



Solihull
METROPOLITAN
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Supporting the return to school in Solihull

Guidance for parents and carers

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD BACK THROUGH THE TRANSITION/RECOVERY PROCESS

The return to school will be a time of significant change for you as a family. For most, you have all been together for an extended period of time and so a range of feelings and emotions will be normal for you all to experience (children and adults) before and after the children return to school.

As a parent/carer, you may be looking forward to the children returning for varied reasons, but you may also have worries about the return to school. You may be worried about:

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

These worries are understandable and normal given the circumstances we are currently in. This guidance is written to provide you with some practical tips for supporting your child back to school when it is time to do so.

What can I do to support my child back to school?

Getting back into a routine:

When considering the return to school, there will be a large number of changes to the daily routine. Here are some practical ideas to support with this:

- Make sure your child's sleep pattern is returning to that expected when attending school. Given that a sleep pattern takes some time to alter, this should be thought about at least 2-3 weeks prior to returning to school.
- Re-starting a clear morning routine, with a visual timetable if required, to lay out all of the steps to getting ready for school again.
- Have a visual calendar on display so that your child can begin counting down the days to the first day back
- If your days have had little or no structure, start to try to introduce structure and routines back in e.g. eating breakfast before playing on the computer. Where possible, integrate activities and routines which are similar to those that your child might experience in school. This might include similar start times, lunch times, and timings for the transition between activities during the typical school day.
- Give your child the opportunity to share and celebrate some of their achievements whilst on lockdown to mark change through celebration. You could encourage your child to write down some positive memories of lockdown, and to compile physical memorise to look back on such as a book of achievement or a memory book.

Helping them feel re-connected to school and friends

- Have supportive conversations at home about starting back at school and what this might look like for them. Use different sources of information (including visual sources) to help them visualise what a typical day in school might look like, and make the transition as

predictable as possible. Materials sent by schools such as welcome packs and other correspondence may be useful for this.

- Talk to your child frequently about school; the fun times that they had when they were previously attending, kind things that their teacher may have done, funny memories of them and their friends. Nice memories will help them to feel more enthusiastic about going back.
- Contact their teacher or form teacher and request a video call. Even if your child finds it difficult to take part in that call they will see you interacting positively with their teacher and talk about exciting things to come when they are back at school.
- Encourage them to contact their friends on a video call. For younger children you may need to support this by playing games, e.g. scavenger hunts. For older children, they may have avoided this as they feel they have little to talk about, help them to think about what they have in common with their friends and how they can use this to start conversations e.g. if they both enjoy exercise they can plan workouts that they will do over the coming week.

Understanding and managing their emotions:

Lots of children might find returning to school, a time of transition, challenging and it might create a range of different emotions for them. Some emotions might be things like excitement to see their friends again or worry that things might be different. It is important to support children and young people to recognise that negative feelings such as feeling anxious, worried, scared etc. are normal and can be survived.

- Talk to your child. Give them time to express their worries and listen to them, without trying to fix them. Verbalise your understanding to ensure they feel heard and safe. You should try to validate and show empathy toward their worries but be careful not to confirm their anxieties.
- If they struggle to articulate their worries, or they struggle to talk to you directly, you can suggest that they write down or draw their concerns to share with you.
- Try to avoid leading questions – ask ‘how do you feel about...’ rather than ‘are you worried about...’

Remind your child that it is normal to feel anxiety about change and uncertainty. Model appropriate ways to deal with anxiety e.g. ‘I feel a bit worried today’ this validates and normalises their own feelings. You can then go on to model effective coping strategies such as physical activity and breathing exercises e.g. ‘I tried deep breathing for 30 seconds and it made me feel much calmer’.

For further information see the Birmingham Educational Psychology Service guidance for Emotion Coaching (website below).

Children who found it difficult to attend school prior to lockdown.

Some young people may have displayed signs of anxiety relating to aspects of their experiences in school prior to the lockdown. These symptoms of anxiety may not be as apparent now as they have not been exposed to that which made them anxious whilst at home, and have been more able to avoid it. Unfortunately, the prospect of reintegration back into school for young people may mean that the triggers for their anxiety are reinstated and that their anxiety increases again.

For these young people it is really important to establish predictability and maintain exposure towards going to school, and to help them problem solve and try out solutions to their worries prior to starting. Here are some ideas to help you do this:

- If it is possible walk past their school as part of your daily exercise.
- Occasionally drive them past school if you have an essential trip to do with them.
- Consider contacting the school and asking for face to face contact with various teachers various online platforms.
- If the school is open for keyworkers it could be worth asking the school, whilst honouring the social distancing rules, to walk around the school, or to pick up a textbook, or to wave at a teacher from a distance.
- Talk to your child about who they can turn to if they are feeling worried in school and specific ways in which they can do this.
- Help your child to problem solve by bullet pointing all the aspects of school they are worried about and brainstorming solutions together. Encourage your child to give solutions as independent as possible. Rate the solutions given and develop a plan of how the most favoured solutions can be put into place.

These small exposures will give you a good idea as to how high your child's anxiety is going to be when they have to go back to school. If those little bits of exposure cause anxiety it is likely that they will experience high anxiety when they return to school. It is suggested you access support at this point, rather than waiting for your child to get to the first day of school.

Children who are starting a new school

Some children will be starting at a new school (Year 3 or Year 6) and this may increase the levels of emotion they experiences as they may be worrying about losing close friendships and all the unknowns.

- Encourage them to think about exciting things they can do with their friends who aren't moving to their senior school with them. Can plan and look forward to something and be reassured that they will see those friends again.
- Ask them if there is anything they would really like to know about their new school that they don't yet. Some of those things you can find out for them by emailing the school. If you can reduce unknowns for them you can reduce their worry and anxiety.
- Go on some test runs to the new school so that when the first day arrives, one part of the day is already routine to them.
- Mark the change from their previous setting with celebration by compiling positive physical memories and achievements.

What to do if you have concerns about your child's transition?

It is important to know that all the feelings that you might observe in your child are normal in this time. There will be a period of adjustment. However, if problems persist, you are concerned that your child is displaying high levels of anxiety when they have had exposure to school prior to returning or you feel your child may require more targeted support due to their experiences during lockdown please contact your child's school. Clear communication between school and families is vital at this time and a shared understanding of your child's experiences will help to put an appropriate plan in place to support their return to school.

Useful websites:

Free webinar by Pookie Knightsmith, about supporting a safe return to school.

https://elearning.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/support-a-safe-successful-return-to-school-using-the-swan-framework/?fbclid=IwAR0Avx4jdZc8icHWs83-Rr280_35Oj44UU9D6hpZqnJskL8BRN6mph71wtA

A film resource that reassures young people that they are not alone when it comes to their worries about going to secondary school, produced by Young Minds:

<https://youngminds.org.uk/resources/school-resources/find-your-feet-transitioning-to-secondary-school/>

A practical guide for helping children and young people manage their anxiety during periods of disruption, produced by the Anna Freud Centre: <https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/resources/helping-children-and-young-people-to-manage-anxiety/>

Support for parents:

Solihull Community Educational Psychology Service Family Support Line: 0121 779 1734

Solihull Parenting Team: Parenting Support and Advice: bsmhft.parenting@nhs.net

Solar: <https://www.bsmhft.nhs.uk/our-services/solar-youth-services/>

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