

## The Journey of Transition and Recovery

### Reflections on the transition back to educational settings in the aftermath of COVID-19

*For SENDCos, Management and Teaching Staff*

Transition can be a significant experience in any individual's life and the change can evoke a range of emotional responses including both excitement and anxiety. Many children and young people can find the transition between schools unsettling and stressful and similar feelings are likely to be experienced by our children and young people when they transition back to school following the period of isolation resulting from the current COVID-19 pandemic.

#### What This Document Aims to Address

This document aims to offer some support around thinking about the needs of the children young people, and staff in your setting and what needs and experiences will need to be considered when planning and preparing for transition back to school or nursery. The document aims to address the following:

- To consider the emotional impact of recent events and how this may impact on children and young people's transitions back to school or nursery.
- To provide psychological guidance to settings as they plan for the return of pupils.
- To highlight the effect transition and change can have on all individuals and demonstrate its applicability to children of any age (e.g. Early years, Primary and Secondary)

It is important to acknowledge at the time of writing, whilst there has been some consideration of a phased return in June, there has been no specific advice and guidance from the government as to how schools should manage this return and what this return will specifically look like for pupils, staff, parents and carers.

#### Why is This Important and Why Now?

As a country we have had to adapt our usual way of living to protect ourselves and others. We are now asking for our children to begin to return to some form of 'normality' by returning to school, even if this will look somewhat different to before schools closed in March. We need to prepare our children, families and staff for this and the associated feelings that may be present for them at this time.

Transition is a process and not a single event and it is important that we support our children and young people to experience successful transitions back to school, so they have the opportunity to experience the best outcomes in their learning and emotional wellbeing. With advance planning and preparation, effective and clear processes for communication, and consideration of relationships we can enable effective transitions for our children and young people.

## **Considerations and Reflections When Planning for a Return to School**

It is worth acknowledging both the loss and gains that will be present for individuals as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the potential loss of routine, structure, social interaction, opportunity and freedom may create anxiety, trauma and grief responses in our children and young people. Therefore, we must plan for experiences that provide the space for recovery and the time to repair.

For ease of reading, these points for consideration have been grouped into subheadings, however, it is worth acknowledging that a number of these points bridge many of these categories and highlight the complexity of the transition process and the breadth of our emotional responses.

### ***1. Acknowledgement of experience***

- We will need to consider that this will be a very different experience for every individual parent, carer, child, staff member and school community, both with regard to their lockdown experience and the experience of returning to school. Some children will have continued to attend school during lockdown for a range of reasons, others will have remained at home. How can we help children to understand everyone's different circumstances and what we have all had to do to follow the guidance and keep people safe? Consider the potential stigma and shame that may be present for the vulnerable children who have remained in school or how some children may feel when other children return and 'encroach' on what has been their safe space? A wide spectrum of emotional responses should be expected. Discuss, acknowledge, and celebrate the difference.
- Consider that there will be different experiences within the same family/household, for example, some siblings may be returning to school (e.g. year 6) and others remaining at home for the time being. There may also be ongoing shielding and social distancing measures that may have to continue for some pupils. How can we remain connected to these pupils and consider their emotional and social needs?
- Acknowledge that all children will have had differences in their access to learning and play resources as well as parental availability, both physically and emotionally. It is important to consider that it may not always be the children

that we have previously identified as vulnerable to be the ones who need the most support. Consider the children of working parents who may not have had the level of attention they require, or the additional work pressures and/or stress on any family which may have affected their family dynamics.

- Consider how we have managed before when transitioning after a long break (e.g. the summer holidays)? How do we prepare our return from them? What new routines must we establish or re-visit? What helps us to settle back into school/work life? What are we glad to return to? What do we continue to miss? Let's consider our previous experiences and use and learn from them. How do we communicate with children what they are returning to? What will be different this time around? Will there be empty classrooms? What year groups will be attending? Will social distancing rules be applied? If so, how? Our children are unlikely to be aware of what their transition should look like, so we must be clear about our procedures and goals and communicate a calm and open environment to the children when they return.
- Consider the children who may need additional support. For example, those who will be transitioning to a new school, a different key stage, those with an identified Special Educational Need or Disability (with or without an EHCP), children in care or on Child Protection Plans. Some of our children may have found the changes in routines or disruption to relationships challenging, such as those with social communication needs or social, emotional, and mental health needs. How can we support those who have experienced grief and loss? Whether from a bereavement or a loss of experience (e.g. missed exams or missed activities linked to previous transitions).
- We are likely to enforce stricter hygiene routines when children return, and these may be containing for some pupils. However, it is important to consider the impact of the individual family narratives that have been created about what this means and how these will impact on our children's responses. Some children may have vehemently stuck to the rules and others may have flouted them. How will this impact on the relationships between children and their responses to the school environment and school rules?
- Parents and carers may also be experiencing significant anxiety and unease about their child's transition back to school or nursery. We need to be aware of how these emotions may transfer to the individual child and influence their responses and behaviour. We need to appreciate the thoughts and worries of these parents and reassure them that their feelings are valid and understandable in the current circumstances. Containing their feelings and emotional responses will enable them and us to better contain the feelings of our young people.

## **2. Teaching and Learning**

### *i) Supporting Children and Young People*

- The home environments of our children vary and therefore, the experiences of home learning are likely to be different for every individual. There will be differences in the learning and the activities children have engaged in. There may be some who have engaged in formal learning every day, even in the holidays, and there will also be those who have not done any learning at all. Many are likely to be somewhere in between. We should acknowledge, respond, and celebrate what our children have learnt and not focus on our expectations of what they should have learnt. How can we value and celebrate what children have learnt and include the alternative activities that may be different to formal schooling, for example, who has learnt to bake a cake? Who has tried something new and succeeded? Who has demonstrated effort and learnt a new skill? Who has built a den? Who has done some gardening? Who has kept active? Who has researched and learnt about something new e.g. a favourite animal or place? Consider how we can adapt the curriculum to address the present needs of our children and whether a return to our previous curriculum is necessary? Is there space for a more reflective and emotionally based timetable alongside our children's academic learning needs?
- Children may have concerns and worries about their ability to complete schoolwork due to their missed learning opportunities. Children may feel like they have lost time in learning and we must be open and transparent with them how we can address these gaps. How can we consult and co-construct with our pupils to heal their sense of loss? Consider potential worries about the future where children have missed exams and/or are conscious about the gaps in their learning. How can we make our curriculum more transparent? Ask them what they want to learn? What do they need more help with? What has been easy or difficult about home learning? Have they achieved things they thought they could not? Or are there things they still find challenging? Is there anything they have learnt at home they felt was helpful and would like to continue in school?
- It is important to consider children may have regressed not only in their learning but also with language or their social skills. We should acknowledge the potential presence and impact of shame on children to have to go over earlier learning, language and behaviours whilst others may have maintained or improved in these areas. We can acknowledge our losses and at the same time convey to children a positive and resilient outlook. Let us acknowledge that although some learning may have been missed, we now have opportunities to grow, learn new things and emerge stronger.

## *ii) Supporting staff*

- Our schools in general have not been closed so we need to be mindful of the capacity of our staff to keep delivering and working. How can we ensure teachers feelings about returning to school are acknowledged and their circumstances and associated risks and vulnerabilities are also considered? We need to acknowledge that some of our teaching staff may have found lockdown particularly stressful, busy and upsetting. We must consider their mental health and emotional wellbeing, so they are able to consider the same for our children.
- Re-establishing connections and developing relationships between staff will be important to ensure feelings of belonging and safety and will provide opportunities to re-affirm structures and routines.
- Unbearable and difficult emotions, such as anxiety, helplessness and anger can be too painful for children to digest on their own. This can lead to a projection of these feelings onto caring others who will experience the anxiety, helplessness, and anger as their own. Teachers will need support to observe, unpick, and understand these emotions so they are able to process them and be better able to provide empathetic listening, contain the emotions of their pupils, and return the emotions to them in a more digestible form. Senior Leadership Teams and Educational Psychologists can be supportive figures for teaching staff during this time to enable them to effectively continue to contain the unbearable emotions of children.

## *iii) Re-establishing routines*

- We will be asking our children and young people to re-learn and re-establish routines and the expectations of school and behaviour. Children will need time to adapt and re-learn both daily school and daily life routines, such as, early mornings and getting up and ready, and going to sleep at a reasonable time. School routines may also differ in the first few months too, dependent on staff availability, staged and phased returns and alternative curriculums, (e.g. moving from a play-based curriculum back to a more full-time academic timetable). How can we help our children re-establish routines and feel equipped for the potential changes in the weeks to come? Acknowledge the children who have continued to attend school under different circumstances, how can they be prepared for the upcoming changes?
- Parents and children may need to adapt to new travel routines, whether that means adhering to social distancing measures on public transport or finding new ways to get their children to school if contact with family members or

other families are to be minimised. The changes and impact of these routines will need to be considered and thought about.

### **3. Emotional Impact**

#### *i) Anxiety and Change*

- Although returning to school may provide a glimpse of our previous reality before the corona virus. We must hold in mind that at the moment everything is not 'normal', and many parts of life will still be different or changed by corona virus. Children and staff will have lost loved ones, there may be additional family stressors including relationship breakdowns, financial woes and educational regression. Returning to school may evoke a lot of anxiety for students as they may have to leave vulnerable family members behind, or they may be anxious about schoolwork. It is important to acknowledge that things are not 'normal' and allow adequate time and space for this.
- Change gives rise to feelings of anxiety as well as excitement. Returning to school may also evoke separation anxiety for both children and parents. There may be additional risks that may exacerbate a child's worry, for example, if their parents are key workers, or if they have a family member at home that is more vulnerable. Children may experience additional feelings of loss, including, separation from their family bubble, pets, less time to spend on hobbies and loss of 'screen time'. How can we make our children feel as safe as possible when they return to school? How can parents be made to feel safe about their child's return to school? How can we provide them with opportunities for open communication about their child's experiences both prior to and after transition?
- Children may experience health worries for themselves and their loved ones and be anxious about whether they may catch the virus. They may also carry fears about leaving the house and returning to school. Feeling safe may have become associated with 'staying home', 'social distancing', and frequent handwashing. How can we continue to make children feel safe when asked to reconnect with their peers and return to learning together in their school setting?
- Consider physical changes. Children may have grown, and new uniforms may not be possible due to financial restraints or time limitations. There may need to be a relaxation of uniform codes to ease some of this anxiety for parents and children. New rules can feel unconfining and may evoke anxiety for

some, so it is important to be clear about why the rules have been relaxed and how they will be reinstated at an appropriate time.

## *ii) Relationships*

- Children will likely be one of the first in our society to have to move from rules of socially distancing to being around people in closer proximity. This is likely to spark anxiety and it may be frightening and overwhelming for some. We will need to be aware of this and support them. For example, be clear about why it is a positive for them to return to school and what we can still do to ensure we minimise the spread of the virus. Having experienced weeks/months of 'social distancing' children may have received an implicit message that others are dangerous. There may be a need to re-learn social skills and help ease the anxiety and fear that may be present about interacting with others outside of their immediate family.
- The relationships we build with each other can cushion the discomfort of transitions. Many relationships, even those that were thriving will need to be invested in and restored. How can we focus on rebuilding relationships between children and their peers, and teachers and their pupils? Can the use of games and a genuine interest in others' lives help to re-establish some connections? Compassion and kindness will go a long way as school may no longer seem the safe, constant place we thought it was. We must help children understand and show them we are trustworthy again.
- Let us hold in mind and consider the possibility of bullying. There may be children who have had the virus or there may be ethnic minorities who are perceived to be more 'risky'. Some children may respond to their peers differently through anxiety or fear, how can we explain the facts, minimise unkindness and bullying, and build stronger lasting relationships.

## **4. Safeguarding**

- There is the potential that some children have been exposed to abuse at home or online, indirectly, or directly and there is the possibility that disclosures may be made when children return to school. We need to be aware of this and ensure children have safe spaces to talk. An emotionally literate school environment will support children to share their feelings and allow for discussions about appropriate and expected behaviour towards others. If a child makes a disclosure speak to your designated safeguarding officer and follow your safeguarding policy. It is all of our responsibility to keep our children and young people safe.

## 5. Loss & Grief

- There will be losses for our children and young people, both big and small. With loss there are feelings of grief and a grieving process. Children may carry grief from more obvious losses, like that of a bereavement, but also from smaller losses, for example the loss of familiarity of their small family group, the loss of new rituals they have established as well as the old rituals and experiences that may have been missed, such as, end of term celebrations, exams, birthday parties and relationships with peers.
- Change and transition can stir up feelings which are associated with earlier losses and separations. For some children, even very small changes to the school day can bring about acute anxiety and children have to be prepared for this sensitively.
- It is important to acknowledge that some children may not have as long to prepare for transitions. For example, they may prepare to return to primary school only to then have to prepare for their transition to secondary school. It is essential we manage this sensitively and acknowledge the feelings of loss associated with this unique experience. There may still be some who do not return to school and will not have an opportunity to say goodbye. How can we mark their transitions? Are there alternatives or new procedures that can be established for these children and young people? Can we invite children back later this year or next year? Cards and memory books may soften the loss and grieving process that may be present for some. We need to consider the same for staff.
- It is inevitable that for some of us there will be bereavement. It is essential that we recognise this and take time to mark those who have lost their lives and celebrate them. We need to be clear with children about who has died (either from the virus or by other means), and who has not returned to the setting for another reason, e.g. house move, job change, retirement etc. We may wish to celebrate the lives of those unknown to us as well as those who are known.<sup>1</sup>

*Transition brings with it the experience of separation, loss and change and however minor or major every ending involves a loss of some kind and every beginning carries with it the anxiety of facing the unknown (Youell, 2006). Perhaps it is helpful to hold this in mind as children face the end of lockdown and embark on a new beginning.*

---

<sup>1</sup> The Educational Psychology Service have developed a Traumatic Incidence guidance for schools and a Traumatic Incident bereavement booklet for parents, which include links to other services. Please speak with your link EP if you require another copy of these.

### **Some Ideas/Approaches That Might be Helpful When Preparing for Transitions:**

- Staggered starts and part timetables can support those to adjust to the changes.
- Alternative timetables that support the transition process and allow children and staff time to talk about and share their experiences and learning.
- Focus on rebuilding relationships and establishing routines.
- Mark transitions including inviting those who have left back and mourning those who have died.
- Safeguarding training so staff feel equipped to notice any signs of abuse.
- Aim for some continuity at the start. Consider extending time with familiar adults, for example, remaining in the same classrooms or with the same teachers for a period of time before changing?
- Provide additional support to the children who may not have accessed formal learning during lockdown. Remember these may not always be the children you expect.
- Visual resources, such as, dinner menus and timetables, or virtual tours of classrooms, areas of school that can be accessed online if there is not time for usual transition practices.
- Clear and open communication with parents about the return to school. Encourage joint sharing of information and communicate information about social distancing measures that will be being implemented.

### **Suggested Activities That Can be Completed with Children**

- Read a therapeutic story and hold an open discussion about how children feel and acknowledge the different feelings.
- Design a return to school timetable collaboratively with students, including setting new routines.
- Read a social story about hygiene and maintaining distance.
- Create memory books for transitions or for those who have left or died.
- Plan for mini celebration when others return.
- Consider activities that relieve stress, for example, run around the playground, knead dough or bake, take part in mindfulness activities, do yoga, listen to calming music.
- Create a worry box.
- Write a gratitude journal. Reminding ourselves of the things we are grateful for in the midst of a difficult time.
- Help children to understand why some need to be at home and why some at school. This activity is designed to support this: <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/My-home-and-my-school.pdf>
- New teachers can record a video message to allow the children and young people to get to know them and pupils could send a video response, email or postcard back to the teacher to let them know what they have been up to whilst away from school.
- Celebration of the ways in which students coped and managed to keep going and feeling positive or hopeful.
- A jigsaw activity. This activity recognises that we are all unique individuals, but we can also come together as a group of students, class, or year group.

- Help children recognise positive qualities. Take a sheet of paper write your name in the middle. Pass around the group or class and write a positive comment for each person in turn.

### **How Can My EP Help?**

This document is designed to aid thinking. Your EP will be able to offer consultation to support your thinking and development about any of the above points. This may include consideration about concerns you hold about any individual pupils, or how to support staff wellbeing.

If any further information or support is required, then please contact your school Educational Psychologist (EP) through your SENCo.

### **Other Transition Resources Developed by Our Fellow Educational Psychology Services**

- 1) *Wakefield Educational Psychology Service. 'COVID-19 Advice for Schools - Transition and Back to School'*. This document includes principles of a good transition, psychological frameworks underpinning transition guidance, advice and strategies for planning and preparing for the transition of vulnerable children and early years and advice for parents regarding key transition points.  
<http://wakefield.mylocaloffer.org/s4s/api/FileManagement/GetFileContent?id=/1280/>
- 2) *Northamptonshire Educational Psychology Service. 'Promoting Positive Transitions'*. This a comprehensive guidance document that includes strategies to address developing a sense of safety, a sense of calm, a sense of self and collective efficacy, social connectedness and promotion of hope. It also provides information for managing and planning for transitions into nursery or primary, from primary to secondary, and for children with additional needs.  
<https://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/councilservices/children-families-education/schools-and-education/educational-psychology-service/Documents/EPS%20Guidance%20-%20Promoting%20Positive%20Transitions%20during%20COVID-19.pdf>
- 3) *Bi-borough Educational Psychology Consultation Service. 'Transition, recovery and learning in the aftermath of a pandemic'*. There are two resources one for nursery and primary schools and one for secondary schools. They include how teachers can help themselves and each other, tips for creating a resilient and wellbeing focused classroom and a number of activity ideas. Transition, recovery and learning – primary: <http://services2schools.org.uk/Pages/Download/29b7152b-c4bb-484e-8a23-1c36435fd2>  
Transition, recovery and learning – secondary  
<http://services2schools.org.uk/Pages/Download/75137bbf-87b2-4c29-bb3f-28e612c18976>

- 4) *Supporting the well-being of pupils during the return to school following COVID-19, Dr Alison D’Amario*. Online training for all school staff to develop understanding of the possible psychological impact of lockdown, and practical strategies to support their well-being upon their return to school:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFTSWTOrnG0&feature=youtu.be>
  
- 5) *Planning for Transition back to school during the Covid-19 Pandemic, Greenwich EPS and Lambeth EPS*. Guidance for senior leadership teams in schools when planning for the return of pupils. Information has been collated in an abbreviated format and put together as an INSET pack for schools. It includes a guidance document and a PowerPoint presentation.

### **Acknowledgements and References**

Thank you to the following who have shared resources and enabled this document to be developed:

Bi-borough Educational Psychology Consultation Service.

Nottingham City Educational Psychology Service – Emotional Wellbeing support strategies.

Nottinghamshire Educational Psychology Service

SEA Inclusion and Safeguarding, Sarah Alston, The many problems of returning to school.

<https://www.seainclusion.co.uk/post/the-many-problems-of-returning-to-school>

Wakefield Council Educational Psychology Service

Youell, B. (2006). *The learning relationship. Psychoanalytic thinking in education*: Karnac.