools and settings may initially be uncomfortable in close proximity to others, seeing them as a threat to life – and wanting to observe a two-metre rule. Children and adults may be tearful, jumpy, find it hard to concentrate, have difficulty sleeping (or sleep too long). Trust may have diminished. School and its demands may seem irrelevant.



It is important to recognise that there are some very normal responses that people are having and we do not need to pathologise these. That being said, we recognise that the current pandemic may be exacerbating the mental health difficulties of some, and feel it is important for children and staff to be educated about difficult experiences and the impact these can have. Some children are currently too afraid to leave their home. Previous research suggests that up to a third of children may experience trauma as a result of prolonged isolation. Therefore, children need a **trauma informed approach**, which supports them to find ways of processing their experience and discharging toxic stress. They should be responded to with acceptance, validation and empathy. Before children can learn they need to feel regulated and connected.

It will be important to be mindful of those children and young people who may be particularly vulnerable at this time, such as those who have been shielding or those with special educational needs and disabilities. Some children will have been directly impacted by COVID-19 and will have experienced significant loss or bereavement. It is understood that a flexible and sensitive range of responses is required, based on sound psychological understanding of the variety of reactions and needs of children, young people and adults at such times. The Educational Psychology Service is able to offer such support to schools and settings. Please follow this link for more information: [Critical Incident Support](#).



“No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship” (James Comer, Yale University)

“Every interaction is an intervention” (Dr Karen Triesman)

The quality of pupil-teacher relationships is the most critical factor in effective education (Roffey, 2015). The brain is a social organ, developing through dynamic interactions with other brains, so children need to know that relationships are an absolute priority in the school or setting community. We need to develop a model of interconnectedness between teachers, pupils and families. If we get this right, then academic energy (aka motivation and concentration) and achievement will follow!

Many of the relationships that were thriving may need to be invested in and restored; this needs to be a conscious and planned effort. Resilience is based on relationships and resources, so we want to create relational opportunities. It is relationships where we feel safe and can learn. Our ‘Recovery Curriculum’ section looks at the importance of Social Connectedness and provides strategies to support re-development of these relationships.

#### Key messages to support recovery from difficult experiences and change

- A **safe environment** is essential
- A **flexible model of intervention** is needed that can address a continuum of trauma responses, including ongoing exposure (Kinniburgh, 2005). Bespoke individual support for a child can be sought from the MK Council SEMH Inclusion and Intervention team. The Inclusion and Intervention Team Duty Line is open Monday to Friday 8.30 - 4.30 for parents/carers and professionals to seek advice, support and information for children and young people with SEND: **01908 657825**.
- **Self-Regulation**: it will be important for children to be supported to learn that they have control over changing their arousal system
- Supporting children to reach **self-empowerment**: the idea that children are in control over changing their thoughts, with the aim to reduce feelings of helplessness
- Helping children learn to express their experiences, at their own pace
- Having a **key adult** with pastoral support responsibilities for regular check-ins. For younger children, this may include use of nurture rooms
- Strategies that calm the brain, such as **Emotion Coaching**, have a positive impact on learning (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Sniekus, 2015)
- It will be helpful to think about **adversarial growth** and what resources we have to build resilience
- There are lots of **creative ways** to support children to process their experiences e.g. through art, play, nature, drama, music

## Staff Wellbeing: Information for Senior Leadership

We recognise the important role Senior Leadership Teams have in supporting and steering a culture of connection, recovery and relationships for their staff; placing the well-being of their staff as central. Staff members need to feel a sense of belonging in the school or setting community, seeing the school environment as one from which they draw strength and come away feeling emotionally resilient rather than depleted. It is important to remember and remind each other that there is no 'blueprint' for how to respond to this situation, you are doing the best that you can and your support will be appreciated.

Senior leaders will be exceptionally busy at this time. Nurturing relationships with staff does not necessarily need to be a time-consuming process; resilience is often conceptualised as 'ordinary magic' (Masten, 2014). Therefore, taking advantage of everyday opportunities to build in this relational support, and opportunities to connect, may help teachers feel valued and 'held in mind' (DECP, 2020).

There are well publicised support mechanisms which may be helpful to consider, such as: **mentoring, consultation, emotional check-ins**, to reach and connect with staff members on a personal level. It will be helpful to consider what processes you already have in place at school or in your setting, and how can these be enhanced or adapted?

Dudley Educational Psychology Service completed a literature review focusing on how to support the psychological wellbeing of staff during this time (Bhardwaj et al, 2020). Key points from the review include:

- It is crucial to **consider cultural differences** regarding response to the current climate
- Importance of a **personalised approach**; some individuals may not feel they need much support, others may need more
- Ensuring **staff are aware that their emotions**, whether they are positive, negative, conflicting, are all normal during this time
- Ensuring **basic practical support needs are met, before emotional needs**
- **Empowering individuals** through identification and development of coping/self-help strategies
- Looking at **wider community systems** to strengthen connectedness, belonging and to identify resources
- A consideration of **how to build connectedness** amongst colleagues, children, parents, staff is key, especially as social distancing measures may reduce these feelings amongst staff

Other suggestions:

- **Consider using online technology** to create a 'virtual staffroom' where teachers can chat and check-in with each other.
- Promote an **ethos of help seeking in school or settings**, where staff members are encouraged to model help-seeking behaviour.
- Enable staff to contribute to decisions e.g. through online polls
- Senior leaders inviting feedback e.g. during staff check-ins or briefings.

# Staff Wellbeing: Information for all Staff

*We can only meet someone as deeply as we've met ourselves.*

*The well from which we pour needs to be at least half full.*

We recognise that, similarly to the children, adults in the school or setting community will have had different experiences during this pandemic. You will also be experiencing a similar range of emotions and reactions to the children, young people and their families. Experiences of bereavement and loss, caring for someone shielding, living with a frontline NHS worker or carer, coping with additional stressors, worry and anxiety will be shared and lived experiences for many.

## What might be helpful during the transition period?



SELF-CARE:  
KNOWING WHAT  
HELPS YOU TO  
CALM



ACCLIMATISE:  
TAKE TIME TO  
ACCLIMATISE TO  
HOW THINGS  
WILL BE



REFLECT ON  
HOW YOU FEEL



FIND YOUR CALM



COMMUNICATE  
YOUR WORRIES



CONNECT WITH  
OTHERS

Think about having a **buddy in school or the setting**, so you can check in with each other at various times if needed. It might also be helpful to have someone on hand to help you think through any questions that might come up in class and work through them together.

- Don't put any pressure on yourself to do any activities or have any discussions you don't feel up to, that is absolutely fine.
- **Talk to each other, support each other**- the staffroom can become a real sanctuary at times when things are feeling difficult. It never hurts to bring in a few snacks and treats to share or to try and come together for a quick catch-up at break time.
- **Mindfulness based activities**- having strategies you can use in the moment to support you to stop.....clear your mind for a few seconds....focus on your breath....carry on again.

## A Recovery Curriculum, focusing on healing

Research has identified five key principles that support recovery following a disaster or serious incident (Hobfoll et al., 2007). These principles will be important to consider when supporting members of staff, children and young people upon their return to school or settings:



SAFETY



CALM



SELF AND  
COLLECTIVE  
EFFICACY



SOCIAL  
CONNECTEDNESS



HOPE





### A sense of safety

It is important that adults, children and young people feel safe upon their return to school or a setting. For children and young people to feel as safe as possible, schools, settings and classroom environments need to be high in both nurture and structure, and to be predictable and organised, with clearly stated, reasonable expectations. Nurture principles derived from Marjorie Boxall (1969) promote “immersing students in accepting and warm environments which develop positive relationships with both teachers and peers” (The Nurture Group Network, 2017). Considering the underlying principles of Nurture Groups (e.g. the classroom as a safe base, behaviour is communication), could be useful when thinking about how to promote feelings of safety at this time.

All adults must consider how body language can communicate safe feelings. Staff should be given license to connect with students in order to co-regulate their emotions and accompany them on their journey to self-regulation and hope. It might be helpful to have a consistent and shared agreement of how children will be greeted i.e. feet touching, Namaste, hand on heart to show love, air hug, thumbs up etc. so that children know what to expect for each adult they meet

#### Some principles to consider when helping Children and Young People to feel safe

- Have a **consistent, predictable routine**, present this visually where possible and give this to children and their families beforehand
- **Ground rules** focusing on how we can keep ourselves and each other as safe as possible can be co-constructed and reviewed with groups and classes
- **Transitions**: be aware of children’s reduced capacity to cope with change, give a lot of warning and consider use of music to signal transition, this will help keep things predictable and give children a chance to adapt
- **Support for vulnerable pupils**: there will be some children who will find things particularly difficult. Consider the use of social stories to help children understand why certain things are in place e.g. 2 metre distance, washing hands. Involving the children in feeding back what will help them feel safe
- **Safe space**: consider if there is a safe space in school or the setting for staff and for children and communicate this to all
- **Be curious not furious**: some children will show how they are feeling through their behaviour. Consider using approaches such as emotion coaching to support
- **Prepare and pre-warn**: classrooms, settings and schools will look quite different. Consider sending information home, including images to help prepare children for the changes
- **Separation anxiety**: children may find separating quite difficult. Consider avoiding distraction and instead offer comfort, compassion and validation
- **Information sharing** will be essential in order to ensure wrap-around safety. Schools and settings should consider how information is communicated e.g. via daily posts or briefings





### A sense of calm

Children and young people are likely to experience a range of emotions including both pleasant and unpleasant. It is important that these are normalised, and they are given support to help them manage their emotions and return to a state of calm.



#### Some principles to consider when helping Children and Young People to feel calm

- **Self-care:** *see staff wellbeing section*- in order to help others feel calm, we need to feel calm and contained ourselves
- **Monitor:** consider having daily check-ins to ask how children are feeling and do they have someone they can turn to, who can empathise, validate and accept their feelings
- **Focus on what they have learnt** rather than what they have not: there are going to be huge gaps, but it won't be helpful for them to be tested when they come in. Give opportunities for them to share what they have learnt e.g. skills of looking after others, baking, and nature
- **Self-regulation activities:** consider anything that includes rhythm e.g. breathing exercises, music, walking, rocking, swinging, running and jumping. If you can use relational regulation that will be more powerful, this is when you do these exercises together. Short frequent bursts are more helpful
- **Teach relaxation strategies:** breathing techniques, blowing bubbles, mindfulness activities
- **Create frequent opportunities to express emotions:** talking about feelings, having posters around the classroom that provide words for feelings and emotions and cueing children and young people into their feelings are all strategies that develop emotional literacy and help children and young people to understand their own and others' feelings
- **Remember the power of your voice:** at times where we cannot use proximity and touch, your voice is just as powerful in helping others to calm down. Loud empathy e.g. slow audible breath to help calm down, or using a story telling tone of voice





### A sense of self and collective efficacy

Children (and staff) 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. They need to feel they belong to a group that is likely to experience positive outcomes. This is known as collective efficacy. People need to feel like they are doing something and helping in some way, giving everyone a sense of purpose.



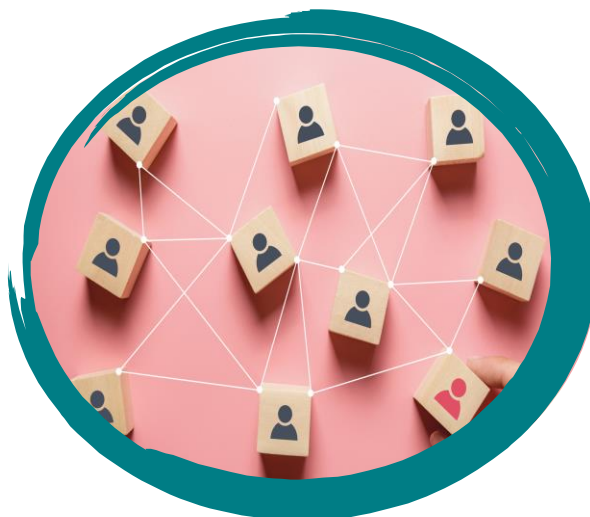
#### Some principles to consider when promoting self and collective efficacy

- Discuss **what's strong with them** rather than what's wrong with them- what strengths have the children used to help them to cope?
- **Set goals** with the children to give a sense of achievement and purpose in the day, ensure they are manageable
- **Co-constructing** group rules, timetables, and what to do will help give children a sense of control and a sense of efficacy at this time
- **Ask for their feedback:** ask regularly how school is feeling and how to feel safer, calmer and more enjoyable. This gives them a sense of control
- **Responsibilities:** give children responsibilities, such as collecting books, when it is considered safe to do so
- **Control through 'doing':** what can we as a class do to help the community at this time?



## Social connectedness

It is important that adults, children and young people feel they belong and have a social network which can support them within the educational setting. It is important to consider if there are any individuals or families who have limited social support, and how to ensure they are connected.



### Some principles to consider when helping children and young people to feel a sense of connectedness

We can encourage children and young people to **share their stories** about ways in which their community has helped each other. We can reflect on what might have changed possibly for the better or what has been brought into sharper focus for us.

**Encourage 'Relational Dosing' (for children and staff):** This is the idea that we can feed small relationship building interactions throughout a child's day. By setting up relational dosing around the school, setting and in classrooms, this may take the pressure off individuals and will ensure children are being kept in mind. This might include:

- Setting up **professional buddies**
- **Sending postcards or letters** to children
- **Opportunities to share/ check-in** – e.g. circle time
- Regular opportunities to show children are **being held in mind**, for example remembering something about what they said they did at the weekend, or something you saw that reminded you of them.
- **Increase opportunities for connection:** and help children to reconnect e.g. sending a welcome message, introducing new staff
- **Promote kindness, understanding and gratitude:** increased opportunities for group reflection
- **Use a relational approach to behaviour:** rather than punishment, focus on understanding the behaviour and supporting the behaviour e.g. using restorative approaches, emotion coaching
- **Key adults:** some children who may have found the current situation particularly difficult or who found attending school difficult before, may benefit from a key adult approach to build feelings of safety
- It is important for staff to consider how to **connect with children before returning** – see *Transitioning to School* section
- Find opportunities for children to **work together as a group**, in a safe way



## Promoting hope

Whilst things may feel difficult at the moment, it is important that adults, children and young people feel things will get better and work out in future. They need to be provided with reassurance and understand that in the long term they will feel positive again. It is important to harness adversarial growth, how we have grown during this period of adversity.

Schools and settings can enhance hope by **setting positive goals, building strengths** that they have as individuals and communities, and **helping children to tell their story**.

Some children may experience a loss of trust in the world after a global pandemic; they may believe that because a terrifying thing has happened, they can no longer dare to hope that life can be happy and safe again. **Modelling optimism** and encouraging them to see the strengths and coping skills they have and encouraging them to **notice acts of courage and kindness** will help develop a sense of personal efficacy and future. It is not uncommon for children and young people to have a less optimistic view of the future after events such as these. **Reminding them of their strengths** and providing opportunities for setting goals and achieving them will help them to take a positive view of their lives. Remember optimism can be taught and that it is contagious.

It is important to talk about and reflect on the following:

- **What have we learnt from this?**
- **How have we changed for the better?**
- **How did we cope?**
- **How did we pull together as a community?**
- **What are you grateful for?**
- **What are you looking forward to?**

Consider **new beginnings**, what opportunities do we have now that we didn't before. How can we think creatively to make the return to schools and settings feel safe and fun?

It is important to recognise the positive impact nature has had on so many children and people during this pandemic. When we consider things that have enhanced our mental health during this time, such as the nice weather, going for a walk, exercising outdoors, being able to garden etc. they can act as a guide to **consider how outdoor learning can have a positive contribution to new opportunities at school or in the setting**.

**Adults will need to have a clear message of hope in their interactions with children, conveying the message that things will be better in time.**

# Transitioning to Schools and Settings:

## Creating Comfort

The transition from home to school or setting can be a particularly anxious time for children, and their parents. Due to the current pandemic, typical events to support transition may not have happened in the usual format, as we would have done before coronavirus. Below are some possible ideas that could be helpful. *See appendices for some useful resources.*

[The Milton Keynes Local Offer](#): The place to find local services for children and young people with special educational needs and disability.

For all the latest information and support regarding children and young people with SEND, join us on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/mksend](https://www.facebook.com/mksend)

The Inclusion and Intervention Team Duty Line is open Monday to Friday 8.30 - 4.30 for parents/carers and professionals to seek advice, support and information for children and young people with SEND: **01908 657825**.

### Relationships and wellbeing

- Ensure that you are liaising with parents to provide tailored support- it is important to acknowledge parents anxieties as well as the child's
- Have a key person to make contact before entry into school or nursery, this will help to support their relationship
- A settling in plan may be needed if the child needs a personalised transition back into school or nursery
- Ensure that there is the opportunity to build relationships again, with the consideration of the changes that have now been implemented and the impact that will have on children. Have protected time to allow this to happen
- Consider learning through play approaches and provide opportunities to have fun
- Acknowledge the challenges that the children may have- talk these through and reassure children that they will be listened to and valued
- Consider using the Leuven Scales to check in with the children. Further information on Leuven Scales can be found in the appendix

### Creating comfort and being creative with play

Ensure where you can that routines are in place for the children; morning circle check-ins, familiar songs to create an atmosphere of comfort and safety. Unfortunately this can't be a soft toy, but an object that the child can bring in from home to school or setting which is a comfort to them. Adjustments to transition objects may be needed in liaison with family/school e.g. laminated photo of a special object, object in a sealed bag to enable cleaning. Do not focus on 'catching up' with learning. We know children learn through play, so create opportunities for them to explore.

1



2



<sup>1</sup> Top figure: ABCdoes <https://abctoes.com/abc-does-a-blog/2020/05/30/what-now/>

<sup>2</sup> Bottom figure: Back to School Shelfie - @resolvetoplay - Susie Robbins <https://www.resolvetoplay.com/>

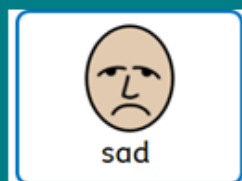
## Protective hand

- Add five people, children and adults that you trust to talk to if you are feeling sad or worried. Please make sure you include at least one of the adults who is with you daily.
- It is also important to share the things that make us happy and that we are proud of
- Once you have added your five people, colour in and decorate your hand



## Wellbeing

- Consider a wellbeing check in for children to communicate if they are worried
- Children to know which key adults they can speak/communicate with if they need to
- Consider non-verbal ways of doing this such as an individual 'think box' where children can write their thoughts and questions





## The importance of play

### The Home Corner & small world play

Providing the *instruments* for children to use in their play gives them the opportunity to dramatise everyday life and share what is happening around them. Margaret Lowenfield (Play in Childhood) emphasises:

“These toys are not merely used by the children for imitating the often incomprehensible actions of the adult world they see around them, but to dramatise their versions of everyday life, and their conceptions of how they would *like* life to be.”

Now more than ever children will be using play to help interpret the world around them. Give your children time to play with small world toys and role play to help them to process what they may need to. Observe carefully and note anything you may want to focus on with individual children.

Alistair Bryce Clegg suggests using ‘mini-me’ figures of children and their families (photographs on lollipop sticks!)

*“Role Play provision is just the opportunity for children to engage in their own self-directed investigation and articulation of the world they inhabit. Whether we create a ‘space’ for this to happen or not – we are going to see lots of it.”*

<https://abctoes.com/abc-does-a-blog/2020/05/30/what-now/>

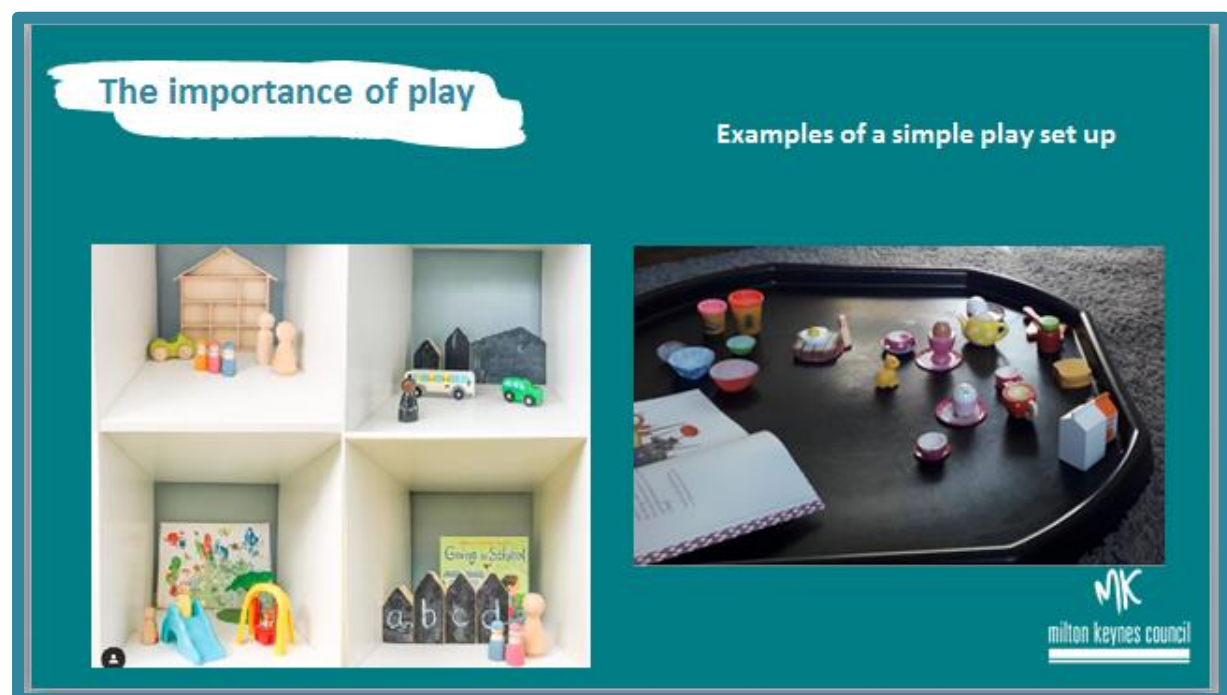




Image left: [@resolveplay](https://www.resolveplay.com/) - Susie Robbins  
<https://www.resolveplay.com/>


## Visuals to support transition


- Have a book of photographs of the nursery/school so the children can see what the classes look like now and what staff (if there have been changes) will be working with them. If small groups have been decided, a photo of the children in their group with a positive message about something they want to do together
- Video tour of the school or setting<sup>3</sup>, again to get used to the changes and familiarise the children with the setting/school again. Video messages from the staff to the children
- Visual countdown for when the child will be going back to school or setting – see *links on the Local Offer*
- Talk about how the children feel about going back to nursery or school and have visuals and stories to support with this
- Thoughts and Feelings book from ELSA – *please find a link in the appendix*
- Predictability and routines will be crucial, so consider a similar daily routine (where possible) and use visuals schedules so the children can see the structure of the day. If there is any anxiety around leaving parents, a visual schedule will support them to see when it is home time
- Widgit has released visuals to support the transition back to schools and settings which focus on new routines that all children will need to be aware of and followed. These posters are free and can be downloaded: <https://www.widgit.com/>

### Visuals

- Having visuals to support language and modelling what these new visuals mean in reality





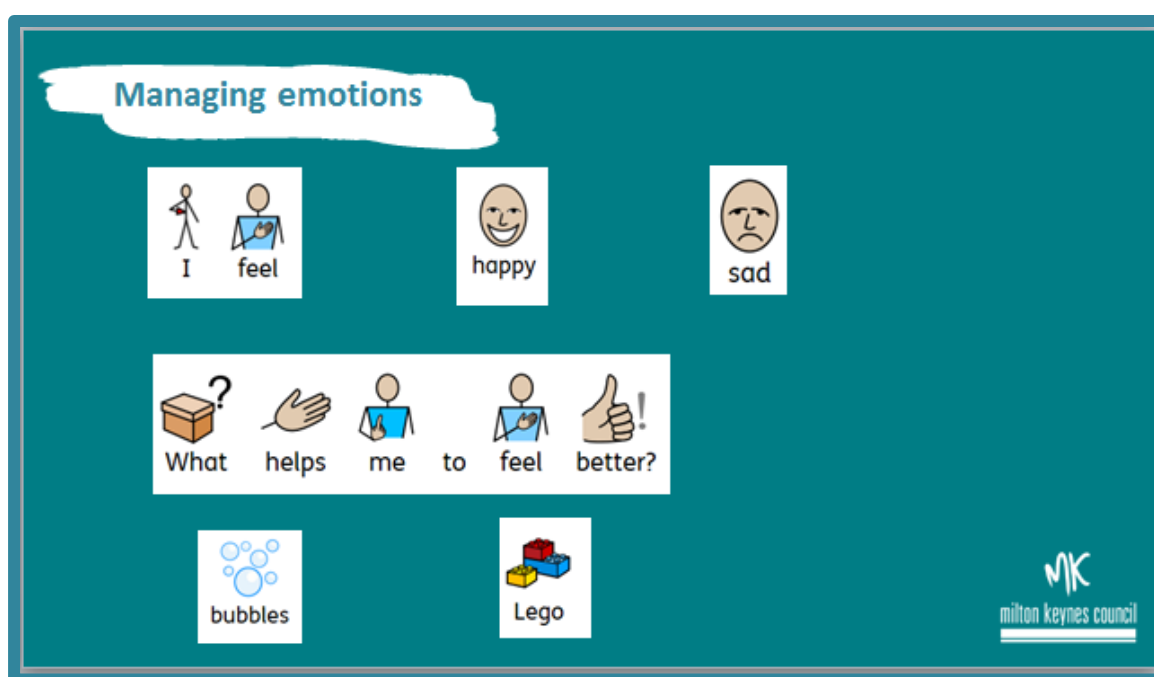


This resource was created using Widgit Symbols. To create your own, visit [www.widgit.com](https://www.widgit.com).  
Widgit Symbols © Widgit Software 2002- 2020.

<sup>3</sup> schools and settings should follow their IT and safeguarding policies when considering use of videos (or amend and update policy as needed).

## Managing emotions and anxiety

- Provide books on feelings to support children to understand the emotions they are feeling
- Use visuals to support self-recognition of emotions and personalised self-regulation strategies
- Provide simple visuals to support how the child feels and strategies to help them feel better
- Use Social stories to explain how things may have changed over the coronavirus. It would be helpful to cover both what is the same as well as different, this can be represented visually to support understanding e.g. a Venn diagram, what we know is the same, what we know is different, what we don't know/questions
- Prepare the children for the changes and the visuals that may be used – what has changed and what is different, possibly a picture sorting activity.
- A toy from home may help children feel comfortable – it may be kept in a special box to ensure hygiene measures are observed




## Build in regular sensory breaks

- Incorporate regular sensory/brain breaks into the day for all children
- Consider having a yoga session scheduled into each day
- Provide headspace time for children to ensure their mental health is looked after
- Encourage time to be active that helps us to switch off and feel better – a strong focus on wellbeing and mental health
- Explore strategies that the children may have used during lockdown. Can any of these be implemented, for example gardening (Forest School)


Please see the SEND Local Offer for ideas and visuals, specifically the Early Years section may be useful: [click here!](#)

### Sensory breaks


- Consider setting up sensory circuits with visuals
- You could zone off different areas with chalk or cones




star jumps



skipping



yoga



milton keynes council

## Maintaining regular contact with key staff

Pupils will need regular contact with the staff of most importance to them in the run up to their return to school or setting. Ways to do this may include:

- **Phone calls** to chat about what they have been doing at home, their achievements, interests, interactions etc. Staff can also use this opportunity to gather valuable information about their emotional wellbeing. For example, has the child had any contact with their peers during school or setting closure? If so, who and how? It is also an opportunity to discuss activities they are looking forward to on their return to school or setting and to ask any questions they may have. Staff can let pupils know about key events that will be happening on their return
- **Emails to parents** to check how the pupil has been. Phone calls often take place within earshot of the young person so email may be a more discrete way to discuss their wellbeing and any anxieties that may be present about returning to school. Consider asking about the family and child's experience of the Covid-19 period including whether they have noticed any changes in their child's behaviour, sensory needs or communication.
- **Video to the class**, made by their class teacher, giving them a virtual tour of the new layout within the classroom and any key changes. This will prepare the children for how they are to enter, where they will put their belongings, where they will sit and how key points in the day will take place, such as break and lunch times. The more information that can be given in advance, the lower the pupil's anxiety should be on their return
- **Photos sent home or emailed** showing the key staff in school or setting doing a positive activity, which can be enjoyed by the pupil on their return
- **Postcards or letters** to the pupil saying that staff are looking forward to seeing them back at school or in setting, send a simple, positive message to the child that they are valued and important to that adult

**Ensure key changes about the nursery or school environment, routines and rules are shared before the return to setting or school** where possible. For example, pupils could be provided with a visual in the form of a leaflet or flyer, giving key information about the changes due to social distancing measures. Word this as positively as possible and list the things that will happen to keep children safe.

**Encourage children to send in a photo of something they have enjoyed at home which will be shared with the class on their return.** Just as school has been moved into the home, it will be important for home to be linked back into school. Celebrate the positives and fun had at home. This could then be used to create a display which is added to with photos of fun activities that then take place at school.

**Put wellbeing at the heart of everyday** to ensure the children feel as positive as possible and to reduce stress levels. This could take the form of regular 'circle time' conversations (keeping to distancing rules), physical breaks, fun challenges, music, team activities etc. to help pupils regulate through the day.

**Build quiet and calm times in to the day** to give children time to relax, lower anxiety and regulate.

**Teach strategies to help children self-regulate**, which can then be personalised. Over the school closure time and the weeks ahead, pupils will have many changes to cope with and will need strategies to manage anxiety or worries as they occur. The following suggestions may prove helpful:

- Create a helping hand of those people that are there to support the child and emphasise the importance of talking about worries to those we trust
- Encourage children to write down or draw their worries on post it notes which can then be put away in a bag/box and discussed with an adult, if needed. Worries that are dealt with can be ripped up and thrown away as a powerful visual
- Teach breathing techniques. There are many examples to use which support this, found online or through the use of Apps
- Normalise anxiety and explain it in terms of the body's reaction to a situation. Give the child a positive message that you will help them so they can try to manage the situation causing them anxiety. Ask the child what would help them to feel better about that situation and create a plan to work towards. Break the situation down into little, achievable steps.

**Reduce the demands of work and lessons** whilst the children are settling back into school, giving them time to adjust to the new situation.

**Allow time to heal.** A number of children may have been affected by family members becoming unwell. They will need significant support and help to manage their emotions. In addition to the advice given, some children may need individual support or counselling.

**Please contact the Inclusion and Intervention team on: [01908 657825](tel:01908657825) if support for a personalised transition plan for a child with SEND needs is required**



## Considerations for Children and Young People with Sensory and/or ICT Needs

**For children and young people with a hearing impairment, vision impairment or multi-sensory impairment, key areas of consideration for when they return to schools and settings are:**

- The impact of social distancing measures on classroom environments and engagement
- Cleaning of devices and equipment, following government and manufacturer recommendations

In addition to their standard advice, below are further strategies offered by the Sensory Team for considering how to support children and young people with sensory and or/ICT needs return to schools and settings.

**Social Distancing makes 'Deaf friendly' strategies even more important:**

- Ensure the pupil is **sat near the front, facing the speaker**. Hearing Aid(s) and Cochlear Implants work best at 1 metre but due to social distancing it is important pupils have access to lip patterns, facial expression, gestures, visual aids and modelling
- Due to the pupil being seated further away the hearing aids **background noise may have a greater impact and therefore reducing background noise is important**. Ideally it will be important for class teachers to close doors and windows as well as switching off equipment which produces background noise. ***Please discuss this with your head teacher as part of a risk assessment***
- Social distancing may prevent a pupil with a hearing impairment from hearing their peers and therefore they would **benefit from the class teacher paraphrasing other pupils' contributions**. Other pupils' contributions can also be written so they can be accessed by the whole class
- Teaching assistants may not be able to sit as close to the pupil: locating sound may be more challenging, therefore directing the pupil to who is speaking would be beneficial
- Listening at a distance takes greater concentration. This may cause fatigue and therefore a break from listening will be needed more frequently for a hearing impaired child
- Taking cues from their peers at a distance will be made difficult so **explicit instructions** will need to be provided.

Some radio aid systems can be used in 'conference mode' to avoid being placed around the neck. This may be less effective for the user. Any decision to use the system in this way should be based on discussion with the pupil and the Teacher of the Deaf.

**The following strategies will need to be considered for children with a visual impairment:**

- If the vision impaired pupil is placed into an unfamiliar room, they will require **additional support to ensure their familiarisation and orientation of the room and its resources**
- With social distancing appropriate seating is important – a pupil with a vision impairment would benefit from being **seated at the front, facing the teacher** (refer to advice on seating from the QTVI)
- **Face the visually impaired pupil** when you are speaking to them and stand with your back to windows so that light falls from behind you. With social distancing pupils with a vision impairment will have greater difficulty seeing the teachers'/adults' facial expressions and gestures so **additional verbal cues and information** will be required
- Materials/text for the pupil should not be shared with others because they may need to bring things closer to view them and nystagmus can become worse when having to look to the side. If they are shared, the hygiene advice at your setting should be followed
- Social distancing may make it harder for the pupil to access information so ensure that **information presented is verbalised**
- Pupils with vision impairment need to make much more of an effort when using their vision throughout the school day, especially when social distancing. Encourage them to have **short rest breaks** after visually demanding activities and be aware that they become more fatigued by the afternoon
- Nystagmus becomes more pronounced when a pupil is anxious or stressed which may be caused by their new environment
- The signage should be accessible for a vision impaired pupil and will need to be pointed out by an adult, especially signage relating to hygiene that the pupil may not be aware of
- **Develop opportunities for social interaction:** Social distancing will make it difficult for a pupil with a vision impairment to see their peers and to interact with them.

**Please contact the Multi-Sensory Impairment Teacher, Qualified Teacher for Vision Impairment and The Teacher of the Deaf for personalised information, advice and support.**

## Further Considerations for Secondary Transition

Key considerations that have been highlighted in current literature around secondary transition include:

- The difficulty managing one's own emotions and others' emotions (and how these can be conflicting)
- Children need to reconfigure where they will seek support
- Relationships and friendships are protective factors and crucial during this time
- Children need insight into social and environmental changes they will face
- Acknowledgement of variables most predictive of pupil outcomes: support, self-efficacy, emotional sensitivity and emotional impairment (Bailey & Baines, 2012)
- Acknowledgement of risk factors which may exacerbate difficulties with this transition, such as: negative coping behaviours, low-self-image, high anxiety, previous negative experiences i.e. bullying

Below are suggested support strategies for schools to adopt, to support children when transitioning to their new secondary school:

- Create a **virtual tour** of the school which can be posted on the school's website. This could even be done by children who are attending school (with parental permission)
- A visual resource with **photos of key people/places in school**. This can be sent directly to children who have SEND or are considered vulnerable. Again can be posted on schools website for all to access
- Provide other visual resources regarding the **rules and routines** of the day such as pictures of the uniform, how many lessons a day, timing of lunch time etc.
- If **class teacher/form tutor is identified**, for them to give parents a ring and dependent upon age speak to child/young person
- Consideration of whether class teacher/form tutor **send the child/young person a letter** to let them know they are thinking about them
- School to provide a **Q&A sheet for parents** with key questions and answers that often are asked
- Schools to try and **gain as much information as they can** about the child/young person from parents, the child, the previous school or any agencies that are currently involved with the child (EPS, IIT, VST)
- Consideration of **sending home some activities about themselves, that they can complete** (age dependent) that can give adults opportunity to find out their thoughts. This could be things such as 'All About Me' sheets containing photos of the child. *Please refer to appendices*

## Support for parents

The return to school or a setting will also be a time of significant change for many parents and carers. For most, they have been at home with their children for an extended period, and parents themselves may have worries about the return to school. Parents may be negotiating their own emotional conflicts.

They may have concerns about:

- Their child or young person settling into a new class, or for some, a new school or setting
- Any enduring emotional impact of recent events, including experiences of loss and bereavement
- Any lasting impact of the disruption to their child or young person's learning and progress
- Their child or young person being able to re-establish friendships and relationships in the class / school / setting
- Their child or young person's safety, particularly if they have any existing health concerns

It is important that schools and professionals appreciate the thoughts and worries of parents and carers and pro-actively seek to reduce anxieties which may transfer to the individual child. We should reassure parents that any feelings of worry are understandable and normal in the current circumstances.

***An enormous thank you to all who have published helpful resources and ideas on MS TEAMS, to BiBorough, Dudley, Wakefield and Northamptonshire EPS for their guidance documents which have helped to shape this. And to Lisa Cherry, Barry Carpenter and Dr Ali D'Amario.***

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## Appendices: Useful Resources

[The Milton Keynes Local Offer](#): The place to find local services for children and young people with special educational needs and disability.

For all the latest information and support regarding children and young people with SEND, join us on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/mksend](https://www.facebook.com/mksend)

The Inclusion and Intervention Team Duty Line is open Monday to Friday 8.30 - 4.30 for parents/carers and professionals to seek advice, support and information for children and young people with SEND: **01908 657825**.

The Educational Psychology Service is able to offer such support to schools and settings. Please follow this link for more information: [Critical Incident Support](#).

The following resources can be accessed via our Milton Keynes Local Offer page: [Transitioning back to school following the Covid-19 pandemic](#): *please click the teal underlined text to open the resources.*

[Emotion Coaching](#): Emotion coaching is a three step process adults can use which teaches children and young people to understand about the different emotions that they experience, why they occur and how to handle them. Specific training is needed to use the Emotion Coaching approach, more information can be found at [Emotion Coaching UK](#).

[Protective hand](#): A strategy to support children in feeling safe and knowing there are key people to go to who can support them.

[Emotional Meter](#): A visual tool to support children to identify and regulate their emotions; personalised with strategies.

[Social Stories](#): A Social Story is a short description of a particular situation, event or activity, which includes specific information about what to expect in that situation and why.

- [Going back to school](#)
- [Going back to school - simple](#)
- [Social Stories examples - Bev Cockbill, Curriculum Learning](#)
- [What will schools be like now?](#)

**Relaxation activities:** A range of activities teaching children how to relax: How to use imagery to relax, safe place use, breathing techniques and awareness of your body.

- [Relaxation](#)
- [Relaxation - safe place imagery](#)
- [Relaxation - working with imagery](#)
- [Relaxation techniques](#)

### **Early years and KS1 Resources**

Specific resources and further reading to support early learners when transitioning back to school following the coronavirus crisis.

- [Eight ways parents can support transition](#)
- [Coronavirus book](#)
- [Countdown to starting school](#)
- [How Early Years workers can manage transition - Anna Freud](#)
- [My Inclusion Plan](#)
- [Rationale for the Happiness Box - Bev Cockbill, Recovery Curriculum Learning](#)

**All About Me KS2 Template:** A template for KS2 children to share what they find challenging; encourages children to reflect on which strategies help them.

**Feelings Activities:** Taken from Dr Karen Treisman: Strategies for Supporting Children to Identify, Label, Express and Regulate their Feelings, in: 'A Therapeutic Treasure Box for Working with Children and Adolescents with Developmental Trauma'.

**Building Strengths:** Examples Taken from Dr Karen Treisman: Strength, Resilience and Hope-Based Practices chapter, in: 'A Therapeutic Treasure Box for Working with Children and Adolescents with Developmental Trauma'

**Therapeutic Stories:** Therapeutic stories can be used to bring healing to a difficult situation by offering an alternative more helpful way of looking at it and to change unhelpful difficult response patterns by presenting what would help through the medium of story.

**The Leuven Well-being and Involvement Scales:** A measurable tool which focuses on two central indicators: children's wellbeing and involvement.

**Supporting mental wellbeing: Resources and Apps:** Resources and Apps that may be useful to maintain mental wellbeing during the Covid-19 crisis and beyond.

**Young Minds:** Further ideas and guidance from Young Minds, highlighting the need to prioritise wellbeing.

**Further reading: Useful information and links**

**[Anna Freud Centre](#)**

**[The Education Endowment Foundation](#)**: The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has produced a range of guides and resources to support both schools and families.

**[Talk for change](#)**

**[Bend don't break](#)**

**[Every Mind Matters](#)**

**[Social Emotional Resources: FACT Plus](#)**

**[Nurture UK](#)**