

RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN 2020



Taking stock – where are we now?

As this fact sheet is being written, the UK is emerging from 'Lockdown'. Some people appear to be returning to a near normal life and others remain very fearful about theirs or their family's health. We all have different situations and experiences and therefore need to consider these circumstances when planning how to cope with the next phase of life during the pandemic.

The plan is for ALL children to return to school in September. Schools have been working to make this as safe as possible for pupils and staff. 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 additional 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 few months 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? Relief that carers are returning and schools re-opening?

Attitude towards school

Children who previously enjoyed school or who have been missing their friends may be very excited about returning in September. Some may have been attending throughout or been able to go in for some time during the summer term. However, there will also be some who have been quite happy not to attend, been enjoying the last few months with less pressure and may now be highly anxious at the thought of going back. These are the children who will need the most support and now is the time to plan how to prepare to make their return in September as smooth as possible.

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 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 the situation will continue changing. Finding a balance between reliable, local knowledge, understanding real risks and 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](#)).



RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN 2020

Preparation

Over the summer mention school casually and in a positive way whenever appropriate. Perhaps meet up with friends in the park or encourage on-line contact. All children will be experiencing changes in September – some a change of school; others a change of class; all a new year group. Hopefully, school have provided you with information to help your child prepare for this. If not, we would recommend contacting your child's school for further information.

Talking about school positively, discussing any changes, making it sound like a new adventure and encouraging curiosity rather than apprehension is helpful. Putting off talking about it because you fear your child's reaction may make things worse, but don't overdo it so that they worry all summer. You know your child best and need to adapt advice for your individual circumstances.

Keeping Safe

Prepare your child realistically for hand washing, sneezing and coughing safely, discouraging face touching (as far as possible and age appropriately). Explain why people are wearing masks and let them do so in some circumstances if it helps them to feel safer. Depending on their level of understanding, tell them that only 2 people in 10,000 have the virus in your area (or whatever current figures are) and that they will probably be at home if they are poorly.

If you have to be extra careful because of vulnerable people in your home perhaps explain that too, rather than making more extreme measures seem normal. Some children won't remember life before Covid-19 or 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 and physical handling. Talk to your child's school about this.

Important to know

- **Transport** – The transport team are working closely with schools to get plans in place for September but are warning that changes and delays may be unavoidable. Families should be contacted by phone or e-mail when plans are finalised.

- **WSCC Say** - "It is advised that approaches to supporting learners with SEND will be developed in consultation with families and that any requirements to amend provision detailed in their EHCP or enhance it (even for a short period of time) will be discussed through the annual review process."

"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** – The government has relaxed guidelines around the timing of the statutory assessment process (sometimes inaccurately known as 'EHCP requests') until 25th September, but WSCC are endeavouring to collate advice and process assessments as quickly as possible.



RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN 2020

Countdown to return

- As September begins** - preparations such as getting school clothes and shoes ready will step up. Find out what your children are allowed to take to school in advance so that there are fewer dramas on the day – some schools are not allowing own pencil cases/toys etc.

Continue to talk positively about what to expect and all the aspects of school your child is likely to enjoy the most. Remind them about potential changes, watch videos and look at school websites for the most up to date information. Try to get a balance between problem solving and not dwelling on concerns you have no control over.

Also see our Anxiety Fact sheet on ‘parking’ anxieties, having a special time to think about them rather than allowing them to become overwhelmed.
- On the first day** - be organised and prepared to minimise tension. Exude calmness if you can, prepare favourite breakfasts and talk about the positives ahead – “maybe we’ll see Tom on the way”, “won’t it be exciting to meet your new teacher/see your new classroom/play in the playground”, choose the thing most likely to interest your child. If it is difficult to identify any positives about school for your child, focus on what you will do after school.
- After school** - plan something nice for after school on the first day. 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.
- 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.

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



RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN 2020

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>
- **Introduction to Separation Anxiety Video (Laura Dawson):**
<https://youtu.be/9CcGjzW2Uxc>
- **Supporting Young People with OCD:** <https://youtu.be/KDD7vE0gxFA>
- **Reaching Families Animation on Returning to School:**
www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/animations.html
- **Reaching Families Coronavirus Fact Sheets:** www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/factsheets.html
- **Getting Read for Secondary School for Children with Autism:**
<https://vimeo.com/430330321>
- **Contact** - information, training and resources on returning to school:
<https://contact.org.uk/news-and-blogs/confused-or-worried-about-your-childs-return-to-school-take-a-look-at-our-back-to-school-information-for-families-in-england>

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
- **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
www.westsussex.gov.uk/fire-emergencies-and-crime/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-and-information
Also, local information and resources on returning to school: https://westsussex.local-offer.org/information_pages/613-returning-to-school-during-covid-19-pandemic
- **Returning to School Promoting Emotional Well-being booklet (WSCC):**
<http://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
- **Opening Special Schools:** www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings
- **Supporting Children & Young People with SEND:**
www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-send-risk-assessment-guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-send-risk-assessment-guidance#supporting-children-with-ehc-plans-in-mainstream-schools-colleges-and-ap-settings
- **Education & Child Care:** www.gov.uk/coronavirus/education-and-childcare

