

# Back to School

## - A trauma informed approach

Hull and East Riding Child and Adolescent Mental Health  
Service (CAMHS)



*Parents, carers and teachers have been working hard to support children during lockdown. There is understandable anxiety around how children have been coping, and worry over the long-term emotional impact of missing school.*

*As children begin to return to school, this leaflet aims to provide an understanding of the responses you might see in the children in your care as they return to school.*

*It is intended to be a practical guide for parents, carers and teachers with ideas on strategies to support children's emotional wellbeing.*

## Back to School

Some children will be so happy to get back to school, reconnect with friends, and get back to structure and routine. However, this won't be all children and families experiences.



Many children will have the “**anticipatory anxiety**” of school and going out into a world that feels ‘unsafe’. We have had to teach children that being out of the household is (temporarily) unsafe.

Things outside also feel different which is confusing and scary, because even our normal routines might not feel the same as they did before.

It is likely that you, your child, and their teachers will have worries in these uncertain times.

In particular, if the child in your care has had difficult experiences, then they may have raised anxieties about their safety in this new world which they will find harder to express and understand.

**For children this triggers their innate desire to be near to safety and security— you (as their caregiver) and home (as their safe place).**



We might expect to see the following behaviours from children:

### **For Parents and Carers**

Refusal to go to school  
Clinginess in the morning  
Tearfulness  
Poor sleep on nights before school  
Temper tantrums on school mornings  
Feeling sick- especially stomach aches, headaches  
and ache related to muscle tension (sore legs,



### **For teachers**

Kids being reluctant to leave their parents  
Distractibility, poor concentration and memory  
Hyperactive or withdrawn behaviours  
Increased clinginess with teachers  
Refusal to do work  
Behaviours seen in younger children

## **What do these behaviours mean?**

We might see these behaviours as signs of being *naughty*, *attention seeking*, being *difficult* or *controlling*, or just wanting to stay home because its *easier* than school. Research into trauma shows that these behaviours are based in survival.

Importantly, children can't control these responses and such behaviours are not a choice, but communicate the child's internal world.

Children's stress response in their brains and bodies will be activated by threat, and the pandemic naturally has activated this system in us all.



Being out the house can be a trigger —and so can returning to school.

## Why are children showing these different behaviours?

When a child responds to a threat, the brain stem—the part of the brain in charge of survival — ‘floods’ the brain so that the child is on high alert and ready to respond.

This means that they are very aware of their surroundings and cannot focus on anything else. They are ready to react to threat—tense,

energetic, jumpy. They may be quick to anger or distress because their emotions are in the driving seat. It’s exhausting too. This brain stem response is likely to be hyper-active if a child has *previous* experiences of threat or trauma—so the response will be *more frequent, bigger or less predictable*.



### So what does this mean?

You are facing a frightened child rather than a child who is being *difficult* out of choice—they cannot access their thinking brain!

At school, this child that feels unsafe cannot access the part of their brain that is in charge of clear thinking, reasoning and learning.



### Caring for the carer

You might be stressed too. That’s okay! ... Through awareness of your own anxiety around the virus or the child’s behaviour you can notice how this might impact on how you respond. Try not to trigger your child’s anxiety by responding in a panicked or angry way—but don’t beat yourself up if you feel this way.

Reframing the behaviour in your mind by being curious about the cause will help you to respond calmly and with care towards yourself and others.



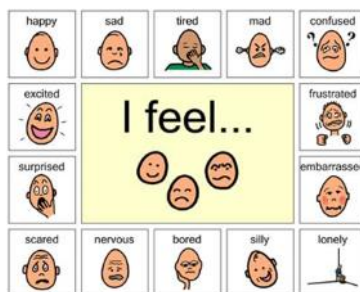
## Strategies—For parents:

There is no direct 'solution' to take away the child's anxiety. Their anxiety is natural and normal and whilst it should not be ignored, it does not need to be a reason to keep the child home forever.

***We can help the child by recognising their emotions, and responding to these through conversations and strategies.***

- Find out what your child is looking forward to and what they think might be different or be expecting. Validate fears and correct confusion.
- Teachers may be able to explain plans to your child or show a video of what to expect. Speak to your teacher if you can to plan and co-ordinate.
- Practise the school procedures to model what the child will have to do (i.e. queue on the playground). Tell the child at what point you will have to leave them (i.e. at the gate).

- Talk about emotions. Give emotions names: "sad", "angry" or "worried" or descriptions of feelings like "shakey", "fuzzy", "spacey", "spiny" so the child can tell you their feelings.



- Remind your child you know it is hard and it's OK to be scared. Let them know you are there. Remind them you are proud of them and what they have achieved.
- Problem-solve together: If something is a worry then try to work together with the child to help come up with a few solutions.
- Prepare! Start your normal morning routine a week before school starts and, if you can and its helpful, visit school before it starts
- Language: Use encouraging language like "**when**" rather than "**if**" you go to school.
- Use visual aids such as calendars to count down to school starting.

## For schools / teachers:

**In preparation:** Positive transitions are supported by planning, clear communication and drawing on relationships to build a “safe base” or place with you.

- Help the class to prepare with an email count-down with prompts and positive comments with pictures or a video of any new layouts;
- Create connectedness before the return by asking for an update and sending a class task home to draw a picture of their time away;
- Let the child bring a favourite object from home to the first day back (a transitional object).



### **Create a Safe Base**

- Welcome children enthusiastically!: “I’ve missed seeing your face! I thought of you when I went to see X in the summer.”
- Communicate belonging – “we are all looking after each other” – “our class”
- Structure– use a visual schedule, clear labels for new arrangements, explain clearly and remind gently as an anxious child will forget.
- Structure is important, but don’t try to assess what has been missed too quickly. The return will take time and patience.
- Acknowledge how things are different and are not “normal” and that the class may have mixed feelings about what’s happened.
- Use regular reassurance to help children feel positive whatever they have achieved.



Click here for [more detailed information](#).

## Promote Wellbeing and Coping

- **Positive:** focus on “it’s good to be back together” . Make a tree of life of family, skills and strengths.
- **Worries:** Catching butterflies- write down worries on cut out butterflies, chuck them in the air, catch them and put them in a jar.
- **Mindfulness:** group calming activities like story-time or hold a favourite object and play gentle music and breathe together.
- **Play:** Consider use of play and activities which promote bonding and laughter, before academic expectations.
  - Allow for breaks, promote social time and group work. Give time to burn off extra energy – do a running game or ask active children to help with tasks.
- Do play based activities that acknowledge the time away, such as “what I missed most about school”, “show and tell- photos from time away”, “back together” chain (children make paper chains linking all the reasons they’re glad to be back together)



## For teacher’s own wellbeing:

- Use support from the school team. Consider [10 steps towards staff wellbeing in school](#).
- Schedule a teacher debrief session by a wellbeing or pastoral support worker.
- Share worries and anxiety and how you as a team might manage children’s worries and refer on to your schools mental health support network.
- Seek personal support from your network. It’s OK to acknowledge your own worries and anxiety in a safe forum with peers and staff.



## **Children with additional needs**

**Bereavements:** Some children may have been bereaved and need additional support from a key worker. The child may find it helpful to know that someone at school knows even if they don't need additional support. Find more information [here](#).

**Emotional wellbeing needs:** Some children may need extra support. Consider pastoral support at school or wider systems like social care, CAMHS or Virtual School. Work together to share information and promote joint working.



**Transitions:** Schools need to make additional considerations for those who are transitioning to a new school; Consider a virtual tour, photos of staff, uniforms and the school day. Offer a Q&A sheet for FAQs – personalised to the families who are joining, and get the child to send in 'all about me' sheet.

### **Additional Resources**

[Going back to school after coronavirus](#) a story for children

[My Home Book of Thoughts and Feelings](#) support pack for children preparing to return to school

[Mentally Healthy Schools: Return to School](#) resources to support emotional wellbeing for children after coronavirus

[Anna Freud: Managing the transition back to school](#) a guide for schools and colleges

[Mentally Healthy Schools: Toolkit on managing transitions](#) hints and tips for activities

[Mentally Healthy Schools: Toolkit on managing anxiety during coronavirus](#)

[Mentally Healthy Schools: A School Inset Day on Wellbeing](#)

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