

Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities as schools and colleges open to a wider number

Following the government's decision to open primary schools from 1 June for Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 pupils and secondary schools and colleges for Year 10 and Year 12 students from 15 June, leaders, teachers and students have been working even harder to plan the return within the guidelines for health, welfare and safe distancing. With the short centre assessment window to contend with, as well as helping learners with progression to their next phase of learning and planning the start of the new academic year in September, the pressure has been on to do as much as possible to get ahead. This is challenging for everyone. It is even more so for those with anxiety and health concerns. The wider opening of schools and colleges within our education system is being taken at a time when many people – children and young people included - are feeling afraid to return to their normality as coronavirus is still prevalent.

This paper is the fourth in our series *Reaching out to children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities*, and explores what might be done to help those who are vulnerable and may have hidden needs to support them with the return to face-to-face school and college (links to the previous documents are provided at the end of this paper). Going back to school and college may cause these children and young people anxieties, even though they are just as anxious in isolation at home.

Life under lockdown

The needs of children and young people with hidden vulnerabilities were highlighted during the recent [Mental Health Awareness Week](#). The many negatives which some children and young people felt during lockdown were heightened for those with hidden vulnerabilities in many ways, whether social isolation, losing touch with their friends, feelings of not keeping up, that centre assessment grades will be “bad” and they can do nothing about it, or feelings of loss of hope when their prospective job or apprenticeship is no longer available.

A survey of 5,000 adults by the [Royal Society of Public Health](#) reports that “life under lockdown has been a challenge for all of us, but we are very concerned to see that young people are the most vulnerable to experiencing adverse effects on their mental health and wellbeing. We need more support tailored to young people who are struggling in this unique situation if we want to avoid further disadvantaging young people by allowing a mental health crisis to develop.”

Now more than ever, those in education and the wider society understand the importance of schools and colleges for economic and community recovery and for the recovery of the country as a whole as well as for the education, mental health and welfare of the next generation.

Making the adjustment back into learning

- Spend time with and listening to individual children and young people when first in face-to-face learning, understanding their emotional and physical needs.

Preparing for September: what can we do?

- Young people especially, are likely to be unsure about previous choices and may want to change. Consider elongating induction in September, within funding constraints, so that those who want to change direction are not bound by previous decisions.

Resources to help teachers and students from other organisations:

The Diana Award: diana-award.org.uk

The Anti-Bullying Alliance: nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk

The Anne Frank Trust: <https://annefrank.org.uk>

Education Support Partnership: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk>

RSHE curriculum materials: <https://www.gov.uk/pshe>

Starfish loss and bereavement support <https://starfishing.co.uk/about-us/>

Winston's Wish for loss and bereavement resources and guidance
<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

Child Bereavement UK for loss and bereavement resources and guidance
<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

Transition back into a school and college-based learning environment

There are things to consider here when thinking about whether or not the child or young person and their family have made the decision to return to school, or if the decision is that they will not yet return if they are still isolating or someone in their home is isolating .

If a return to school has taken place or will take place imminently, consider friendship groups within the learning bubbles and how to support some children and young people if they are not able to learn near to their friends.

Some children and young people may feel anxious that the work they have completed at home thus far is not to the same standard as their peers. Some may feel anxious just getting back into the routine of school and college again. Many will feel anxious about leaving the home environment and may worry about leaving members of their family behind, or a sibling. Certainly, the school and college layout will have changed to accommodate social distancing requirements, so a link to a virtual tour of the school or college might help before some children and young people arrive, or a series of photographs of the classrooms might help, sent virtually.

It is an important reminder though to ensure any feelings of anxiety or other emotions felt by staff are not passed to children and young people (or parents). A feeling of positivity is needed to remove any anxiety or stress.

If a child or young person is remaining at home, whether for their own shielding reasons or that of a family member, then other factors need to be considered. However, the important thing is that they are not disadvantaged as a result.

If a routine has been established between a teacher and the child or young adult, can this continue? It may be difficult or not possible if the teacher is now in charge of a bubble of pupils or a reduced group of young people who have returned to school or college. If this is the case, plan ahead and explain the reasons for a change in communication. Also, try to ensure any handover information is ready so that the teacher taking over knows how the child or young person has been getting on and their feelings, if known.

Some emotions to consider in children and young people as they begin to return to school

- Bereavement and related trauma
- General feelings of loss and sadness
- Anxiety about what to expect
- Feeling they have fallen behind academically
- General fear about Covid-19
- Reluctance to return

Possible reasons for these emotions

- Different teachers setting work (if at home), teaching bubbles or making contact
- Changes to the 'known/expected' layout of school
- Family/siblings at home
- Anxious parents/listening to media
- Changes to home circumstances
- Anxiety about renewing friendships

Suggested solutions

- Curriculum changes and thinking ahead: sharing learning plans as soon as you can to help children and young people prepare in advance if needed.
- Add 'talk for learning' into the curriculum where it is possible, with opportunities for discussion about events and feelings.
- Teach the class or group listening skills so that everyone is heard in discussion. This is as good for young adults as for children.
- Online chats between classmates where this is possible to help reconnect and reassure that everyone is well.

- Help children and young people learning in different bubbles, groups or at home feel connected by each designing a piece of a paperchain or a piece of creative bunting, then linking them together and sending the image to everyone.
- Continue to call or message home if a child or young person has not yet returned to school.
- If no response can a more familiar adult or someone with an existing connection call round whilst still social distancing?
- Send postcards home to children and young people from school, possibly include a blank postcard and a stamp to encourage a response back.
- Consider the wider family too: it could be that a child or young person is feeling like this because of how a particular family member is feeling, for example if the family member is dealing with grief.

Remembrance

- It may be helpful to some children and young people to have an act of remembrance to deal with any feelings of loss and help to move forward.
- Consider something easy that could be added to relatively simply.

Examples

- A memory tree in the school garden.
- Primary children could paint stones -this could be a memory, a feeling, or a person (note: memory stones could be placed around the tree and added to if needed and appropriate).
- A memory wall – add thoughts, a name, a feeling (anything really) to the wall.

Celebration

- A kindness wall as you come into school or college.
- Thank you displays.
- Awards to members of the community.
- Celebrate the resilience of the wider community, building trust and confidence.
- A listening wall where pupils and young people can share their stories of lockdown.

Welcome back

- Some children and young people will not be back before the end of term and their anxiety will be building. It will help with anxiety and eventual return if they know they are missed.
- Make a video including familiar people and places.
- Send a 'thinking of you' card home.

The importance of logging any concerns

It is important to record and act on any concerns or changes you may notice, even if it seems insignificant or small. Children and young people may not be ready to open up and may be feeling very differently inside to the way they are presenting themselves to the outside world. Give them time and keep reminding them that you (or someone else) is there if they need to talk.

Further information

[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](#)

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