Guidance for Primary Schools
Returning to School

Schools are re-opening and school staff are looking forward to welcoming pupils back. Most pupils will be looking forward to going back to school and meeting up with teachers, friends and classmates. While some children have enjoyed being at home, for others it may have been challenging. Some may feel a little anxious and worried about returning to school. That's normal and to be expected. Most will settle back without difficulty and schools will be there to support pupils and parents in this process.
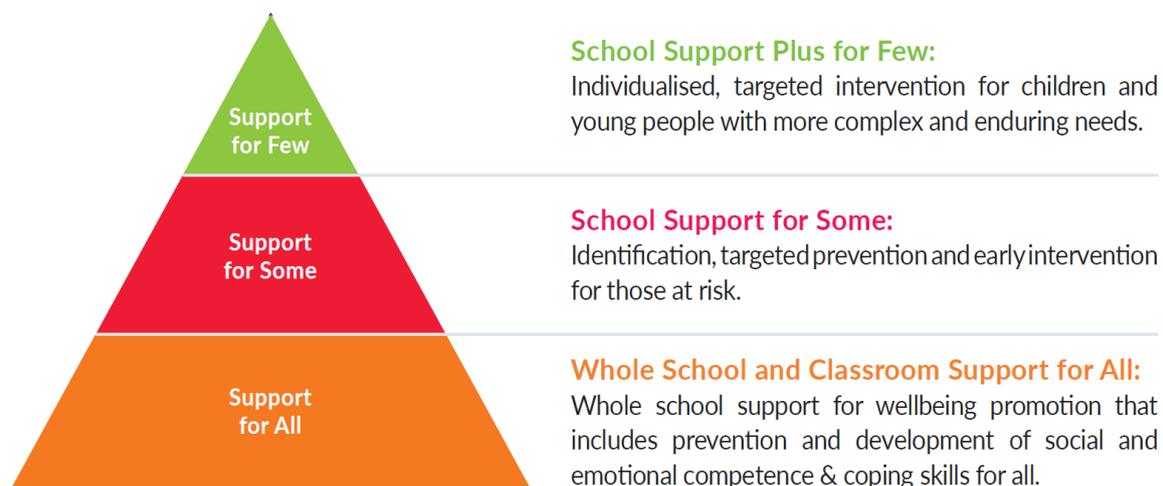
The government and schools are working hard to make sure that the school building and playground will be safe for pupils, school staff and parents. This might mean adjusting to some new routines and rules for a while to keep everyone safe.

It is important that children and young people are supported to experience a successful transition back to school, recognising that transition is a process over time rather than a once-off event. The following information will help teachers support their pupils on this transition journey acknowledging that each school community has its own unique characteristics and will therefore use this guidance to develop their own plan to support the wellbeing of their own school community.

A Continuum of Support for Transition

When schools reopen there will be changes for everyone. Pupils will be changing classes, some may be changing teachers and some will have changed schools. All schools are different and each school will know how best to support the process of transition within their own school community. Schools are already planning how to welcome and settle their pupils back.

The Continuum of Support framework supports a whole-school approach to planning for the return to school and helps to ensure that staff, pupils and parents feel welcome, safe and secure. It also recognises that some pupils will require more targeted intervention and more detailed transition plans to help them reconnect with their school community and re-engage with learning. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is available to support school staff during this time.

Support for Few

School Support Plus for Few:
Individualised, targeted intervention for children and young people with more complex and enduring needs.

Support for Some

School Support for Some:
Identification, targeted prevention and early intervention for those at risk.

Support for All

Whole School and Classroom Support for All:
Whole school support for wellbeing promotion that includes prevention and development of social and emotional competence & coping skills for all.

Support for All

While many pupils will feel excited and optimistic about returning to school, some will need additional support in adjusting to new routines and changes to the school environment. Whole school and classroom supports for all students will help all students settle back into school. Getting back to a school routine, getting enough sleep, eating healthily, taking physical exercise, taking some time to be creative and connecting with friends will help everyone return to school and adapt.

Support for Some/ Few

A Continuum of Support framework recognises that in addition to the supports provided for all pupils at a whole-school level, some pupils will require more targeted intervention while others will require individualised and sustained support. This includes those known to the school as having special educational and/or additional needs. It also includes those who have become more vulnerable as a result of their experience during Covid-19. For some and/or a few pupils, schools will need to consider an individualised approach to transition planning, taking a developmental perspective, and adapting the five key principles above to the individual needs of the pupil.

Schools are advised to take notice of and plan how they can support the following pupils:

- Pupils who are reluctant to attend school

- Pupils who are absent or ill

- Pupils who have experienced illness, bereavement and loss in their family

- Pupils whose behaviour seems different or out of character, or who don't settle as well as others

- Pupils who were previously identified as having special educational or additional needs

Actively involving pupils in the planning for their return to school will help reduce their worries and rebuild a sense of belonging and connection. Taking time to re-engage with class teachers, SET, and SNA support as appropriate, will help support the transition back to school. Student support plans should be developed in collaboration with parents to identify current strengths and needs and enhance the effectiveness of intervention planning. For those pupils unable to return to school immediately (e.g. due to health concerns), ongoing distant learning supports will be required.

Supporting pupils at this time of transition is helped by fostering resilience using five key principles[1]:

- Promoting a sense of safety
- Promoting a sense of calm
- Promoting a sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy

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[1] *This guidance is underpinned by the framework developed by Hobfoll et al. (2007) for supporting resilience during and after traumatic events*

- Promoting connectedness
- Promoting hope

Each principle applies to all pupils, including those whose needs have emerged as a result of their experiences during the pandemic, as well as those with existing needs prior to Covid-19. Each principle is outlined below.

1. Promoting a sense of SAFETY

Many pupils may be worried about the transition back to school in the context of Covid-19. Promoting a sense of safety helps pupils believe that their needs will be met now and in the future and that they are protected from harm. Feeling safe helps to reduce the impact of stress and anxiety. The less stressed we are, the more we are able to think, plan, engage and learn.

> I feel safe at school

The following can help promote a sense of safety:

Process of re-integration

It will take time for schools to adjust and for pupils to reintegrate. For many pupils, re-establishing basic routines may be difficult. Apart from re-engaging with learning and study routines, pupils must re-establish everyday routines related to sleep, morning schedules, and following a timetable. Not all pupils will be ready or able to engage with learning tasks upon the initial return to school. Some pupils may have experienced significant levels of anxiety or may have suffered separation from or the loss of a family member. For all pupils, it is important that wellbeing and social-emotional learning is prioritised in the initial days and weeks of returning to school over more formal academic tasks and activities.

Slow down to catch up

On the return to school it is important that teachers and school staff do not rush into a focus on academic learning and 'catching up' before first ensuring that children feel safe and secure. A focus on pupil wellbeing and belonging will enhance their readiness to engage in learning. It is recommended that teaching should focus initially on familiar activities and revision before introducing new concepts and materials.

Routines

Routines create a sense of psychological safety by providing predictability. Re-establishing routines will contribute to a safe and calm learning environment and give pupils a sense that things are returning to normal. It will be important to model and teach the new routines necessary for children to return to school. It will also be important to prepare children for any possible changes to the classroom and school environment, for example, they may have to wash their hands more. This could be done ahead of school reopening via school websites and newsletters. For children

with special educational and/or additional needs, this could include the use of a social story and/or other visual approaches to help them understand new safety routines and changes to the physical environment.

Emotional comfort and support

Teachers can support pupils' emotional needs and sense of safety through careful observation, listening to pupils' concerns and acknowledging their feelings. Ask pupils what you can do to help and let them know that you know it is hard for them. Offer kindness and comfort and provide a quiet place for pupils to talk to school staff if they wish.

Consider the use of transitional objects to support children to feel safe if they have problems separating from key adults. A transitional object can represent the important people to the child when they are in school, for example, having a photograph in their pencil case or an object belonging to their significant person, to reassure them that the person is supporting them even if they are not physically with them.

2. Promoting a sense of CALM

Some pupils may be experiencing a heightened sense of anxiety about the transition back to school in the context of Covid-19. Acknowledging and addressing their worries will help support their transition. Promoting a sense of calm ensures that pupils have the ability to become peaceful in mind and body. Being able to relax and stay composed helps us to focus and concentrate on what we need to do.

> I can do things to help me feel calm

The following can help promote a sense of calm:

Before children return

Support parents

Reassure and connect with parents/guardians. Share clear information with parents about changes in routines/rules, wellbeing supports, and strategies to help all children's return to school in line with the Continuum of Support framework, with particular regard for those who may be more vulnerable, including those with additional needs. Acknowledge uncertainty and seek to address any concerns or worries by phone, email or virtual meetings.

Convey affirming messages

Offer calming hopeful messages to parents and children, for example 'We are working hard to make sure that the school building and playground will be safe for all of the

pupils, school staff and parents', 'We are looking forward to seeing everyone'.

Use technology

Consider offering pupils a virtual tour of their new classroom or school setting, introducing new teachers using video technology or using virtual question and answer sessions.

Plan ahead

Identify which pupils may require extra support and plan for those with known and emerging needs in line with the Continuum of Support framework.

When children return

Normalise children's responses to Covid-19

Children will have had different experiences during school closures. Children's responses to stressful events are unique and varied. Some pupils may verbalise their concerns, others may withdraw or present with behaviours of concern. It is important to recognise and acknowledge that a wide variety of reactions can be expected and these are normal reactions to abnormal events.

Allow children time to talk

Pupils should be given opportunities to talk about the Covid-19 pandemic in a safe and supportive way. These opportunities can be provided through circle time or small-group sessions. Listening to children and letting them share their experiences with each other can promote calm. This can also help them to normalise feelings and process the changes they have experienced. Some pupils may not wish to share their thoughts and experiences in a group setting and may be more comfortable to talk about these in a one-to-one setting.

Support pupils in their efforts to self-regulate

By modelling emotional regulation themselves and responding sensitively to individual needs, teachers help pupils to learn how to self-calm and manage any worries. An important part of this process involves acknowledging pupils' feelings and supporting them to problem-solve and cope with their thoughts and feelings. Many children benefit from calming activities, such as mindfulness, drawing and relaxation/breathing. See relaxation techniques here.

Having opportunities to engage in creative activities and rhythmic exercises (e.g. painting, crafts, play, music) and physical activities (running, walking and yoga) also helps to promote a sense of calm and safety. Some children may require more

individualised approaches to help them stay calm and regulated, for example, support to understand, label and communicate their emotions, and provide more frequent movement breaks.

See more information on stress and self-regulation see here.

Review the physical environment

Consider ways to create a calm environment in the classroom, perhaps by

- Use of lighting/music/calming colours
- Objects such as blankets, cushions or sensory toys
- Decluttering the room
- Allowing some children to access a space to help them regulate and calm themselves, e.g. quiet corners, tents, relaxation spaces.

3. Promoting a sense of SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Social connectedness involves having relationships with others (individual or groups) who understand you and support you. Building connections and relationships with teachers and peers provides the basis for engagement, emotional wellbeing and readiness to learn. This is particularly important now as many pupils may have experienced loss of connection with friends and teachers as a result of school closures.

I am part of my class and school. I have a voice and I am listened to

The following can help promote a sense of social connectedness:

Prioritise relationships

Central to supporting all pupils to recover from challenging events is the presence of supportive, caring adults in their life. Social support and connection act as a buffer against stress. It will be particularly important to reach out to vulnerable pupils because it is through their connections with others that they will effectively manage and cope with this transition. Help them feel genuinely cared for, listened to and included. Some students will require targeted intervention such as a buddy or peer support system adhering to physical distancing guidance. Small group and structured activities including circle time, SPHE and extra-curricular activities can also help pupils to build connections and re-establish relationships.

Slow down to catch up

Take the time to re-engage with pupils, build relationships and connection in preparation for the return to school, so that all pupils will be available and ready to participate in a meaningful way. For some children it may be necessary to consider assigning a key adult to support their transition. This promotes a sense of

connectedness and belonging for both the child and their parent.

Be creative

Look for opportunities to be creative. Start the year by easing into work through the use of circle time, drama, music, visual arts, and sharing stories and experiences. This helps to build a sense of connectedness and community spirit and efficacy.

Create a sense of a class community

Create a sense of community in the classroom by giving children responsibilities such as doing jobs and involving pupils in planning activities that create a sense of belonging and efficacy. Give pupils a voice in the classroom and encourage them to contribute to decisions around rules, classroom organisation and routines. Promote the use of language such as 'our class', 'our project', 'our school'.

4. Promoting a sense of EFFICACY in SELF and COMMUNITY

Self-efficacy is the belief that you can do what you need to do, deal with challenges and handle tough times. Community efficacy is the belief that the school community you belong to can do what it needs to do to thrive and take care of its members. As a result of the Covid-19 crisis, some people may feel a lack of control and may doubt their ability to solve problems and handle ordinary day-to-day challenges.

I can do it and my teacher will help me
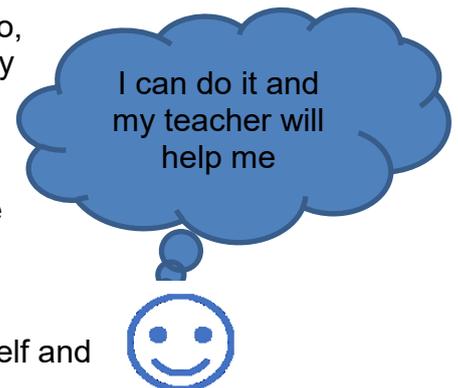
The following can help promote a sense of efficacy in both self and community:

Information and/or training for staff

Professional development for staff to build knowledge and awareness of how best to support the wellbeing of pupils on return to school may be useful. For information on training please refer to the DES CPD directory on the DES Wellbeing in Education page here.

School staff (both teaching and non-teaching) should have information about stress reactions displayed by children at different ages and guidance on how to handle class discussions and answer pupil's questions. Information about children's response to stress is available here (link)

Teacher wellbeing and self-care

Everyone will have had different experiences of the pandemic and it will take time to adjust to the 'new normal'. It is important to show compassion and kindness to ourselves and others. Not all individuals will respond to stress in the same way and each person will have their own unique coping mechanisms which will vary from time

to time. It is especially important that teachers are proactive and look after their own wellbeing and self-care. Pupil wellbeing is influenced by the wellbeing of the adults around them. Pupils pick up on the stress of others so it is important that adults model positive ways of coping with their own emotions. Further information on teacher wellbeing and self-care is available here

School staff will benefit from:

- Dedicated time for staff reorientation and preparation prior to pupils' return
- Strategies to build staff wellbeing and resilience
- Knowing how and where to get help (See information on Spectrum life the DES Employee Assistance Service).

Encourage pupil voice and agency

All children have unique skills and competencies and make progress at their own pace. During school closures, many children will have enjoyed new experiences and learned new skills. Others may have experienced difficult circumstances and loss. It is important to create opportunities for children to tell their stories. Acknowledge pupil's thoughts and feelings about their experiences since school closures.

Some pupils may have difficulty expressing their thoughts and feelings in words and these should be supported through visual approaches, story-based intervention and/or play. Some may have lost or been separated from family members due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important that their loss or bereavement is acknowledged and that the school community is given the opportunity to show compassion to all.

Involving pupils in identifying and responding to their needs will strengthen their sense of belonging and help reduce any worry. This includes engaging pupils in setting targets, drawing on their preferences and interests, and providing choice where possible.

Encourage problem-solving

Pupils can be supported to identify what they have done in the past that helped them to cope in challenging situations. This develops their awareness of a range of coping skills and gives them confidence to know they have coped with difficult situations and can again.

5. Promoting a sense of HOPE

A sense of hope is related to fostering resiliency and the expectation that things will work out for pupils in the school community. Hope also includes a belief that others will be there to help.

The following can help promote a sense of hope:

Being in school helps me reach my goals

Emphasise strengths, hope, and positivity

Schools provide opportunities for pupils to feel safe, secure, and hopeful about the present and future. Teachers can talk about how people came together locally and nationally and found creative solutions to overcome challenges during the pandemic. Talking about these examples of resilience can be healing and reassuring for both pupils and adults. Teachers can support children to identify their own strengths and use these as coping strategies if they feel anxious, shy, nervous or down. The SPHE curriculum and the Friends programmes may be helpful in brainstorming ideas for a coping plan.

Encouraging children and families to resume activities

Returning to familiar extra-curricular activities that involve separation from parents/carers can support the transition process and help them adjust to being away from their family and home. This can shift the focus away from feelings of worry and allow pupils to enjoy the present moment while looking forward with optimism to their return to other activities. This increases emotional strength and resilience and demonstrates that change and growth can occur despite adversity.

Additional resources:

Schools may find the following guidance and resources useful in supporting the transition back to school:

- Department of Education and Skills Return to Schooling Curriculum Guidance for Primary School Leaders and Teachers

- The National Council for Special Education resources to support pupils with SEN on learning and on transitioning back to school.

- Middletown Centre for Autism resources and webinars which may assist in meeting the needs of pupils with autism including strategies to support their return to school.