



Preparing young people for the return to school

Returning to school after a long period away can cause a great deal of apprehension. As the UK gradually opens up schools, children and young people's wellbeing will likely be impacted by all the change over the past year.

It is important to remember that every young person will have had different experiences of home schooling and lockdown – for some it may have been fun and safe where new things were tried and enjoyed, and for others it may have been challenging. One common theme, however, is that all young people have experienced a period of enormous change and uncertainty with the sudden and unexpected closure of schools, the little opportunity to say goodbye to friends and teachers and the short time to adapt to a new way of life.

As a parent or carer your role may have accelerated during this time as the only source of mental health wellbeing support for the young people in your life. This role will continue, as many young people will need reassurance and support while they prepare to return to school, where many may experience heightened levels of fear and anxiety in already uncertain times.

Here we look at some of the challenges young people may have faced, how these experiences might impact on their return to school and how you can best support this transition.



Some of the challenges young people may have experienced due to coronavirus and lockdown include:

- **A sense of loss:** this includes missing out on lots of things they've taken for granted such as seeing friends and family, playing sports, following familiar routines such as studying and end of school year activities.
- **Fear and anxiety:** uncertainty has been prevalent in all aspects of life and there may be fear that schools may close again if there is another lockdown, when school does re-open what will it look like? What will the new rules be?
- **Friendships:** many young people will have missed interaction with their friends and the self-worth and development they attain from being part of a peer group. While some may have managed this remotely, others will have struggled.
- **Family experiences:** home life for some young people is not easy, whether facing conflict or an increased role as a carer for other family members. Some may have had a different experience and, having spent a significant period with a supportive parent or carer, they may be fearful of leaving.
- **Illness and bereavement:** young people may have experienced a traumatic event including illness or the death of family member and loved ones.
- **Self-care:** Normal routines have been suspended or in some cases have completely disappeared. Sleep patterns may have been disrupted and there has been less opportunity for doing exercise and other activities, which can affect a young person's wellbeing.

These experiences may have an impact on a young person's return to school in the following ways:

- **Adapting to the new normal:** certain aspects of school will be different and the idea of this can be overwhelming. The fear of catching the virus could be lingering, mass testing happening and there may be new levels of bullying around those being accused of spreading it. Class sizes will be smaller, there may be new teachers, and these will all be happening under new social distancing restrictions.
- **Transition:** the social aspects of school will continue to be different, and many young people will have to manage new routines and expectations. Those who are in key transition pathways may be feeling worried that they are falling behind in work and fearful that schools could have to close again. This could have an impact on concentration and engagement.
- **Re-engaging with friends:** the new rules and boundaries in school will be felt mostly in areas where most young people have 'down-time'. Some friendships will need an element of rebuilding and some of them will have changed, which can be a difficult experience.

How can you support their return to school?

It's important to remember that young people are often more resilient than we give them credit for. Lockdown may have had a positive impact on their wellbeing, and

they might have enjoyed the extended time with their family. Some could be feeling less pressure around academic success and exams, and others could have developed new resilience-building skills and coping strategies.

However, for many young people going back to school may be an added source of anxiety in already difficult times. Managing this transition back to school may in fact be the biggest challenge for many young people.

Some tips to support you when preparing the young people in your life for the return to school:

1. **Talk and listen** to how they are feeling. Normalise and validate that it's not surprising that they are feeling worried about returning to school during these times. Express how you are feeling also. Try to balance normalising their fears with thinking of ways to help them move forward. For some young people, it's easier for them to write things down or use creative methods to express themselves.
2. **Increase feelings of security** by preparing them for the return to school as much as possible. This might involve looking at the school website, talking to the school, walking past the school (if possible) or getting in touch with schoolmates to have a conversation about how they're feeling. Provide as much information as possible about what their new routine might look like.
3. **Discuss the uncertainty** by being open that a lot has changed, while also acknowledging that many things have stayed the same. This will help balance out worries and focus on positive things about going back to school. It might help to think together about what they can and can't control, to help work through and manage uncertainty.
4. **Gradually start to expose** them to things that are causing fear and anxiety in a way that makes them feel secure. At the moment this is best done by discussing these worries. For example, if their anxiety is around going back into school and what it will look like, talk to them about this and reassure them that the school will have all the measures in place to keep them safe.
5. **Introduce a routine** in the days leading up to returning to school. Sleep patterns will have changed during lockdown and it's important they are put back into place. Encourage them to get some exercise also.
6. **Model coping strategies** you use and will continue to use. This is a unique position where you might find yourself returning to the office at the same time they are returning to school. Discuss that, be open about your worries and feelings about returning to work and how you are managing those feelings.
7. **Look after yourself** the last couple of months of home schooling has put enormous strain on parents, carers and families. No one has been unaffected. Taking time to look after ourselves and each other is so important.

Bloom Resources to support you

For support in having these conversations with young people, please visit the [Bloom Resource Library](#) and download our guide 'Guide for having discussions with other parents and carers'.

Watch and share [our animations](#) to learn more about what it means to be resilient and practical tools that help build it.