



A CHILD AND ADOLESCENT
MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE



Pennine Care
NHS Foundation Trust

A Focus on Child Emotional Wellbeing as Schools Return

Some thoughts for Parents and Schools

Thousands of children in pre-school, reception, year 1 and year 6 may be returning to schools across England from 1st June 2020. All of our HYM staff have been working very hard to ensure that our young people and families have been well supported during the time we have been in lockdown, and it will be really important to think about how we help families and schools navigate this next step.

We have become very used to socially distancing and so to think about having physical contact again and that being okay can feel anxiety provoking. However, the routine, structure and play with other children could be very beneficial to some children, especially those children from more vulnerable households.

Opinions on whether to send children back are divided. On parent social media groups three strong views are emerging – those parents who are happy to send their children back to school; those you prefer they remain at home and a lot of parents confused and worried about making what they feel is the right or wrong decision.

There is a lot of conflicting information around, which naturally makes the situation confusing and anxiety provoking. Whether families have decided to send their children back, prefer them to stay at home or haven't been offered a place, it is important that they don't feel guilty – nothing is black and white at the moment and we have all had to balance risk with our personal circumstances.

Doing what is right for your family.

If parents are working, struggling with home schooling, feel that your children would benefit from seeing friends and teachers, do what is right for your family. It is important at this time not to judge the choices that one family makes. Anxiety is one of the most common emotions and can cause people to worry that something bad may happen in the future. Given the current circumstances, it is normal for parents to feel anxious; however, it is also important to make sure this anxiety is not passed to their children.

With this in mind we have created some top tips for parents in preparing their child to remain at home or to return to school.

Tips for preparing yourself and your child.

- **Remain calm yourself as much as you can.** Keep in touch with schools and take part in any surveys they are doing. Be as honest as possible. Try not to have too many worried conversations in front of your children. Save these for after bedtime. Talk to a loved one or friend who you find helpful and reassuring.
- **Limit exposure to the news and especially social media.** This is more likely to make you and your children feel worried and unsafe. There is also a lot of unhelpful speculation, sparse facts and a lot of anxiety and distress.
- **Let your child know what they will be doing.** If you don't know an answer to their question, let your child know that you don't know for definite, but you will let them know as soon as you do. Don't try to make something up. It is okay to say, "I don't know". This can be followed with, "... But I'll keep you safe".
- **Allow your child to talk about their feelings** and voice their worries, whatever they may be. These are strange times and

their minds and imaginations may run away with themselves. Listen, validate (“it’s completely normal to feel like that at the moment”) and reassure them that you are there and will make sure they are safe. If there is lots and lots of worry talk going around in circles, use activities to distract them and move on if possible.

- **If your child is having a difficult time, try to safely name their feelings.** For example, "I can see that you are feeling angry / upset / sad. It is really hard right now and I completely understand why you might be feeling like this".
- **Talk to your children and explain that school may be different when they go back.**
- **If your child is staying at home, try to keep a routine over the next few weeks as this will provide a sense of safety.** This should include regular getting up, mealtimes and bedtimes and set times for activities / home learning. Routines will help adults and children alike.
- **Do something to look after yourself.** This might be something as simple as reading a book or watching part of a box set. Try not to use all of your spare time with keeping on top of the house work or business work. This will help you manage your stress and remain as calm as possible.
- **Make sure there is time for fun and play.** This will help your child process difficult feelings and distract them and you from the current challenges. This might also include video calls with your child’s friends to maintain or re-gain contact.
- **Try to give your child some choices to help them feel in control.** Two choices at a time is enough, such as what to eat at mealtimes, or whether to do Maths or English in home learning time, for example.
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Time at School

When thinking about children's experiences at school and if we are working with schools as some children return, it will be helpful to think about how teachers are feeling and how the schools are responding to the situation.

The DFES have stated that it will be necessary to have small groups of children interacting together. For this purpose it may be helpful for teachers to think about these small groups as a family unit.

Socially distancing individual children from each other at schools could be emotionally harmful to children as well as distressing and very stressful for staff. Increasing, especially children's, anxieties at this time with social distancing at school, we believe, will be more detrimental than the potential benefits around COVID for children. In addition, children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (including the physical structure of the brain) depend to a significant degree on physical contact and warmth. Their sense of safety in the world is built largely around physical parameters and to enforce an environment of no-contact would be detrimental to a large number of children on these different levels.

Whilst at school, it may be helpful for schools to think about the strategies that they use to promote emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation in their setting. Initially, helping the children to process their experiences of being at home for a long period of time and putting emotional well-being at centre stage. Other activities for emotional wellbeing could include strategies such as regular whole-class sensory movement breaks, songs, music and more creative time. It will be important for teachers to be creative in working out class rules about

how everyone signals how they feel and how adults and children will notice and respond if someone is upset.

Coming Home from School

It is also going to be important for parents to think about what their children may need on coming home from school, which may feel like a very different environment to their usual experience. This may include:

- Time to reconnect with family,
- For children to have physical contact time including hugs, parent-child interactive games, and time to play with someone who can be physically close.
- Jumping on trampolines may be helpful if available.
- Sitting at tables and doing homework may not be the best thing for these young people.
- It may also be useful for parents to prepare themselves for different behaviour from their child on coming home from or going to school.
- You may find that they are more upset or find it hard to manage their emotions.
- For younger children, there may be more bed wetting or daytime wetting accidents. This should improve by itself over time as they settle more.
- Using a no-blame approach and allowing time to calm with some listening, validating and reassuring, will help them navigate through this time.

Where parents or schools really are worried, having conversations with their school health advisors / getting advice services may be really helpful. Resources for schools can be found in one handy place for the GM footprint at <https://hub.gmhsc.org.uk/mental-health/covid-19-resources/>



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