

Transition considerations for children and young people (CYP) who have previously experienced trauma or adversity.

Purpose of this guidance

This guidance has been produced by Derby City Educational Psychology Service and should be read alongside the more general guidance for transition back to school for all CYP found here:

<https://schoolsportal.derby.gov.uk/media/schoolsinformationportal/contentassets/documents/steps/covid-19/Transition-Guidance-to-Schools-and-Settings.pdf>.

This guidance presents some additional considerations and strategies for supporting children who have previously experienced trauma or adversity prior to the coronavirus pandemic. These may include Looked After or adopted CYP, CYP where there have been previous safeguarding concerns or CYP who have been refugees or asylum seekers, but is not limited to these groups.

Additionally, the coronavirus pandemic itself may be considered a 'collective trauma' (Bomber, 2020), and this guidance may therefore be useful to consider for any CYP who finds the return to school particularly difficult.

Background

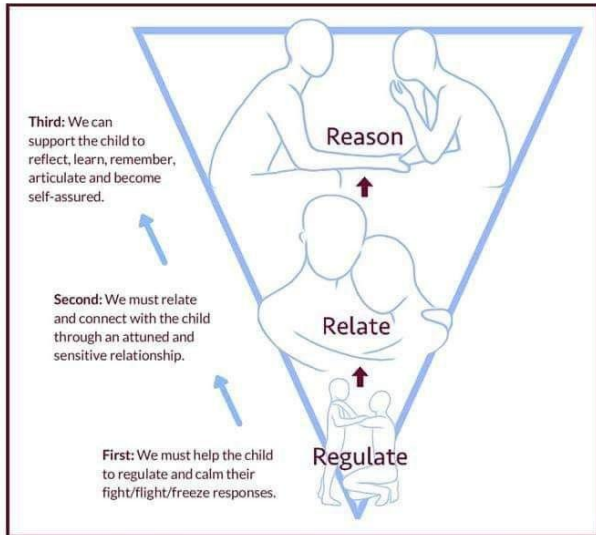
For all CYP, the lockdown period is likely to have disrupted their relationships with staff and friends in school, and some time will therefore be needed for re-establishing and repairing these relationships. In some cases, CYP may be building relationships with new members of staff due to classes being split into smaller groups.

Many CYP are also likely to have felt less safe and more anxious in recent months and transition and change can be stressful events. Transition back to school may therefore feel anxiety-provoking for many CYP. However, it is important to emphasise that most are likely to cope well with this and make a good transition back to school, especially where they are well-supported through a plan co-constructed with the child or young person.

It will be important for all CYP that a sense of safety is established, relationships are re-established and they are helped to manage their emotions. Without these needs being met CYP may find it difficult to settle to learn and therefore supporting emotional regulation and relationships should take precedence over academic learning at first. This process can be summarised by the '3 Rs':

The Three R's: Reaching The Learning Brain

Dr Bruce Perry, a pioneering neuroscientist in the field of trauma, has shown us that to help a vulnerable child to learn, think and reflect, we need to intervene in a simple sequence.



Heading straight for the 'reasoning' part of the brain with an expectation of learning, will not work so well if the child is dysregulated and disconnected from others.

www.beaconhouse.org.uk

FOLLOW US
@BeaconHouseTeam

This model suggests that adults need to help children regulate their emotions and rebuild relationships with them before children are able to learn or reflect on the situation they are in.

Bomber (2020) suggests a fourth level may be added to this: repair. This refers to the importance of effectively repairing relationships following a breakdown in that relationship: this may relate both to the breakdown all CYP have experienced with staff and peers in school due to school closures and the response of staff following distressed behaviour by CYP (sometimes called challenging behaviour), which may be more likely at this time.

This hierarchy is equally important for adults. It is vital for staff to feel safe and reconnect with each other to support them to be in the right emotional place to help young people. Supporting CYP and containing their emotions can be challenging at any time and is likely to be more so at this difficult time, where adults may also feel heightened levels of anxiety. It is therefore vital for staff to feel sufficiently regulated to welcome and emotionally contain others and each staff member should be seen and treated as an individual in relation to this, as everyone's circumstances will be different. Where at all possible, staff should spend some time reconnecting with the school building and each other before welcoming back children.

Potential impacts of previous trauma and adversity

Some CYP are likely to find re-establishing a sense of safety and relationships difficult. CYP who have previously experienced traumatic or adverse experiences can find transitions and changes in their lives more difficult than other CYP. Adverse experiences can also affect CYP's understanding of their relationships with other people. This can make it more difficult for them to repair or re-establish relationships where these have been disrupted, as has happened for many CYP who have had a prolonged and unplanned period away from key adults in their lives in school and from friends. Some CYP who have had adverse experiences may experience a higher level of anxiety already, which may make the additional worries brought by the coronavirus lockdown more difficult to cope with. They may have a smaller 'window of tolerance' for anxiety-provoking or difficult events and may be more likely to become overwhelmed. These CYP may therefore find the transition back into school particularly difficult, and may require additional support.

Some CYP with these needs may have remained in school throughout the lockdown. However, increased numbers of peers attending will also be a substantial change for these children, which they may find difficult. Other CYP will continue to be educated at home for some time, such as those in years 2-5 and in secondary school, which has the potential to affect their sense of belonging in school, especially as other year groups begin to return.

Key principles to consider

To support all CYP and particularly those who have previously experienced adverse circumstances in returning to school, facilitating the following experiences would be helpful.

Providing a sense of 'felt safety':

This does not just refer to the physical safety measures that school staff will be busy putting into place at the moment, but attending to CYP's and adults sense of '**felt safety**': how safe they feel at an emotional level. Where people experience this they will be in a calm, alert and grounded state, able to access the internal 'social engagement system' they need to learn and relate well to others.

The opposite of this state is **fight-flight-freeze-flop**: a 'survival' mode where it is unlikely that CYP and adults can access the 'higher' brain regions required for thinking, learning and relating well to each other.

Felt safety relies on relationships as well as the physical environment.

Re-establishing connection:

Connection helps to support our sense of 'felt safety'. It is important that connections are supported between adults, between CYP and between adults and CYP.

Navigating loss:

All CYP and adults have been and are continuing to go through a very difficult experience that is likely to involve some sense of loss, with a lot to process and potentially grieve, which will take time. Those who have previously experienced trauma and losses may find this even more difficult to deal with. It is important to allow and facilitate the expression of all emotions that adults and CYP may feel, including sadness.

Practicing appreciation:

Equally there will be positive emotions and events related to the pandemic and lockdown, and it is important to sensitively facilitate the expression of these emotions, bearing in mind that every CYP and adult will have different experiences. The expression of these experiences will need to be sensitively handled and the experiences of different groups of children considered. For example, for some LAC it may be difficult to hear others talking about time spent with family and positive experiences with them, and teachers should consider individuals within their classes when considering how to support expressions of appreciation and gratitude.

Facilitating these experiences:

There are six main ways in which these experiences can be supported.

- 1) **Predictability:** adults and the school environment should be as predictable as possible to support a sense of felt safety
- 2) **Mobilisation:** physical activity, movement breaks, calming and sensory strategies can all support emotional regulation.
- 3) **Attachment security:** CYP need to experience positive, secure relationships with key adults and feel that adults are alongside and with them. Adults need to be attuned to CYP's feelings and needs and responsive to these. The principles of PACE: playfulness, acceptance, commitment and empathy, may be helpful to consider for adults in relating both to CYP and each other. No relationship is perfect and ruptures will happen: where this is the case, these need to be sensitively repaired using the regulate-relate-reason-repair principles described above.
- 4) **Co-regulation:** many CYP, particularly those who have previously experienced trauma or adversity, may not know how to regulate their own emotions. This is something we learn initially through co-regulation with others. Adults need to be alongside and support CYP in recognising and labelling their emotions and in trying out different mobilisation and relaxation strategies together through an attuned, secure and positive relationship.
- 5) **Narratives:** this involves supporting CYP to make sense of their experiences and the 'story' of these experiences. This can be a useful approach to support the navigating loss and practicing appreciation principles described above.

- 6) **Differentiation:** this is broader than differentiating learning, and means seeing all adults and CYP as individuals with different experiences, starting points and emotional and relationship skills. This is particularly important in the current situation when individual experiences and circumstances will have been very different. Social and emotional expectations, discipline, communication and connection all need to be differentiated according to these individual needs: for adults as well as CYP.

An acronym that helpfully captures all these ideas is SWAN, which stands for Safe, Welcoming and warm, All Together and Nurturing.

Safe: aim to provide a sense of physical and emotional safety by providing a clear, consistent and predictable environment and clearly communicating rules and expectations.

Welcoming (and warm): creating an environment that feels happy and calm, and communicating to the CYP that we are delighted to have them back at school (or really looking forward to seeing them when it is safe to come back for year groups who have not yet returned), helping CYP and families to feel welcome and helping to rebuild relationships.

All together: working together with parents and all staff in school to support everyone to hear the same messages and to work together to move towards an environment where we can all grow again.

Nurturing: aiming to create an environment where everyone can feel safe and where CYP can have fun with peers and staff. Play is very important as part of this. This will take time to achieve in the current circumstances: CYP will need to gradually and slowly rebuild their readiness for learning.

Ideas for support strategies

Regulate:

Universal support

Adult wellbeing:

To support CYP to regulate their emotions, staff need to feel safe themselves. Ways to facilitate this may include:

- Providing opportunities for staff to return to the school building ahead of pupils, to reconnect with the school building and each other. This should include the provision of protected quality time together as a staff first, either virtually or in person with appropriate social distancing.
- Sharing information about adult wellbeing (see universal guidance) and considering ways to facilitate this in school.

- Opening up honest dialogue with and between staff about the reopening of school to more children: what do staff need to feel safe?
- Provide a safe space for staff to support their own emotional regulation e.g. considering ways to make staff spaces such as staffroom or even toilets more pleasant, welcoming and calming. This might include calm colours/plants/music/soft lighting etc.
- Regular check-ins in staff teams or as a whole staff team: again these may be virtual or creatively done to support social distancing!
- Consider use of a buddy system where staff, in pairs or small groups, take responsibility for looking out for, checking in with and noticing/attuning to each other.
- Where staffing allows, a buddy system where another adult can swap in to allow a staff member to take some time out to self-regulate would be ideal, although this may be challenging in the current circumstances. Such a system may be particularly valuable for staff supporting CYP who have previously experienced trauma or adversity, or who are finding the transition back into school particularly difficult.

Supporting children:

Predictability:

- Maintain good communication with parents/carers over the course of transition back to school, to support information sharing about home circumstances staff may need to be aware of and sharing information about changed routines in schools. Communicate proactively with parents/carers and offer a key point of contact they can come to with any concerns or questions.
- Share timetables and other information about what the new school day will look like with parents/carers and CYP in advance.
- Minimise transitions and changes during the school day and provide plenty of warning and time for these when they do occur. Keep them as predictable as possible, for example always at the same time or in the same order.
- Communicate new boundaries and expectations clearly and positively, for example those around social distancing, handwashing and PPE where relevant. Also remind CYP of existing school rules and routines, as routines and expectations at home are likely to have been different. It may be helpful for CYP to be involved in the creation of new rules, for example asking what would help them to feel safe, especially for older CYP.
- Keep new expectations simple, clear and few in number, and support CYP to understand through adult modelling in school and communication with parents to enable them to support this at home.
- Create and communicate clear guidelines for possible situations linked to COVID-19 e.g. what the procedure is if someone develops symptoms.

Mobilisation:

- Offer activities that help CYP to regulate their emotions regularly throughout the day e.g. short movement breaks, music, art, relaxation activities.
- Integrate small, regular movement breaks in the day to support emotional regulation. Liaise with staff with expertise in PE to consider how to adapt these to a socially distanced context.
- Use of the outdoor environment for learning may facilitate both mobilisation and social distancing.

Co-regulation

- CYP may find it difficult to understand and express their emotions at this challenging time, and may therefore express their feelings through their behaviour. Consider what any distressed (or challenging) behaviour is communicating about the child's needs and feelings and how to address these.
- Regularly check in with CYP to give opportunities for them to talk about how they are feeling and their experiences. Visual supports and modelling language to talk about emotions is likely to be helpful. Younger children are more likely to express their feelings through play, so attuning and attending to their play and engaging them through this can provide a way for them to express and regulate their feelings.
- Monitor CYP's return to school carefully to consider any CYP who may need additional support. This may not just be those CYP who have previously experienced difficulties, as all CYP have now been through a potentially traumatic experience. Simple approaches for CYP to express their feelings e.g. a red-amber-green rating system may help with this.
- Consider relational rather than behavioural approaches to respond to distressed or challenging behaviour at a whole school level e.g. Emotion Coaching, Restorative Justice- more detail about this is provided in the additional support section below.

Additional support for children who may experience particular difficulties:***Predictability:***

- Consider how best to maintain consistency for CYP who may find change more difficult: can they be placed with staff with whom they have an existing relationship and in familiar rooms?
- Establish good communication with other key agencies involved with CYP e.g. social workers in the case of Looked After Children, to ensure school staff are informed about any changes that have occurred for the CYP over the period of school closures e.g. changes in placement.

- Provide additional information about changes in school e.g. photos/virtual tours of the classroom, phone calls to discuss these with parents/carers, potentially including visits to school before returning where possible.
- Use calendars and/or visual timetables in school and at home to support CYP to adjust to new routines. Provide additional warning of transitions within the school day e.g. countdowns, timers.
- Provide additional time for CYP to familiarise themselves with the changed environment when they return to school: some CYP may need to 'scan' their environment to check any changes and where things now are to help them to feel safe.
- Consider how to differentiate language and model both new and existing behavioural explanations for CYP who may find these more difficult to understand, as after their long absence CYP may take some time to adjust again to the expectations of school as well as taking account of new expectations like social distancing and handwashing. Use clear concrete language and avoid vague phrases e.g. be kind, calm down etc. – instead use clear concrete statements with explanations e.g. "Talk quietly to others. It gives them a shock when you shout in their ears."
- Provide clear routines at the beginning and end of the day e.g. check-in time with key adult (see below), particular activities, warnings and countdowns.
- Provide opportunities to check-in each day with a trusted adult: this may focus on discussing how they are feeling that day, positives and any worries, and talking them through the timetable for the day, preparing them for any changes of staffing or routine.
- Some CYP may need a more gradual transition to the school environment (see guidance on emotionally-based school nonattendance).

Mobilisation

- Provide additional movement breaks for CYP, using activities individually tailored that are calming and regulating for them. Explore these alongside the CYP and discuss how they feel for them to create a plan co-constructed with the CYP. For children who have existing movement breaks as part of their provision, be aware that they may need these to be more frequent at the present time due to heightened anxiety they may experience.
- Structure cognitive tasks into short chunks interspersed with sensory breaks, to support CYP to regulate between tasks. The length of the chunk depends on the individual child or young person: it is likely all CYP's attention spans will be shortened at the moment.

Co-regulation

- Offer a safe space for CYP to go to when upset or dysregulated, to support them to calm. CYP should access this with the support of a trusted adult to help them regulate and calm.
- Develop a 'calm box' with the CYP including activities that support their emotional regulation e.g. simple breathing activities, sensory toys that are calming for that CYP, colouring sheets etc. This should be created in collaboration with the CYP wherever possible and the contents should be considered in terms of what works for each individual CYP.
- In responding to distressed behaviour, consider how to support the CYP's emotional regulation first and then how to support them to restore and repair relationships. Approaches such as Emotion Coaching and Restorative Justice can help children in feeling heard, reflecting on the situation and repairing relationships. Providing opportunities for relational repair with adults and peers is key: this should follow the regulate-relate-reason-repair model, so CYP are calm and feel supported by a trusted adult before being asked to discuss a situation or repair relationships. The Educational Psychology Service can provide more information and training about these approaches on request.

Relate

Universal support

Attachment security

- Welcome CYP back positively to support a sense of belonging. This might include sending welcome back letters, providing opportunities for them to share positive things they have learnt (about anything!) when they return to class, and keeping in contact virtually with those who cannot yet return to school.
- Adult body language and tone of voice is vital to a sense of felt safety. Use big smiles, open body language, a melodic 'storytelling' voice and a playful demeanour, appropriate to the age of the CYP e.g. humour for older CYP (however avoid sarcasm as this can be threatening).
- Provide plenty of praise and positive recognition for all CYP. This will be particularly important as children re-establish relationships with staff and sense of belonging in school.
- Provide plenty of opportunities for play, playful activities and having fun together – including among staff! These may look different in light of social distancing measures but it is still vital to provide these opportunities. Outdoor learning may be particularly helpful here, as it can foster relationships with teachers and peers and may be an easier environment to engage in playful activity while maintaining social distancing.

- Consider how to foster and re-establish a sense of belonging within school. Many traditions which particularly support this, such as assemblies, school trips and special events, may not be safe at this time. Consider alternatives that can be provided, such as whole-school art projects that CYP can contribute to individually, charity fundraising or use of virtual technologies.
- Offer classroom activities that support CYP to re-establish peer relationships e.g. joint projects, turn-taking games, circle time type activities, adjusted to take account of social distancing measures as necessary.
- Consider ways to support interaction with peers appropriate to the current circumstances e.g. if social distancing is implemented considering playtime games that are compatible with this- CYP may enjoy brainstorming some of these! (I believe children in Denmark have invented 'shadow tag' where you tag the shadow rather than the person!) If peer groups are separated into different classes or groups, consider ways to keep in touch e.g. using technology, letters, notes etc.

Narratives

- Support CYP to share their stories and experiences of this time in a safe way. This should include sharing positive experiences as well e.g. new things they have learned during their time at home (non-academic skills as well e.g. making a sandwich, playing with a younger sibling), while being sensitive to the fact this may not have been a positive experience for all CYP and they may not all wish to contribute. Offer opportunities for CYP to share their feelings about the changes they experienced.
- Support CYP to develop emotional vocabulary, emphasise that all feelings are okay and it is normal to have a lot of different feelings at times of change like this. Allow CYP to talk about difficult feelings and experiences in a safe way e.g. missing friends, missing rituals like end of year assemblies/shows etc. The use of a feelings box/worry monster or similar for CYP to express their emotions may also be helpful.
- Allow and facilitate expressions of sadness. This might include a display or box where CYP can write or draw about things they have missed out on or are sad about in relation to the lockdown. Again this will need to be sensitive to individual experiences, and should be an opportunity rather than something CYP must participate in.
- Consider and discuss with CYP ways they might like to 'mark' the story of the pandemic/lockdown in their school: they might wish to make an art project, contribute to a book of stories/experiences, raise money for charity or the NHS etc.

Additional support for children who may experience additional difficulties

Some children may require additional support to feel safe in school and rebuild their relationships with staff and peers, particularly children with previous experiences of adversity and trauma.

Attachment security

- Try to maximise familiarity for these CYP, keeping them with adults with whom they have an existing positive relationship and in familiar places where possible.
- Where a CYP needs to be placed with an unfamiliar adult due to staffing issues, share information from previous teachers about their strengths, needs and what works well to support them. Make an extra effort to welcome and build relationships with these CYP.
- Make a special effort to notice and acknowledge positive behaviour or other accomplishments to support rebuilding relationships for CYP who may find this more difficult.
- Consider pupil views where staffing needs to be changed. A resource such as 'The Big Red Bus' (resource pack can be downloaded from <https://inclusive-solutions.com/ideas-workshop/>) may be helpful to consider to identify staff who the pupil has a good relationship with. Ways in which these relationships could be re-established and developed either in-person or remotely could then be considered.
- Consider how previous teachers or other key adults can keep a connection with the CYP and demonstrate they are 'keeping them in mind' e.g. allowing the CYP to keep an object that belongs to the person, virtual check-ins, notes/postcards or simply asking their current teacher to let them know you were asking after them.
- Provide opportunities to check-in each day with a trusted adult: this may focus on discussing how they are feeling that day, positives and any worries, and talking them through the timetable for the day, preparing them for any changes of staffing or routine.
- 'Wonder aloud' about the CYP's emotions (positive and negative), both to support their emotional vocabulary but also to demonstrate you are attending to and responding to their needs e.g. "That's a big smile! It looks like you're really proud of that piece of work."

Narratives:

- CYP requiring additional support should be included as far as possible in whole-class approaches to supporting narratives, as this will support their sense of belonging and community. These whole-class experiences may need to be adjusted to support

CYP's individual needs, for example considering their individual experiences, not creating an environment where CYP feel they have to share.

- Some CYP may benefit from additional time on a one to one basis with a trusted adult to discuss their story. This may form part of daily check-ins and could be engaged in through play, drawing, discussion or other approaches.

Continuing concerns

If you have particular concerns about a child or the transition process more generally, please contact your link Educational Advisory Teacher who can offer additional support and consultation.

Other helpful services may include:

- Virtual School (for LAC) – <https://www.derby.gov.uk/education-and-learning/derby-virtual-school/>
- Derby and Derbyshire Emotional Health and Wellbeing Service - <https://derbyandderbyshireemotionalhealthandwellbeing.uk/>
- Educational Psychology Service - <https://schoolsportal.derby.gov.uk/steps/derby-city-educational-psychology-service/>