



Preparing your child to return to school

Advice for parents

County Durham Mental Health Support Team

Trailblazers



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Preparing your child to return to school

Following the sudden closure of schools due to Covid-19, we have all had to adapt to some form of home schooling, social distancing and restrictions on everyday life. Now, the prospect of school's re-opening albeit on a phased return may cause us all to experience a variety of emotions.

A way of normalising this is to think of this experience as similar to preparing children and young people returning to school following the summer holidays or half-term breaks. Routines may have changed; relationships with peers may look or feel different and we will all need to adjust to the new normal.

The following information aims to support you as parents/carers in preparing your children or young people for the return to school following an extended break.



A positive outlook

A good place to start could be by having positive conversations about going back to school. Your child may not be talking about going back to school but it does not mean they are not thinking about it. A positive outlook is everything in setting the tone for a positive beginning. These conversations can help your child to acknowledge a positive way of thinking, helping to balance out any worries or unhelpful thoughts they may have.

Communication with school

There will be lots of people sharing ideas or opinions about what is going to happen when your child goes back to school, and it is important to listen and wait to hear information from your child's school directly. School's will already be thinking about and putting in to place the steps required before welcoming your child back in to school.

Going back to school can provide your child with an environment that is structured. School can be a predictable and reliable space that can be helpful during this uncertain time. Schools can help by being clear about what support there is available and who your child can talk to if needed.

You can communicate with school if you have any concerns about how your child is managing going back to school, and try to implement any recommendations school may suggest to you. If you and school work together, by sharing the same information it provides a consistent approach.



Preparation

To help children and young people adjust back to some form of 'normality', preparation needs to start in advance of their return to education.

1. Sleep

Throughout the period of lockdown it may be that your child has enjoyed sleeping in or staying up late. This can make it difficult to get them back into the school routine. You can adapt a helpful sleep routine by:

- Returning to your usual bedtime/morning routine a week ahead of time (if not earlier)
- Open blinds to get natural light in the mornings
- Skip late night meals
- Limit your child's stimulants, like caffeine, energy drinks and screen time, particularly on an evening
- Getting fresh air every day can stimulate the production of the body's natural 'sleep hormone', helping your child to get to sleep

2. Create routine and structure

Throughout the period of lockdown it may be that routines have been more difficult to maintain, e.g. meal times. It may also have been easier to allow children to avoid areas of challenge – such as a particular subject they find hard.

Creating a family schedule is a helpful way to keep track of everybody's day and ensure there is meaningful and varied activity throughout the week. This should include enjoyable activities but also activities which we need to do such as homework/revision/chores.

If your child struggles with boundaries, playing family games e.g. board games, can remind your child of social rules such as sharing and waiting their turn.

3. Encourage independence

Throughout the period of lockdown it may be that your child is spending a lot more time with you than they are used to, meaning they may experience some worry when the time comes to be away from you.

Encouraging independence and promoting 'have a go' behaviours can increase your child's confidence. Examples of this could be:

- Playing upstairs alone whilst family members are downstairs
- Making a simple meal for themselves e.g. a sandwich
- Dressing themselves
- Staying indoors (with an appropriate family member if possible) whilst parent goes for a short walk without them

Signs your child may be anxious

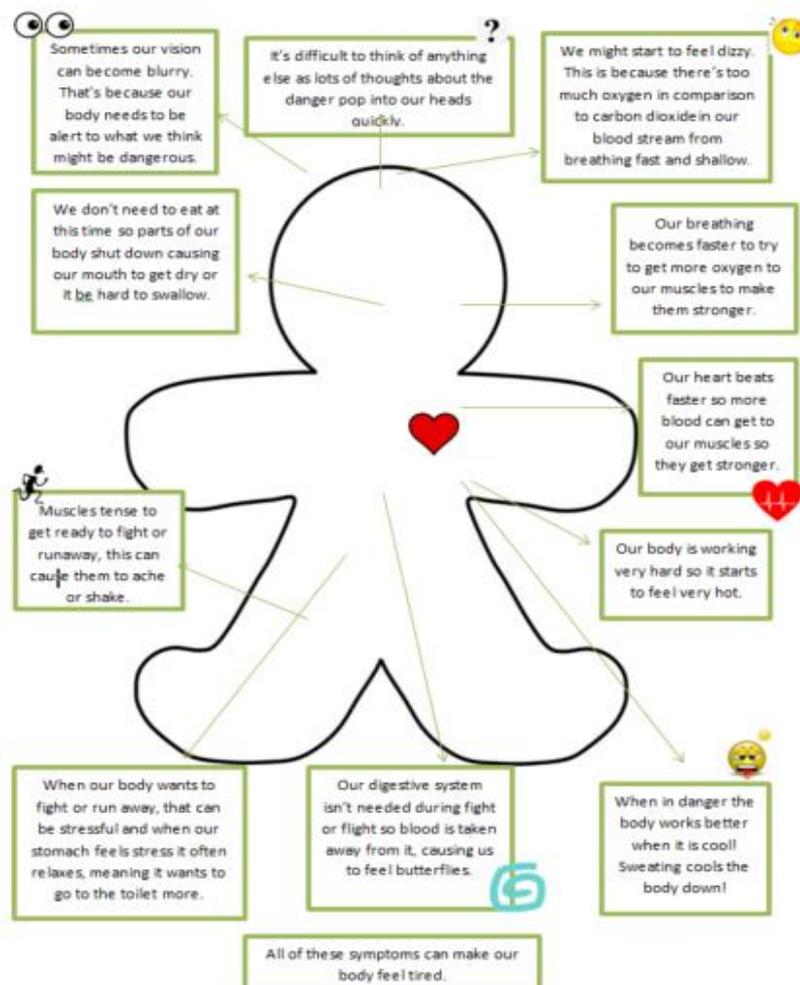
During these difficult times we may find ourselves being forced into survival mode also known as the “*fight, flight or freeze response*”. This response is automatic and kicks in when we feel we need to be protected from a potential threat.

Most of the time, our “*fight, flight or freeze response*” actually plays an important part in keeping us safe. This automatic response is physical; we might notice lots of changes in our bodies. More recently, you might have heard your child complaining of feeling poorly, having a sore head or upset tummy. All of these symptoms can be linked to their bodies being forced into survival mode due to global uncertainty.

The “*fight, flight or freeze response*” can affect us in different ways and all symptoms are completely normal. Some people experience a lot, others only a few.

It is important that children understand that these bodily symptoms are normal when we feel under scared, and they are not a sign of something bad happening.

Symptoms of the fight, flight or freeze response



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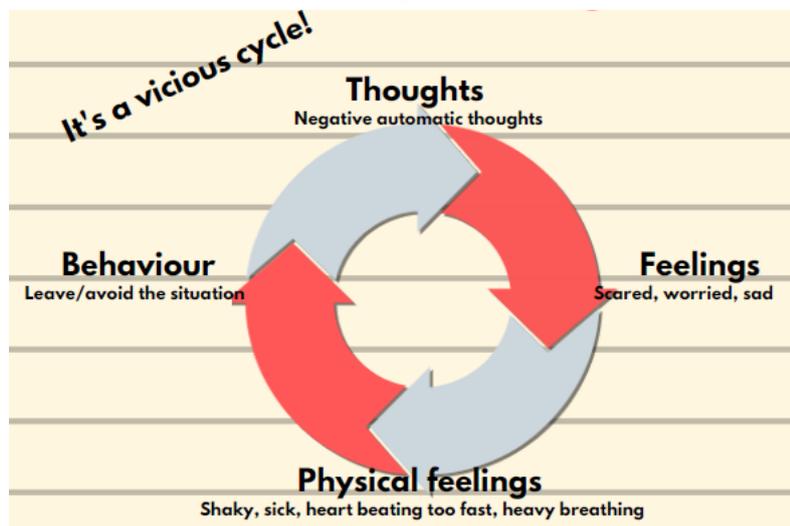


Unhelpful thoughts

If your child is feeling anxious, stressed or worried, you may notice some unhelpful thoughts or negative self-talk. You may hear things like “I can’t do it”, “I’m not good at this” or “I don’t want to ever go back to school” and “it’s too scary”. This can be because, when we feel like something bad is going to happen, this influences our thoughts. If you are on the lookout for these thoughts, you can help children to challenge them into more positive or realistic thoughts.

Unhelpful behaviours

When children or young people are anxious, they may try to avoid things such as trying to stay off school when they are due to go back or not want to go out on your daily walk. If you do notice this, try to promote the importance of school and continue to encourage behaviours which will help your child to feel good such as exercise or family time.



The most important thing is, you can change this vicious cycle and help your child to feel less anxious and more able to cope during these uncertain times.

Strategies for overcoming worry

Setting aside time to talk to your child can help them to feel supported. If you notice your child has lots of worries, you may want to consider ways to reduce the amount of time they're spending worrying.

Worry Time Guide for Parents

1. Schedule a set time each day for 'worry time' e.g. 6pm each day for 15 minutes.
2. Encourage your child to write down any worries they have during the day, to come back to during worry time. Your child could use a worry book, worry box, or worry monster to support with this.
3. Refocus child's attention on the present moment – once the worry is written down, let the worry go.
4. Worry time – use this set time each day to talk to your child about their worries. Listen, discuss and come up with solutions together if needed.
5. Once worry time is finished, get rid of all the worries written down to start afresh for next time, and do something relaxing with your child to take their mind off the worries.

The Worry Tree



It is important for children to become independent and confident in their ability to overcome any problems they may encounter. This can improve self-esteem and reduce anxiety.

Problem Solving Guide for Parents

1. Ask the child to describe what the problem is
2. Brainstorm all solutions to the problem, no matter how unrealistic they may be
3. Weigh up the pros and cons of each solution
4. Try out the best solution – make a plan to give it a go
5. Afterwards, discuss how it went with your child and if needed, go back to step 2



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If you need further support in managing your child's mental health, you can request further support from your schools Mental Health Support Team (MHST) via your child's class teacher.



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