Returning to school guidance for parents

It has been and continues to be a stressful time for many of us. There is a lot of uncertainty still in society and I am sure you had many questions and concerns about sending your child back in to school.

This is a brief guide to try to summarise the main points from the many sources of guidance which has been available during this time from sources such as Public Health England, YoungMinds, Anna Freud Trust & Mind

This is not an official NHS guide. It is the efforts of staff members who are experienced in working with schools, children and families in supporting mental health to collate some of the information so that you can access the main points. There are some links towards the end of the document should you want to find out more information.

SELF-CARE – We need to prioritise our own wellbeing and manage our own emotions

CREATE A SAFE AND PREDICTABLE ENVIRONMENT – We need to be able to connect with our children with calmness and positivity.

This doesn't mean being super-happy all the time – it will actually be helpful to show that you have worried too and felt sad but you have ways which help you deal with this and feel better.

RELATIONSHIPS

Keep a focus on play and connecting with your child, and set realistic expectations of behaviour and achievement (for you and them!)

STOP & THINK – What is the function of their behaviour – what are they trying to tell you with it?

LISTENING

Try to stay curious and let your child know you understand their feelings ('I can see you're really sad about that, and it's okay') and that their feelings are understandable

PLANNING AHEAD

Read information from school about school opening and their plans for social distancing and hygiene, and talk about the plans with your child when more information is available

Keeping routines and boundaries predictable and consistent is helpful for everyone's wellbeing

Things to look out for:

All of the behaviours below are possible indicators of worry or anxiety. Children are not always skilled in emotional literacy, and they may use these as tools to communicate with you. As you will see, they are easily interpreted as being disruptive. Try to stay curious about the underlying reasons for the behaviour and respond to that underlying need (e.g. for a calm space, connection, reduced demands, play). When they are calmer their behaviour can be addressed. Work with school to understand possible reasons for any changes from your child's usual character, and liaise with external services if needed.

- Defiance
- Saying they feel ill or sick
- Asking lots of planning questions – who, when, why, what, where….
- Telling lies
- Seeming tired or sleepy
- Being angry and having tantrums
- Struggling to calm down
- Hiding
- Going shy and/or quiet
- Looking to use comfort items
- Crying
- Problems with toileting
- Seeming agitated and unable to sit still
- Being clingy
- Asking lots of "What if" questions

https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19

UNICEF: 6 tips on how parents can help	**UNICEF: 8 tips on how to talk to your child**
1. Be calm and proactive – ask how they are and what they are thinking 2. Stick to a routine – predictability gives security 3. Let your child feel their emotions; you can talk it through with them later when they are calm to ensure there are consequences if needed. 4. Check in with your child about what they are hearing/reading. 5. Create welcome distractions – you could even make this in to a menu or poster somewhere easy to see as a tool to respond to "I'm bored!"	1. Ask open questions and actively listen 2. Be honest; explain the truth in a child-friendly way, INCLUDING that it worries you too and when you feel worried, you …. 3. Show them how to protect themselves and their friends – use videos if needed. 4. Offer reassurance – verbal and/or physical 5. Check if they are experiencing or spreading stigma 6. Look for the helpers – the good news stories **7. Take care of yourself** 8. Close conversations with care – let them know it's OK to ask you again.

6. Manage your own emotions and try to remain calm (save serious conversations for when young people's ears cannot hear)	
Hints to help stay calm – some people still count to 10, other ideas shared by parents include: a. Imagining you are in your favourite place e.g. a beach or somewhere in the countryside. b. Reciting lyrics of a favourite song in your head. c. Writing it down d. Throwing a tennis ball against a wall (out of sight if possible)	Choose a safe place and time (ideally not their bedroom or bed time). Offer a hug if they want – let them choose. Don't prompt opinions or questions. Try not to overload with information or make promises you can't keep. Be honest about how you feel and what you do to make yourself feel better – tell them they don't need to worry about you.

The most important message that comes through from all of the resources is that to support your child you must first and foremost look after yourself. Parents typically put everyone else before themselves but when it comes to an ongoing situation like this, it will lead to burnout:

- You are not being selfish when you make time for yourself
- It doesn't need to be time-consuming – 15 minutes a day is a good place to start.
- It doesn't need to be expensive – many ideas are completely free, including Apps which can help.

Strategies for worry

These are some of the tools we use to help young people with their worries. They work just as well for adults and in the links section there is a self-help guide from Psychology tools, designed for older children and/or adults which takes you through these in more detailed way.

Worry Time	Worry time can be a useful strategy for children who worry a lot. The ideas is that you agree a specific time of day to allow your child to talk about their worries (no more than 30 minutes a day). If they bring up worries at other times, you might use ideas like writing the worry down or imagining sending the worry to an imaginary worry box until worry time. You then talk about it at worry time as much as your child wants to (if it's still bothering them). Over time, this can help children learn that worries can be contained.
Worry sorting	Our worries usually fall in to two groups: 1. Worries that can be solved, usually with some help. These are real-life problems e.g. worrying about starting revision for exams, there are solutions and support for this. 2. Worries that are "hypothetical". These could be about the future or about what other people may be thinking or saying. Nothing we can do can fix these. We need to recognise them and then let them go. Saying "I'm not thinking about that now" is a good start and then engaging in a distraction activity.

Relaxation	Keeping calm and relaxed helps keep anxiety levels low
Distraction	Activity is great on so many levels. It helps our physical health, it helps divert our attention from worries and improves mood. This is seen mostly when we have a balance of activity which gives us a sense of achievement, closeness and enjoyment.
Positivity	Focus on the good things. What has changed for you and your family for the better? What has changed in society for the better? What are you looking forward to or who are you looking forward to seeing? What are the good news stories? Create "things" linked to positivity which you can engage with e.g. photo albums with real photos and captions to remind you of what was happening. Use your memory functions on social media and remind yourself of happy times and things that made you laugh.
Tackling thoughts	This can be hard to do and it is where we can need support. Simple tactics include thinking "what would my best friend say" or "If my friend was telling me this, what would I say to them?" Repeating positive or calm statements to ourselves will help reduce anxiety, "I can do this", "it's just a feeling", "I can cope" are good mantras to use.

Useful resources and contacts:

We are very fortunate in this area to have a parent group where members support each other when their children are experiencing mental health issues. The focus is on supporting the child, rather than support for yourself but that interaction with others is beneficial in itself.

Lancashire Trust support:

Wellbeing and Mental Health Line: https://www.lscft.nhs.uk/Mental-Health-Helpline 0800 915 4640

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Texting: https://www.lscft.nhs.uk/texting-service Text: 07860 022 846

Lancashirepositiveminds@gmail.com
Susie Marsden (Parent lead and founder) 07713 337182
Closed facebook group: Lancashire Positive Minds
Lancaster and Morecambe District C.H.A.T.S parent/carer support group chats_123@yahoo.com Parent reps Claire 07908452426 Becca 07950784015. Closed Facebook group :CHATS

https://www.psychologytools.com/articles/free-guide-to-living-with-worry-and-anxiety-amidst-global-uncertainty/ Scroll down to be able to download the UK English version – this is the worry self-help guide. Many of these techniques are used in therapy sessions.

https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/patients-and-parents/coronavirus-resources-for-children-and-families/ Lots of great resources – I like the self-care pack for children

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus - lots of useful guidance and links to specific mental health issues for further information

MindEd – a collection of free courses around mental health issues. https://www.minded.org.uk/Login

https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/ a good resource for parents and young people alike. There is a parent helpline 0808 802 5544 which is staffed from 9:30 – 16:00 with an online form for out-of-hours

Samaritans – 116 123.

https://www.lscft.nhs.uk/Mindsmatter if you feel you need support with your mental health, this is the NHS provision for those aged 16 and over. You can self-refer from this site.

https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/ a list of mental health apps which have been checked by the NHS

The “Five Ways to Wellbeing” is a thoroughly researched model to guide our self-care and improve our mental health. Here we have used it as a template to support our responses to the COVID situation

Evidence shows us that nature boosts mood so get out and about.

Try planting a herb garden for the windowsill if you’ve no outdoor space

With the kids – try growing projects or spotting different plants and animals when you go for a walk.

WATCH OUT – for negative cycles, in yourself or the family. These include avoidance, withdrawing from people, excessive “googling”, talking about worries lots, looking for danger and excessive checking

Think about what you and your family do when you are stressed and have a “menu” of activities to do as individuals or together to help when this happens.

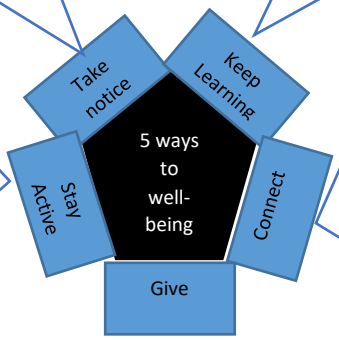
If you want to learn more about the virus, keep it to reliable sources e.g. NHS, Young Minds, Mind and Public Health England (links above)

MindEd offers reputable, free courses on all sorts of aspects of mental health if you want something more challenging – there are print off certificates if they are of use for your CV

For you – try learning a new language. There are some great free Apps like Duolingo to help.

Try taking on a new challenge like perfecting a baking technique.

Combine this with staying active and learn a new skill from YouTube like kickboxing, yoga or dancing.



Try to stick to healthy habits as much as possible. This will set a good example as part of the positive modelling which is so vital and will also benefit your mental health.

Try to eat, sleep and exercise well.

Activities like yoga and Pilates can bring in elements of relaxed breathing which is so helpful for our wellbeing.

If possible try going for a walk alone, combine this with “taking notice” by leaving your headphones behind and listening to the sounds around you.

With your family – talk about things you are looking forward to doing again – you could create a jar/pinboard with these in.

Try using a distraction to help difficult conversations like doing a jigsaw together or baking at the same time.

Talk to friends and mute those on social media who spread speculation and negativity.

Be mindful of the words you use e.g. avoid terms like “victim” when talking about the virus

TIME – Give time to yourself for self-care. This is possibly the most important message as without looking after yourself, you can’t care for anyone else to the standards you set yourself. Try the self-care section on Anna Freud (link above) for some ideas.

TIME & ATTENTION – to your family, without technology. For younger children, 10 minutes play, where they lead the “session” can have huge benefits

REASSURANCE – really important messages to share include: You are following the guidance relating to COVID, so are they and so are school. Most people get better, most don’t go to hospital. Healthcare workers are looking after people when they are ill, scientists are looking for cures and vaccines.

GIFTS – what small things you could you and/or your family do for others? Some baking, a letter or card, a silly video to

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