

Primary Transitions and COVID-19

Building upon our strengths: As primary educators we are already well skilled in supporting children to make the many transitions involved in primary school life. We have effective systems in place to support our new starters, transitions between year groups, and indeed our year six children into secondary education (see document on secondary transition). As we know trauma informed practice looks to build upon areas on where we are already strong, and whilst the COVID-19 pandemic will have presented us with many challenges we haven't previously dealt with before, building upon our prior successes can help steer the support we look to provide to children as they return to school. This guide aims to look at some of the challenges we may be presented with when returning to school as well as considering how trauma-informed practice can help us to best meet the needs of our children. For practical solutions, see page 3.

The possible impact: During these unprecedented times many of our children will be experiencing a heightened sense of anxiety. Our natural need to experience a sense of safety and stability will have been impacted upon greatly during the pandemic. In turn this may lead to our children, and indeed ourselves, operating outside of our window of tolerance (see document 1.a) and demonstrating behaviours which suggest we are operating within survival modes, such as fight, flight and freeze. Furthermore some of our children may have already had previous traumatic experiences, which are compounded further by the lockdown restrictions. For others currently experiencing trauma and adversity they may be experiencing greater doses of toxic stress (see document 3). We know that the impact of toxic stress on a young child's brain can have profound effects on their future (see document 2). Furthermore if children are returning to school whilst still operating outside of their window of tolerance, they are likely to be operating within the limbic parts of their brain, which makes learning incredibly difficult (see document 14). It could therefore be argued that the first step to any approach to returning to school, should be to take into consideration the possible experiences the children may have had whilst at home. In order to prevent further traumatisation it is not necessary for us to have a disclosure of events from the children or indeed their parents. Rather if we hold trauma in mind as possibility we can adopt the approaches we take in order to try and mitigate some of the impacts of trauma and adversity, whilst also reintegrating routine to our children's lives. Many of the children will find the reintroduction of routine, alongside a sense of connectedness to a trusted adult comforting, as it meets their natural need for a sense of security and stability. Using this as a strong starting point can influence how well our children begin to transition back into school, and it is that early transition which, Margetts¹ reminds us can be indicative of how well they transition in the long term.

Building upon relationships: Throughout everyday primary school practice, we recognise parents as the first and most enduring educators of the child and this is reflected in many of our policies and practices. We also know that relationships are the most powerful intervention known to mankind². Our natural caring instinct towards children and indeed a deep rooted interest in supporting their holistic development will have no doubt led to effective working relationships being established with our families. During the pandemic these relationships will have been upheld through the effective communication practices we have tried to employ so as to maintain contact with our communities. (see document 7). On the lead up to returning to school we can continue to build upon these relationships to ascertain what the concerns of our community, including our children, may be. This in turn can help us provide a unique response for each of our communities, and where possible for individual children, as we know there will be no one size fits all national approach. Where time allows, we know that involving children in the planning of transition is often considered as good practice³ and leads to the promotion successful transitions. In turn taking this approach can support trauma-informed practice principles by **empowering** families within the process and promotes true **collaboration**. For suggestions around practical solutions to supporting an effective transition please see page 3.

Working in Collaboration: Seeking to work in true collaboration with our communities and families, truly embodies one of the key principles of trauma-informed practice. By promoting collaboration and working in partnership with our parents we can remove some of the perceived power imbalance that sometimes leads to a sense of “them” and “us” within school communities. This may go some way to reducing the possibility that an individual or indeed a whole community may become re-traumatized or begin to act within survival modes due to feeling a lack of control over the circumstances. As well as promoting a sense of respect, partnership working can help parents to feel as though their individual journeys have been acknowledged and any processes undertaken by the school can be seen to be transparent. The benefits also extend to us as staff as it allows us to become informed of factors which may be impacting on the child, therefore supporting us in adapting our provision and thus making the transition period more likely to be effective⁴. We also know that during periods of any transition, children will experience physical, social and philosophical changes between home, pre-school settings and school⁵. Again when considering this sense of change and insecurity can lead to children operating outside of their window of tolerance, working in collaboration with children prior to the transition can help them to become familiarised with the new situation before experiencing it in full.

Time for Play: Those of us who trained within Early Years will fully appreciate the role play has in a child’s development, for others the role and influence of play can be underestimated. Many paediatricians, early educators and indeed psychologists have outlined the importance of play for the optimal development of the child, so much so that it is recognised within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child⁶, just as the child’s rights to recover from trauma is also referenced. Play can serve as a mechanism, not only for child development, but also for them to make sense of the world in which they live and the experiences they have⁷. Whilst children are operating outside of the window of tolerance, and are demonstrating behaviours which may indicate they are in survival mode, Dr Dan Hughes reminds us that a sense of lightness, hope and background playfulness alongside acceptance, and curiosity around how to find a way forward whilst demonstrating greater empathy can not only reduce reactivity but also encourages us to be mindful of the mind and heart of the child. This moves us beyond focusing on the behaviour and helps to maintain our relationship⁸ which in turn can reduce the impact of trauma.

Home School Links: As previously mentioned, primary schools regularly recognise the importance of parental partnerships in their everyday practice. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, home school links will have already been in place, these will have been further strengthened by the ongoing communications between schools/teachers and home in order to support home learning. Building upon these effective methods of communication there is opportunity for us to utilise the potential of sending our children priming activities to help prepare them for the transition back into school. Priming activities completed at home, ahead of a transition can help children prepare for the anticipated and ongoing changes which are likely to occur, and thus support a more effective transition⁹. Priming activities could include an outline of any temporary routines put in place, such as those that allow for more play, reminders of the school daily routine, a personalised message from the class teacher outlining their hopes for return to school and common emotions they and the children may be feeling along with activities that may support children in expressing these. However it is again important to remember that one size will not fit all, so unique priming activities for some children may be required.

Emotional Regulation: We know that a sense of security and stability is crucial for keeping us operating within our window of tolerance (document 1.a). During any period of change or transition, the feeling of security and stability can be lost. Children may therefore begin to operate outside of their window of tolerance and demonstrate survival behaviours as a result. This can also be true for ourselves. Having an awareness of our own emotional well being, and being able to regulate this effectively is crucial if we are to prevent our emotions from becoming contagious to our children and young people. For ideas on how to support emotional regulation please see document 9.

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Some practical solutions: One of the most frequently asked questions on teachers' minds is how do we help the children come back to school, especially following a potential period of adversity and trauma? As with any solutions put into place as a result of adapting a trauma-informed approach, the solution will need to be unique to each school, and indeed to the child. Building upon the effective transition practice that already takes place in primary schools, below are some ideas we may like to consider:

- My time at home booklet – similar to an 'All about me' booklet, as part of a priming activity we may choose to devise a booklet that gives children space to reflect on their time at home and the emotions they experienced. This activity will need to be done with care, avoiding direct questions around potentially traumatic experiences, so as to avoid the risk of re-traumatisation. Questions could include things such as, who did you spend your time with, what activities have you enjoyed, what are you looking forward to about returning to school. Acknowledging that any emotions they may have experienced are normal, is also important here.
- School is still here booklet - similar to handouts which may be used as part of an induction to school pack. We could consider revising this pack and taking pictures of familiar places at school, the friendly faces of staff (potentially with a personalised message), and an outline of the routine they can expect when returning to school. For younger children it may be beneficial to include pictures of uniform and a picture timetable. This may go some way to providing a sense of familiarity and security for the children, reducing the likelihood they may become dysregulated and operate outside of their window of tolerance.
- Video Conference calling - in place of home visits, where suitable, arranging for the class to have a short series of video calls may help them to re-connect with their peers. The time in these calls could be spent playing simple games which encourage a sense of joy and lightness. Individual 1:1 calls could also be arranged with the teacher to allow children the chance to express their personal experiences or concerns.
- Parent consultations - again in place of home visits, is it possible to arrange for telephone calls/video conferencing or a parents survey to scope the individual experiences of families and their concerns. Having this prior knowledge will promote collaboration between schools and their communities and go some way to supporting an effective transition period. Once school has returned, it may be possible to hold parent coffee mornings for separate year groups or key phases. These drop in sessions could provide parents with the opportunity to gain an update on latest developments at school and a chance to share any concerns they may have. These don't necessarily have to become a permanent fixture, they could be phased out, or reduced to a termly basis depending upon the needs of the school and its community.
- Phased return & reduced timetables - Whilst acknowledging that some children may be functioning in survival modes, and therefore not currently accessing their learning brains, it may be suitable to adjust the amount of time spent at school, or in formal learning. This may reduce the period of time the child experiences feeling insecure and operating in survival mode. Alternatives to formal learning could focus around provision that is similar to those found in nurture groups. Of course we need to consider constraints schools are working with such as staffing, resources and physical space. However if we can be flexible in our approach and adapt to these short term changes it could potentially support the child in addressing some of the impact of trauma and preventing further challenges for the school and child later into term.
- Increased PSHE/Circle Time - as part of a temporary timetable we could consider the role of PSHE and Circle Time across the school. Introducing a period for PSHE/Circle Time each day may present the children with the opportunity to express their emotions, develop a sense of empathy and compassion for their peers, and promote problem solving and social skills (all of which help to develop levels of resilience). It may be that this approach is not required for the whole class, and could therefore be provided in small groups. Another consideration in place of PSHE/Circle Time could be to utilise the skills of nurture group staff, to brief teaching staff so that they are able to provide nurturing activities as part of the daily/weekly timetable.
- Increased 'play' activities - further temporary adaptations to timetables could include greater opportunity for children to engage in play based activities. Helping them to make sense of their experiences and the changing world around them. This approach will be suitable for all key stages.

Throughout all, whilst utilising staff's effective observation skills, we should be considering the role of signposting to further support, such as that provided by educational psychologists or the voluntary sector, for those children who we continue to have concerns about. It is crucial that any signposting done, is done in lines with trauma-informed practice principles. This should be in collaboration with parents, and where suitable the child, and only completed after gaining informed consent. Of course local safeguarding protocols will remain in place and we would also advocate that these are followed.

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