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GUIDANCE

Back to school: Using psychological perspectives to support re-engagement and recovery

Introduction

As governments, local authorities and school leaders look to re-open schools as part of the recovery from Covid-19, it is important to recognise the multiple roles that schools play in the life of a child, family and community. This guidance complements the UK and national government advice on the return to school for pupils by offering a psychological perspective on the process of re-engaging children and young people with school.

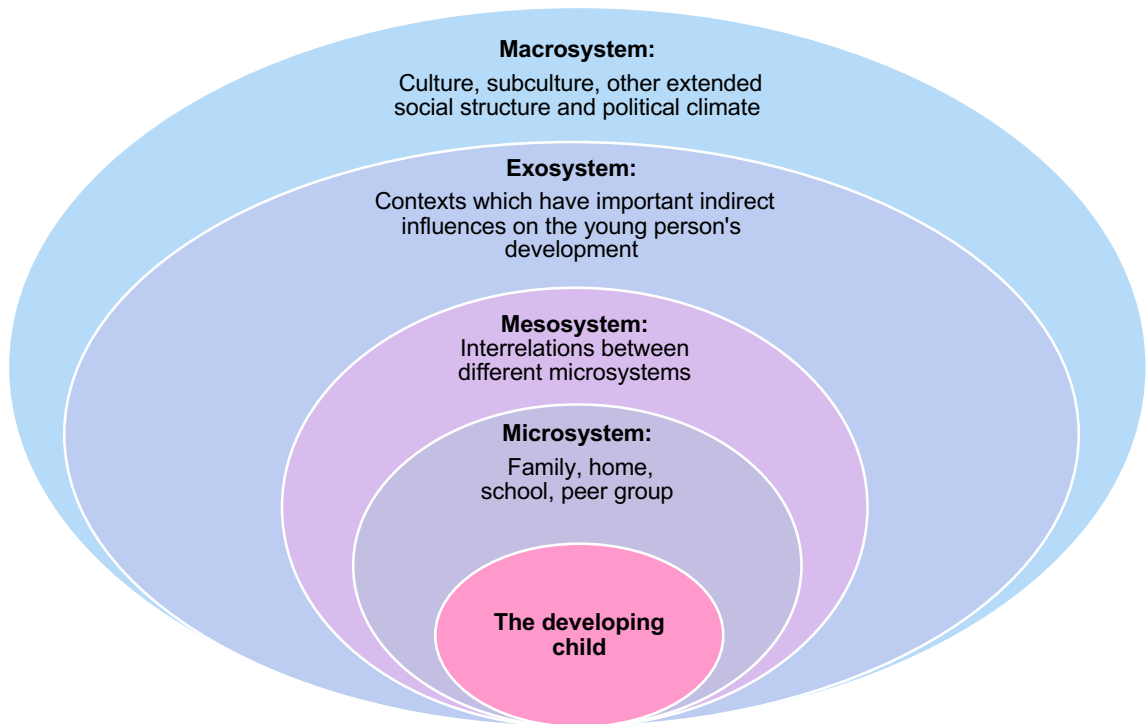
Thinking of the school as a system and supporting the view that everyone in that system has their part to play, from the individual through to government departments, will help ease the transition back to school-based learning. This briefing considers the challenges at government, community, school, family and child levels and offers recommendations for action to prepare and support the return to school.

SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS

Transitions are a natural part of human development and present opportunities for both personal growth and huge challenges as we adapt to them¹. Each school and community has its own unique characteristics, and will therefore need to develop their own plans to support the process of transition^{2,3,4}. Responses that focus on resilience, coping and strengths will facilitate communities to identify their own resources whilst fostering a sense of connection and belonging⁵. Carefully planning for the school reopening with local communities will help to identify specific needs and to ensure effective support and resources are available at an early stage in the process.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory of human development⁶ is a useful psychological framework through which to understand the influences of the interacting systems and contexts that surround children, as plans to reopen schools and help children re-engage in school based learning are developed.

FIGURE 1: BRONFENBRENNER'S BIOECOLOGICAL MODEL (2005)⁶. LABELLING FROM TUDGE ET AL.,⁷ (2009).



Here we will use the Bronfenbrenner Model to structure the guidance to identify planning that is helpful at the different systems levels. Those involved with planning the return to school should ensure that their response considers:

- the influence of social structures, political policy and culture (the Macrosystem),
- community and local authority services (the Exosystem),
- school and family influences (the Microsystem),
- a focus on the individual in their context.

1. The national government policy context (Macrosystem)

The UK government announced that some children in England will return to school at the start of June, while the devolved nations and some local authorities have opted to delay this move. The lack of definitive evidence on the risk of transmission of Covid-19 from children to the wider community has created anxiety for children, families, schools and communities. Furthermore, the differing national policies has created confusion. There is some evidence of the impact of schools reopening within the international community, and the processes that they have implemented to support social distancing and to reduce the transmission of infection.

VULNERABLE GROUPS

There is evidence that some populations are at greater risk from Covid-19 than others including Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups⁸, those with underlying health issues and older people⁹.

It is important to consider how these risks will be managed both in terms of staff deployment and pupil engagement.

INEQUALITY, ATTAINMENT AND DIGITAL EXCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the deep social divide in the UK. Death rates in the poorest communities have been double that of the richest¹⁰. Many families are living in overcrowded accommodation without outdoor access. Other children and young people are living in contexts with difficult and challenging family dynamics, including domestic abuse and school can be a haven for them. Considerable numbers of families have faced significant financial hardship due to the pandemic and have struggled to feed their children and need to be able to return to work. Many have lost their jobs.

The arguments for returning to school often cite the long established evidence of the attainment gap between the richest and poorest children in society. Data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies has highlighted how this period of home schooling has accelerated the attainment gap. The study reports that the most advantaged pupils will have accessed 75 minutes more educational input each day than their poorest peers. This amounts to more than one and a half weeks more education during the lockdown than their poorest peers¹¹.

With most learning moving online during lockdown the need to access the internet has been vital. Yet it is well established that some of the poorest families do not have any internet access; many have only had access through one shared smartphone, and in other families several children and their parents and carers, who are working from home, are sharing access to one device. This is clearly exacerbating the attainment gap. Blended learning, a combination of school attendance and home based online learning, is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy makers must urgently address digital exclusion with the provision of free universal internet access, ramping up the allocation of IT to families without adequate resources and increasing television based learning opportunities.

Despite the evidence of a widening attainment gap there is good evidence that the use of catch-up interventions can promote accelerated progress. Schools should be supported to identify pupils where this type of focused individual support will be beneficial and make this available¹².

2. Activating the community (Exosystem)

Schools have a prominent role in their local community. Many schools have been open throughout the pandemic and have retained close contacts with their community. Others have been closed, but have maintained regular contact with families by telephone and online. Schools can use these contacts and relationships within the community to explore and understand the specific challenges and issues they have faced during the pandemic. This knowledge can be used to inform the plans to re-engage children and families in the most appropriate way. This process will build trust and enhance community resilience, through considering potential anxieties and how to re-establish trusting relationships and a sense of belonging.

Involving the whole school community, teachers, parents and children in the process of re-opening of schools will help to promote a healthier future for the whole school community.

There are likely to be a number of questions that the community, parents, school and children may want to address together, these may include:

What will school look like whilst maintaining social distancing?

How can we best engage all of the children in the plans to return to school?

How can the school community celebrate transitions safely?

What lessons have been learnt from schools that have been open, what have the experiences of home schooling been and how can they be improved moving forward?

What information do families need now?

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

When planning together and developing support plans to ensure that staff, parents and children feel safe, psychologists recommend the following may be useful:

Establishing an implementation team to organise and monitor new systems and structures.

Identifying families that might need extra support and inviting families who might have experienced trauma and loss to come forward in confidence.

Identifying key workers to support people who have experienced financial, social, personal, emotional or safeguarding issues.

Inviting parents to tell school about any worries or concerns they have about their children.

Reconnecting with local support services who are part of the school system is vital at this time. This includes educational psychologists, education welfare officers, children's social services, peripatetic teachers and child and adolescent mental health teams, and mental health practitioners. These professionals are delivering services that can support planning for the reopening and respond to requests to develop plans for particular children's needs.

3. Schools, Families and Friends (Microsystem)

As well as community level consultation processes, school leadership teams should focus on their internal planning for children returning to school in new ways, considering the systems and processes they need to have in place. Including a psychological perspective in this planning can help support the mental health and psychological wellbeing of children and the whole school community.

LEADERSHIP AND GROWTH

Research following other community crises have¹³ highlighted the importance of clear, open and decisive leadership in building resilient communities. The basic principles of good leadership are: listen, learn and then act. This is particularly important during a time of crisis.

Despite the many negative experiences of Covid-19, Post Traumatic Growth Theory research highlights the potential for positive growth and development as a consequence of trauma and challenging experiences^{14,15}. We have seen remarkable things in our communities and will see the same in our school communities.

Staff will need time to reconnect and plan before children return. Protecting this time for reflection will allow teams to:

Reflect and explore the experience of lockdown on them individually and on their school community. Identifying successes and what has been learnt.

Identify staff and children who may need extra support going forward. Consider those who have experienced trauma and bereavement.

Enhance teacher resilience by promoting teachers' sense of belonging, their ability to seek help, and continue learning at this time.

Consider what needs to be achieved, identify the challenges, develop a plan and a timescale that works.

Discuss with staff how everyone's emotional and physical health can be safeguarded and enhanced.

Facilitate management and staff teams to develop a vision for the future.

Identify children at high risk of emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties.

Staff will be aware of some children who are at risk already but Covid-19 might mean that others are now at risk and staff should begin to identify these children in advance of school opening and carefully monitor them.

CHANGES TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Government guidelines suggest that children should return to reduced class sizes of around 15. While UK schools can learn from the wider international community where children have already returned to school, there are still many unknowns. Head teachers and their staff face the huge responsibility of designing and developing school systems that will help reduce potential viral transfer amongst children. Schools are being asked to implement systems and structures that seek to reduce each child's number of close physical contacts as far as possible. It is widely acknowledged that social distancing in the early years of primary school will be extremely difficult.

Psychologists recommend that strategies to help manage this new physical organisation could include:

A. COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES AND PUPILS: EXPLAIN WHAT HAS CHANGED AND WHY?

The complexities of managing smaller class sizes and providing the opportunity for school access to all will require much careful planning. Schools could consider producing briefing letters with photographs of changes to the physical organisation of the school. They could make follow-up phone calls to parents and carers to explain how the school day will be organised for their child to help parents prepare their children for what to expect. If schools make short films these can show changes in the physical organisation of entry points, corridors, and classrooms. These films will help children understand how things will look and what to expect. This will be most helpful for children who experience anxiety or who find change difficult to manage. A range of resources to help children with additional needs understand changes to the school environment are widely available, including social stories and visuals¹⁶.

B. DISCUSS AND EXPLAIN NEW RULES TO CHILDREN WHEN THEY RETURN

Use developmentally appropriate language to explain and discuss the new rules for staying safe at school. Try to engage each group in generating their own ideas and rules so that they understand and fully grasp what is required of them and why. There is a wealth of multilingual and child friendly resources to support this process.

C. MICRO-GROUPS WITHIN EACH CLASSROOM WHO WORK IN A DEFINED AREA

In Denmark each class is organised into smaller micro-groups, who are assigned a demarcated area of the room to work in, with one teacher. This model will help to reduce each child's close physical contacts to a minimum. Conducting teaching and learning activities outside when the weather permits is also encouraged. When planning groups it is important to try to keep friendship groups together.

D. PROMOTING HYGIENE BEHAVIOURS

Establish a regular routine of handwashing, on arrival, before break, after break, before and after lunch and before leaving school. Have tissues available to catch coughs and sneezes, and immediately bin the tissue. Use hand sanitiser and regularly clean the children's work station and equipment. Each group should have designated washroom facilities wherever possible.

E. SUPPORT BLENDED LEARNING

Children will be attending school in smaller sized groups for the foreseeable future so many will need to engage in an online curriculum at home alongside school based learning. It will be important for schools to ensure that all children have sufficient access to IT to support this process.

F. RE-ENGAGING THE WHOLE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

At this stage, it will not be compulsory for parents and carers to send their children to school and parents will have different levels of willingness to engage. All schools will know their vulnerable pupils and may discover that others have become vulnerable during the pandemic. It is important to stay in contact with families to understand their experiences over the past months and to be watchful of how children settle back into school life.

G. IDENTIFY VULNERABLE PUPILS AND STAFF

Some children and teachers may be more vulnerable to Covid-19 for a wide range of reasons, including their health and socio-economic status, as well as having close family members who are vulnerable or that they are shielding. Schools will need to undertake risk assessments for staff and children in these circumstances. Children in this position will probably not be included in the first groups identified to return to school and should be prioritised for access to IT resources to support online learning where necessary.

Schools can make decisions about how best to deploy staff based on those with health concerns or who are shielding family members. This might mean these staff are best placed to lead the online teaching activities and to manage blended learning.

H. CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Some children with additional needs may find it hard to return to school. Children with autism may require specific support to help them adjust to changes in their school routines and environment^{17,18}. Other groups to closely monitor include looked after children, those recently adopted, those with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), and all children in need, particularly those who have not been attending school. It is vital that children with additional needs have access to their support staff on returning to school. Safety for the support staff also needs to be considered. Schools should consider establishing systems to have some form of daily contact with all children, rather like the taking of the register, to ensure all children and young people are well.

Schools can draw on the support services in local authorities, including advisory teachers and psychologists working in schools for advice and guidance in these instances.

MANAGING TRANSITIONS

The first major transition for children and young people comes when they leave home to enter pre-school education and whilst there are yearly transitions from class to class and to different key stages, the transition from primary to secondary school is one of the first major life events for many children¹⁹. Schools should take a psychological perspective to consider how to prepare children for this ending and how best to safely mark this transition.

EARLY YEARS TRANSITIONS

Typical early years transitions, include a transition from home to nursery school or a new childcare setting or from childcare settings to nursery. Different early years transitions are now more common due to the current climate, for example a transition back to childcare or nursery settings after being away for a period of time or the return to a setting where some of their peers (e.g. children of key workers) have continued attending in their absence.

Before transition:

Remember that behaviour is often a form of communication. Young children may be unable to express how they feel about the current circumstances verbally. Be watchful for changes in behaviour that may indicate anxiety, stress or frustration.

Provide parents with materials to support children's transition in to early years settings or reception e.g. visuals, storybooks, visual timetables, pictures of key staff.

Home school communication may be even more important at this time. Families and EY settings/Reception teachers should collaborate to determine how this will work best. Asking parents to complete a 'one-page profile' and share with the setting can be helpful.

After transition:

Prioritise play. Play is essential to children's holistic wellbeing and development and its value cannot be underestimated.

Support children to develop their awareness of routines and the physical environment, which may have changed recently.

Follow the child's lead, strengths and interests. This is about helping children feel safe. From here they can begin to develop strong relationships and be more interested in learning activities.

Explicitly teach routines that are about hygiene and infection control. Use cartoons, social stories, modelling and role play.

TRANSITIONS TO SECONDARY EDUCATION

The transition to a new phase of education brings many changes including new routines and ways of learning, working with more teachers and changes in expectations, and new friendships, this can be an exciting time offering lots of developmental opportunities^{20,21}. For some children this can be an unsettling time, bringing discontinuities in their life, loss of familiar routines and people, and this can trigger a fear of the unknown, and worries about the enhanced academic and social demands they face. These children are also starting to transition from childhood to adolescence^{22,23}.

Managing transitions well can protect against many of these issues and threats to self-esteem. Understanding the key elements of successful school transition at the levels of the child, family, school and wider contexts is exceptionally helpful, particularly to those at risk of difficult transition experiences^{24,25}.

Primary schools should support their final year pupils to think about their transition in this context, this could include:

Asking children about their concerns and what excites them?

Making connections with their new schools to consider how they will be supporting their new cohort in these times of uncertainty, this will reassure the pupils and their families.

Try to find each child a transition buddy, who is going to the same school.

Some secondary schools identify older pupils to support the new intake. Sharing information, holding online meetings, pictures of key staff will all help the children plan for this big change.

TRANSITIONS TO POST-16 EDUCATION

A significant transition for many young people will be moving from secondary education to post-16 education or training. This transition often marks a period of greater independence for many young people and any support will need to take this into account²⁶.

For all students:

Promote activities that encourage social connections and bonding. Further Education (FE) Colleges might adopt a 'freshers week' approach. Already common in many UK universities this approach focuses on building relationships, orientation to a new environment, and supporting the development of friendships by focusing on shared interests and hobbies.

Use technology to help students develop familiarity with the settings. Create virtual tours, or signpost new students to these resources if they exist already. Encourage staff to create short 'pen portraits' perhaps using camera-phones or video-conferencing software, where they can introduce and share a little about themselves.

Many FE and HE settings use a form-tutor or personal tutor model, ensure that students transferring to FE and HE placements have the opportunity to meet their form tutor or personal tutor before they begin e.g. by email, video call, letter, short film.

Highlight and reinforce information about where students can seek advice. This might be particularly relevant as taster or transition days may not have been possible. Consider the full range of support options e.g. pastoral support, counsellors, form tutors, chaplaincy.

For students with additional needs:

Some students may have had difficult experiences in recent months including difficult home circumstances, witnessing severe illness or experiencing bereavement. Identify these students through close communication with home settings and plan additional support.

Arrange virtual transition meetings with key college staff and key staff from the young person's secondary setting. Focus on needs and strengths. Ensure that young people are able to contribute to these meetings fully.

Consider the extent to which timetables can be flexible to support students with additional needs to 'settle'.

Provide explicit teaching and support about the hygiene requirements of the post-16 setting for children with additional needs. Use visuals, videos and repetition to reinforce key messages about hand washing, distancing and infection control.

4. Individual needs

Some children may have coped well during the school closures, but for others they may have experienced considerable trauma, loss and hardship. Restrictions on social, leisure and learning opportunities may have increased children's sense of powerlessness and for some this will have

been an isolating and unpleasant experience. Others will have developed new ways of learning and made connections to support this beyond the school context. Some may have learnt a new appreciation of school and what it offers.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Children returning to school are going to experience a range of emotions. This may include a mixture of excitement, happiness and relief but may also include anxiety, fear and anger. In most cases a whole community response aimed at promoting positive reintegration and building resilience will help to resolve their difficulties, for others the use of school based social emotional and mental health resources and expertise will help.

Actively involving young people in the planning for their return to school will help to reduce their worries and the emotional impact of the process. Being proactively involved will reignite a sense of belonging and reduce their anxiety. If possible children should have an opportunity to get involved whilst still at home. This may include:

- drawing a picture of their ideal safe school;
- writing down their hopes and concerns.

Parents, carers, teachers and other professionals supporting children can help by asking children:

How can we feel safe in school, what ideas do you have about things like how do we make sure everyone washes their hands?

What sort of feelings are you having about school now?

What have been their experiences of home schooling? What was good? Are there things that they would like to continue?

BUILDING RESILIENCE

Resilience is not something that someone either does or does not have, it comes from how all the important parts of a person's life interact – their friends, family, school and local community. We need to make sure that children have a strong sense of belonging, strong relationships, a sense of agency, high expectations, and that they can meaningfully contribute to their community. During this crisis, there is a risk that the narrative around changing policies and school transition becomes dominated by the language of risk and trauma. Coping is important to protect ourselves from stress and it is important to connect with the ways in which we are coping with this challenge. Psychological perspectives and resiliency approaches also give space for talking about strengths and hope²⁷.

A framework to promote resilience includes:

1. Create positive goals
2. Plan how to track positive change
3. Work to reduce risk while enhancing strengths

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced every member of society to confront new and unexpected transitions²⁸. By taking a psychological approach and thinking about the child and the school as part of a system we can better prepare and support communities through this transition. Experience and research evidence suggests that time for planning can reduce the stresses and challenges these transitions pose for individuals and support positive new beginnings within supportive contexts.

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