

## **Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities: preparing for a return to school or college**

This paper is the third in our 'Reaching Out' series. The other papers can be read and downloaded here:

[Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities](#)

[Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities | phase 2](#)

After weeks of lockdown and social isolation, with teachers and leaders appreciating more and more the importance of supporting all their students during this time, the sharing online of ways to support those with hidden vulnerabilities (those not immediately categorised as vulnerable but who are, nonetheless, vulnerable because of their present state of mental health and wellbeing), is growing. Parents too, are more aware of the pressures children and young people are feeling about keeping up with school and college work in isolation, as well as feelings of losing out when not being with their friends. Those who suffer anxieties are experiencing all these feelings more acutely than ever.

As the third in our series of guidance papers about ways to support children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities, this paper builds on our previous suggestions to help and support children and young people in isolation, as well as beginning to prepare them for the next phase: going back to school and college.

For some of these young people, the thought of not going back to school or college yet and, when they do, of picking up where they left off, is causing as much anxiety as the actual lockdown itself. Those children and young people who know their lives are stressful or who worry that they have been left behind because their friends and classmates have been getting ahead of them online are just some of the concerns.

This paper recognises that lockdown is still very much in operation at present, whilst at the same time, we need to plan for a return to normality. We believe that this period is one where teachers and leaders need to work on support during lockdown and support back to school or college in parallel so that those with hidden vulnerabilities do not suffer even more.

### **Strategies to reengage**

The strategies schools and colleges use to support pupils and students to reengage with their school and college communities may vary from setting to setting. The information below is intended to add to that which leaders and teachers are already taking.

The [ASCL Webinar on 6 May](#) considered a think piece called the 'recovery curriculum' <https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

This is not a prescription for reengagement with school but a helpful consideration of how loss is experienced differently in each of us and can lead to anxiety and trauma. It then considers possible drivers for a successful to school or college.

In this paper, we set out what leaders and teachers might provide as a recovery curriculum for those children and young people who are anxious about what is happening now and are also anxious about what will happen next.

As primary schools prepare to open to more pupils, leaders will be thinking about the needs of the children and the wider community and their staff, but, importantly, they should not ignore their own needs and wellbeing.

As more children begin to return, there will inevitably be a sense of loss felt within the school for many reasons:

- Death of loved ones within the family or the community
- Loss of school traditions like end of term events, sports days, transition days
- Loss of family holidays
- Loss of time with friends
- Loss of time with grandparents and family
- Loss of structure
- General sense of loss – not fully understanding what has happened

It is important to note perspectives vary by age and stage of development. Young children also have a basic emotional vocabulary and feel more than they can verbalise. Leaders and teachers may therefore notice:

- changes in behaviour
- loss of concentration
- changes in friendships
- changes in body language

**For young children, a whole school approach to responding to crisis and prioritising mental health and wellbeing might include:**

- Need for play
- Voice of children and young people
- Listening to young people
- Personalised response but proactive
- Building on positive relationships that have developed
- Building on relationships developed online
- Bridging link between home-school

## **Recovery starts now**

**What you can do in your setting:**

### **Welcome back**

- Celebrate
- Involve pupils in planning for the new normal
- Listen
- Share stories of lockdown kindness
- Share things to look forward to at school
- Deliberately celebrate friendships and relationships
- Just because we can't touch doesn't mean we can't be kind, warm and help others

- Monitor the child and offer support where you can
- Keep a record of things you have noticed in a child if needed as it may be easy to forget the little clues
- Talk and listen
- Advertise support groups for parents on posters (ideally in prominent places like the school reception)

### **Try to avoid:**

- suggesting that ‘everything will be fine’, instead, help children deal with this new way of being in school by talking, explaining, listening
- telling your story instead of theirs – instead, let them speak
- praising bravery, e.g. for not crying, risking the suppression of sad feelings

### **Where to access training/advice/support**

Organisations such as Starfish, CBUK, Winston’s Wish and Cruse offer a range of support including webinars and training for all ages.

Starfish <https://starfishing.co.uk/about-us/>

Winston’s Wish <https://www.winstonswish.org/>

Child Bereavement UK <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

Cruse <https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

Evidence Based Practice Unit (a partnership between UCL and The Anna Freud Centre)  
[https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/coronavirus\\_research\\_bite\\_2\\_unplanned\\_endings.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/coronavirus_research_bite_2_unplanned_endings.pdf)

Most children do not need an expert to talk to, they need familiar, trusted adults in a secure environment.

### **Curriculum planning**

Note that unresolved grief (of any kind) can be a barrier to learning:

- Within the school day or week, have some sort of way to acknowledge the stories that have happened in the community over the last few weeks – really important task to help heal early grief and allow children to talk and listen.
- Look at your curriculum and identify areas that can be used to open up a conversation that may help children to understand and deal with these unusual and challenging times.
- Add more opportunities to use art lessons or drama, free play activities to help children to explore their feelings - especially for pupils who appear reluctant or are too young to talk or open up.
- Find willing individuals to lead on support if this possible in your school context.

### **For SEN and vulnerable children:**

- Consider a pack of resources that can be used in readiness (Winston’s Wish and Child Bereavement UK have specific resources).
- Talk to parents in advance.

- Set out a plan to build back trust and confidence for everyone, and especially the most vulnerable.

**For all children and young people give opportunity for a student voice:**

Loss and anxiety are often accompanied by feeling a loss of control for children and young people.

Recovery and reengagement can be supported through maximising the student voice and their co-development of the classroom environment:

- Have an ideas box for social distancing in school and on the way home.
- Have an acts of kindness wall in your classroom or in reception – making the pandemic positives visible to everyone.
- Talk to families and young people about what is happening in school and out so that no-one feels left out (some children will be at home wondering what they are missing).
- Build the connectivity between school learning and home learning.

**Wider school and college support:**

- Could the school or college library identify specific texts to support pupils and young people who may feel vulnerable and support teaching?
- Could the school invite an organisation to offer support/counselling if this is an option?
- Colleges will already have this inhouse support but it might be stretched so consider using other local charity or community support.
- For younger age groups, front desk/reception teams trained to feel that they are able to respond to a notification of a child trauma – share relevant resources with them.

**Practical examples for younger children and adaptable to young people:**

- Monitor and record concerns where you can.
- Train staff in bereavement knowledge and how they can help children.
- Signpost to professional help in and around school.
- Engage with relevant wellbeing services.
- Support each other too in school.
- Send a letter or postcard home ahead of the first day back in school to say you are thinking of the child who you feel has hidden vulnerabilities and that you are looking forward to seeing them soon.
- If anything in the curriculum is sensitive to a particular child, talk to them about this first.

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May 2020

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