**Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities:
the importance of developing socialisation skills during Covid-19**

This is the sixth paper in our '*Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities*' series (links to all papers in the series are provided at the end of this paper).

In this paper we address the important issue of socialisation of children and young people now they are back at school and college under socially-distanced measures.

Children and young people generally like to socialise and dislike not being able to see their friends and so the impact of Covid-19 has arguably been harder on children and teenagers than any other age group. However, for children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities, being back at school and college with others after a long lockdown period may create worries about how they will cope. We set out some priorities for helping children and young people and provide some examples for school and college leaders dealing with concerns about the impact on opportunities to socialise in the normal way for children and young people.

**Seven priorities for action: what leaders can do**

1. Listen to and acknowledge concerns regarding socialising with others.

2. Provide clear information about social distancing and how to stay safe when socialising.

3. Be aware of your own reactions to concerns about socialising.

4. Connect regularly with the children and young people you are worried about.

5. Support safe ways for children and young people to connect with their peers and friends.

6. Provide opportunities for children and young people to have a voice and propose safe solutions for socialising whilst maintaining social distancing protocols.

7. Create a new routine at school or college, including new contacts and keeping in touch with existing contacts to enhance socialising opportunities.

Young people as well as children respond differently to worrying situations, but their response can result in problematic behaviours. This could include reckless driving, and abuse of alcohol, drug abuse, becoming afraid to leave the home, cutting back on how much time they connect with their friends, feeling overwhelmed and feeling unable to talk about emotions. They may have concerns about how possible school or college closures take place in local lockdowns and how exam changes next summer will affect them.

Children and young people ideally need to be active for an hour a day, which can be more difficult when spending longer periods of time indoors. Plan time outside if you can do so safely, or see Change4Life for ideas for indoor games and activities. Young people will also hear things from friends and get information from social media. Talk to the young person about what is happening to them and ask them what they have heard. Try to answer their questions honestly but reassure them where you can.

Children and young people with existing mental health problems may find the current uncertainty around being in school or college difficult. Below are some resources to help understand mental health and wellbeing in yourself and others.

**Resources**
MindEd for families is a free online educational resource on children and young people's mental health for all adults, which can support parents and carers.

There are resources available to help, including the Children's Commissioner's Children's Guide to Coronavirus, or the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) have produced a storybook developed by and for children around the world affected by COVID-19.

For further information on how to look after your own or others mental wellbeing, see the guidance on how to look after your own mental health and wellbeing or visit Every Mind Matters.

**Case examples to consider for your own setting**

**Primary**

In primary schools, learning together again and cooperation with others may need to take a priority. Some children of course may not have attended school at all since schools closed back in March and might need to establish a sense of structure and routine again. Whilst this is an obvious point to make, some pupils could need more time than others as each one has had a different situation to deal with.

Any group-based activity, for example, a craft project, a class debate, or a focus on team sports-based activities can support a child to learn (or re-learn) how to socialise again with their peers and get to know their friends again. Maybe establish Sports Ambassadors to lead on small groups and set up the equipment during PE lessons.

Another example shared with us is weekly participation in a whole school assembly via 'bubbles', as pupils all watch in their separate classrooms on a screen, clapping the successes of individuals as reading scores and other achievements are announced alongside leader board updates and the clapping heard throughout the school.

We appreciate this is not new information , and is shared only as a reminder that some primary-aged children who did not attend school at all during lockdown may still be feeling particularly anxious and show more reluctance to leave a parent at the school gate. Think about ways to link learning in school with activities at home with a parent, if this has not already been considered.

Another example is a focus on a single book within a primary school class bubble with several tasks from this. For example, *If I Built A House* by Chris Van Dusen can be read in school and/or at home, and then many class/group activities can be created from this, including designing a building, modelling where you live, debating the 'dream' property, design competitions, descriptive writing and story writing, and so on.

A child who has suffered bereavements may need a bit of extra time in settling back in again. Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley is a beautifully written book to help young children deal with death and talk about it. A bereavement could be a barrier to a child socialising again with their peers. The link also has resources that can be used at home with parents and guardians.

**Breaks and lunch**

This time of unstructured play in primary school is a great opportunity for children to let off steam and socialise. However, for some children it may be a period of renewed anxiety over friendship groups with some children deliberately isolating themselves to protect themselves from potential rejection. Some pupils may need more help with reintegrating because they feel excluded or are struggling to fit back in and compete with other peers in established friendship groups.

**Support from home**

Case studies have supported the involvement of parents where this is possible. The use of apps that inform parents of the school day are excellent as a conversation starter when a child arrives home. Try to prevent negative media or anxiety at home by keeping parents and guardians informed wherever you can. Parents may feel anxious that their child has fallen behind, so be aware of this and identify learning priorities for school, but also for homework tasks.


**Secondary and post-16 case studies**

Opportunities to socialise in secondary schools and colleges are of course severely limited at present. Many settings are bravely asking the question: how do we enable more socialising and less emotional distancing? Is it possible to truly replicate the same social bonding activities in an online world?

Many of you tell us it's not only possible, it is essential if we are to prevent social isolation of young people, particularly those who are vulnerable.

**Ideas that have been shared include:**

1. **Virtual Book Clubs**
   Appropriate to all year groups and held in virtual breakout rooms after school. A particularly helpful example was the success of an LGBTQ book club for providing a creative and safe space for young people who felt they couldn't discuss gender and sexuality with confidence at home or in their community during lockdown. Relevant book choices stimulated energised dialogue hosted by a member of school /college staff. The same is true of games clubs which we have highlighted in point 6, and which can include anything from chess to fitness. The current situation means that virtual socialising is more important than ever.

2. **Formal study groups**
   Set up to support homework and revision.  Teachers propose groups of five (identified in class to ensure everyone has a group) with "I want you to work together on reviewing this text and then to support your revision through discussing key questions". The group keeps a chat function and then shares this and the recording of the study session with their teacher.

3. **Teacher-led virtual drop-ins**
   One school has set up virtual drop-ins to support homework and has replaced the school's homework club. This supports blended learning that will make collaborating easier during isolation or lockdown, should there be a return to remote learning. It has helped motivate pupils to mix online and with face-to-face engagement.

4. **Virtual socials**
   One Year 12 voted for a series of virtual social events - a movie night, a quiz night and a keep fit class open only to their year group once a week – as a way of sharing an experience together. With new students entering the sixth form the usual social engagements that help to create new friendships have not happened. The shared film gave a common experience for everyone to talk about the next day in the classroom. This type of socialising online can be achieved with dance and performing arts activities too.

5. **Online clubs and societies**
   Poetry club, rap club, yoga and cooking - all these activities can be done together virtually. Some schools have realised that for some young people this happens naturally, but for those who find socialising difficult it is easy to forget that their social interactions are 'drying up'.

**Other social initiatives include:**

1. **Vertical mentoring**
   Year 9 writing letters to Year 7 to give them tips for life at school, mailed by the school office. The same can be offered by older students.

2. **Letter writing**
   One tutor shared his pastoral challenge for the term: Year 9 has decided to write letters to residents in their local nursing home about their experience of lockdown. The exercise is about how to make a connection with someone you don't yet know.

3. **Common room calendar**
   Rather than closing the sixth form common room, one prefect group campaigned to reopen with a booking system so there were manageable numbers at all times. They also took charge of the cleaning rota (the Deputy Head says he is expecting a common room app to be in place by the end of the year!).

There are many opportunities to connect with others, which is so vital to the development of children and young people, so we strongly recommend you consider these suggestions. If you have any ideas or suggestions that you would be willing to share, please contact us at coronavirus@ascl.org.uk with 'Reaching out' in the subject heading.

**The ASCL Reaching Out series**

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

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

- [Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities: preparing for a return to school and college](#)

- [Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities as schools and colleges open to a wider number](#)

- [Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities at the start of the autumn term](#)

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