

# RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN 2021



## Reaching Families

### Taking stock - where are we now?

We are republishing this update of our earlier fact sheet as the Government has now published a 'Roadmap', setting out steps for the return to as near normal life as possible. The intention is, if all goes according to plan, that the UK will not face any further lockdown restrictions after June 21st.

Some people cannot wait for a return to normal life while others remain fearful about their own or their family's health. We all have different situations and experiences and therefore need to consider our individual circumstances when planning how to best cope with the next phase of life. What is very clear is that we all need to be careful, cautious and continue to take care in order for this to be Roadmap to be successful.

The plan is for ALL children to return to schools and colleges on March 8th, with the possible exception of a very few children and young people who are considered clinically extremely vulnerable and who have been advised to continue shielding until March 31st. Schools have been working to make this as safe as possible for pupils and staff, including a regime of testing. There is specific guidance for all types of settings included in the Further Advice and Information section at the end of this fact sheet. If you have specific concerns about your child returning to school we would recommend contacting them directly.

### Experiences during lockdown

Reaching Families have undertaken a number of surveys during the last year and have been keeping in close contact with families through social media and on-line activities. These show that there have been a vast range of experiences. Some families have enjoyed the much slower pace of life; others have had an extremely challenging time caring for children and young people alone with a complex range of physical, cognitive and emotional needs. There are of course a myriad of experiences in between these two extremes. Each will affect how you feel about the next stages - increased anxiety about going back out into the world? Pleased that some kind of 'normality' is returning?

For many families the lockdown since Christmas has been much harder to take, possibly due to the winter weather and fewer opportunities to spend time outdoors, or perhaps because there had been some relief and hope after the first re-opening in September and just as it seemed there was a chance of life beginning to return to normal, we were forced into a stricter lockdown to control the spread of new variants of Covid-19. Now, as most of the most vulnerable adults are being vaccinated, perhaps we can rekindle that hope and move forward again cautiously, but positively.

### Attitude towards school

Children who previously enjoyed school or who have been missing their friends may be very excited about returning to school. Some may have been attending throughout or been able to go in for some time during this lockdown. However, there will also be some who have been quite happy not to attend, been enjoying the time at home with less pressure and may now be highly anxious at the thought of going back again. These are the children who will need the most support and preparation to make their return as smooth as possible. Hopefully individual schools will have given some advice and guidance on this. Some will aim to have everyone in on March 8th and some will have a more phased return.



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### Managing anxieties

Having some understanding of how your child might be feeling about going back to school (but without adding to any anxieties) is vital. The first stage may be acknowledging your own anxiety. Children are likely to pick up on your fears and take the lead from you and so this is very important. It is absolutely understandable if you are worried about your child, how they will react being back at school as well as having concerns about how safe we all are. Our instinct as parents is to protect, but over protection can be unhelpful. If you or your child has become fearful of going out, begin slowly, go to quiet open spaces for a short time and gradually get used to being around people again.

There are still many unknowns and uncertainties in the government's Roadmap and the situation may continue to change. Finding a balance between reliable, local knowledge, understanding real risks, what keeps you safe and ignoring the more unreliable horror stories that provoke panic is the best course of action. You can help your child to feel safe by feeling as safe as you can yourself. (See also the Reaching Families fact sheet on [anxiety](#)).

### Preparation

Mention school casually and in a positive way whenever appropriate. Perhaps meet up with friends outside (as guidelines allow) or encourage on-line contact. Talking about school positively, discussing any changes, making it sound like a new adventure and encouraging curiosity rather than apprehension is helpful. The media has made much of 'lost learning', 'being behind' and 'catching up', but this won't be the case for all children, many have thrived and been enjoying on-line learning and more time to develop their own interests. Whatever the situation, adding more pressure is the last thing they need.

Many children will be feeling anxious, a bit like returning to school after the summer break each year. Putting off talking about it because you fear your child's reaction may make things worse, but don't overdo it so they think you are anxious about it too. Emphasise the positives. Listen to their fears and try to offer practical solutions where possible. You know your child best and need to adapt advice for your individual circumstances.

### Keeping Safe

Remind your child about hand washing, sneezing and coughing safely, discouraging face touching (as far as possible and age appropriately). Some age groups will be encouraged to wear a mask in school and teaching staff may be wearing masks. Even if your child is exempt from wearing a mask, they may feel less anxious if they can wear one and trying them out when relaxed and gradually increasing the length of time they wear it for can help with their tolerance.

If you have to be extra careful because of vulnerable people in your home perhaps explain why that is, as appropriate to level of understanding. Some children won't remember life before Covid-19 or be able to imagine life after it. Some particularly vulnerable children may require individual risk assessments to keep them safe and to identify any additional support needed, particularly around respiratory hygiene, personal care and physical handling. Talk to your child's school about this.

### Important to know

- Transport – The transport team have been planning services since the first lockdown and should be in contact with families if any changes are necessary.



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- Whilst there may be some inevitable disruption to normal services due to illness/ isolation/ staff shortages etc There should be every effort to operate as usual and keep to statutory timescales.
- There should be no changes to provision specified in EHCPs without full consultation with parents – via an early Annual Review if changes necessary. An EHCP is a legal document and only the LA can amend it.
- WSCC Say - “Specialists, therapists, clinicians and other support staff for pupils with SEND should provide interventions as usual. Any re-deployments of support staff should NOT be at the expense of pupils with SEND. Where a class, group or small number of pupils need to self-isolate, or where there is a local lockdown requiring pupils to stay at home, we expect settings to have the capacity to offer immediate remote education.”
- New Needs Assessment Requests – These should be undertaken in the usual timescales, and the **SENDIAS Top Tips** series gives further information on how to make a request.

### Countdown to return

- Continue to talk positively about what to expect and all the aspects of school your child is likely to enjoy the most. Prepare them for potential changes, watch videos and look at school websites for the most up to date information.
- Try to take problem solving approach for the things you can help with and not dwell on concerns you have no control over. See our Anxiety Fact sheet on ‘parking’ anxieties, having a special time to think about them rather than allowing them to become overwhelming and all consuming.
- After school - plan something nice for after school. Go home via the park, walk home with a friend, favourite activity at home when you get in, favourite tea, etc. Resist asking too many questions, especially straight away. Prepare to give your child/children your complete attention if they need it, but without being over anxious yourself.
- On the second day - try to keep routines in the morning as smooth as possible. Minimise tension and talk positively about things you need to do. Focus on the tasks in hand – breakfast, getting dressed, brushing teeth, etc. Distract if small worries are expressed – “I wonder what you’ll have for lunch”, “I wonder what story Miss Smith will read”. You are not ignoring your child’s anxieties, more helping them to manage them. “I know you feel a bit worried about this, but see how it goes/lots of people have these worries...and we’ll talk about it later” etc.
- On-going - keep repeating the routines described as far as possible. Notice what works and what makes things worse. Some children may need a token to keep with them to remind them of home. A photo, a spray of perfume a small object to help them ‘hold you in mind’ and remind them you are coming back. Soft toys may not be allowed so check first.
- Signs of distress - Some children hold their anxieties inside and cannot express them. They may become withdrawn or change behaviours, feelings of being unwell – tummy aches, headaches, etc. Try to encourage them to face their fears as far as possible without causing distress. Building up gradually may be necessary for some children. Increased anxiety is highly likely after a long gap away from school for children and adults – being prepared so it doesn’t take you by surprise is the best thing to do.

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### The Recovery Curriculum/Catching-up

Schools will be reacting to the situation in different ways. Don't be afraid to ask questions. The SENCO may be your best first contact or class teacher in primary schools. You may hear mention of "the Recovery Curriculum" – this is a focus on putting children's well-being before academic catch-up. If they aren't happy they won't be able to learn.

Some of you may be worried about 'catching-up' academically but remember all children have been in a similar situation and schools should be handling this sensibly, especially for those with additional needs. Contact the SENCO if you have concerns your child is being put under too much pressure or if the school have unrealistic expectations. It may be that they are giving out generalised advice and instructions and not taking into account individual circumstances and making reasonable adjustments which they are obliged to do.

### Further information and advice

- **Understanding and Managing Anxiety in Children and Young People (Tina Rae):** <https://youtu.be/ft0aTwG4dFM>
- **Reaching Families Animation on Returning to School:** [www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/animations.html](http://www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/animations.html)
- **Reaching Families Coronavirus Fact Sheets:** [www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/factsheets.html](http://www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/factsheets.html)
- **IPSEA update on SEN Provision:** [www.ipsea.org.uk/news/ipsea-update-on-covid-19-school-closures-and-sen-provision](http://www.ipsea.org.uk/news/ipsea-update-on-covid-19-school-closures-and-sen-provision)
- **Introduction to Separation Anxiety Video (Laura Dawson):** <https://youtu.be/9CcGjzW2Uxc>
- **Supporting Young People with OCD:** <https://youtu.be/KDD7vE0gxFA>

### Local Guidance

- **West Sussex County Council** - information and resources on returning to school: [www.westsussex.gov.uk/fire-emergencies-and-crime/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-and-information/coronavirus-schools-and-education/#feeling-confident-about-returning](http://www.westsussex.gov.uk/fire-emergencies-and-crime/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-and-information/coronavirus-schools-and-education/#feeling-confident-about-returning)
- **West Sussex Local Offer** - specific information and guidance on Covid-19 for West Sussex: [https://westsussex.local-offer.org/information\\_pages/605-coronavirus-covid-19-useful-information](https://westsussex.local-offer.org/information_pages/605-coronavirus-covid-19-useful-information)  
[www.westsussex.gov.uk/fire-emergencies-and-crime/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-and-information](http://www.westsussex.gov.uk/fire-emergencies-and-crime/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-and-information)
- **Returning to School Promoting Emotional Well-being booklet (WSCC):** <https://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/17618>

### Government Guidance

- **Opening Schools:** [www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools)
- **Special Schools:** [www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings)
- **Education & Child Care:** [www.gov.uk/coronavirus/education-and-childcare](http://www.gov.uk/coronavirus/education-and-childcare)

