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REDUCING SEPARATION ANXIETY

teacher resource

Following lockdown, some children may have increased anxiety about returning to school, particularly separation anxiety at leaving their parents and carers.

This document has been produced to guide teachers in supporting pupils exhibiting anxiety. It may be useful for the return to school in September, following any periods of local lockdown or blended learning, or any other longer absence from school.

Each child is individual and parts of this may not apply to their situation. Please refer to our guidance for teachers, and where the concern is ongoing do please refer to further mental health support in your school or local authority.

Whole class measures

Communication

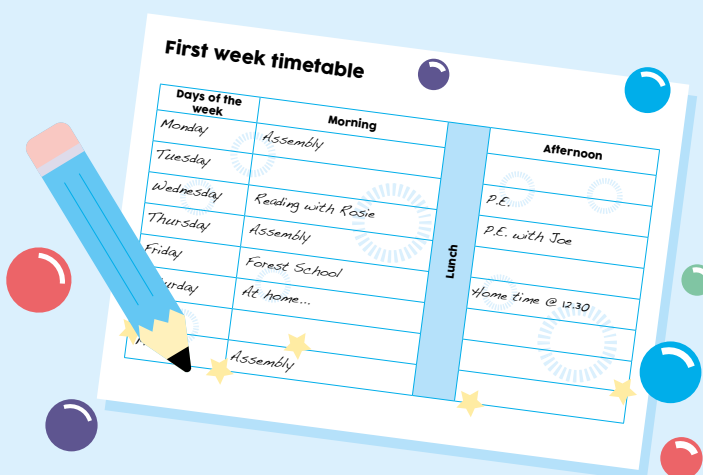
Before a return to school, particularly where the learning environment has changed, it is important to make sure the parents and children feel informed and confident about returning to school. It may be useful to do the following:

- Send out a learning timetable in advance
- Record and share a video of the changes in the school environment
- Talk about the health and safety measures in place
- Explain changes to the day-to-day running of the school, e.g. where they will line up, who will greet them

It is important to acknowledge that there will be some changes in the school but that the school is ready and prepared to welcome them back.

Routine

Not all children will be anxious about returning to school - many will be keen to return to a familiar routine, albeit with some changes. The familiarity of a timetable may help some children to settle in, so spend some time with the children talking through the timetable and any changes. It may be useful to display a visual timetable for the children to refer to during the day.



First week timetable

Days of the week	Morning	Afternoon
Monday	Assembly	
Tuesday		
Wednesday	Reading with Rosie	P.E.
Thursday	Assembly	P.E. with Joe
Friday	Forest School	
Saturday	At home...	Home time @ 12.30
Sunday	Assembly	



Continuing transition

While routine is important, it is important to acknowledge that this is not a normal return to school. The whole school should plan in time for further transition activities and a focus on wellbeing to reduce the anxiety of pupils.

Wellbeing activities might include a daily mindfulness activity, some individual time with each pupil going through the transition work set at home, or an afternoon story time with their former teacher. You may consider running a show and tell, where children talk about an experience they had during lockdown.

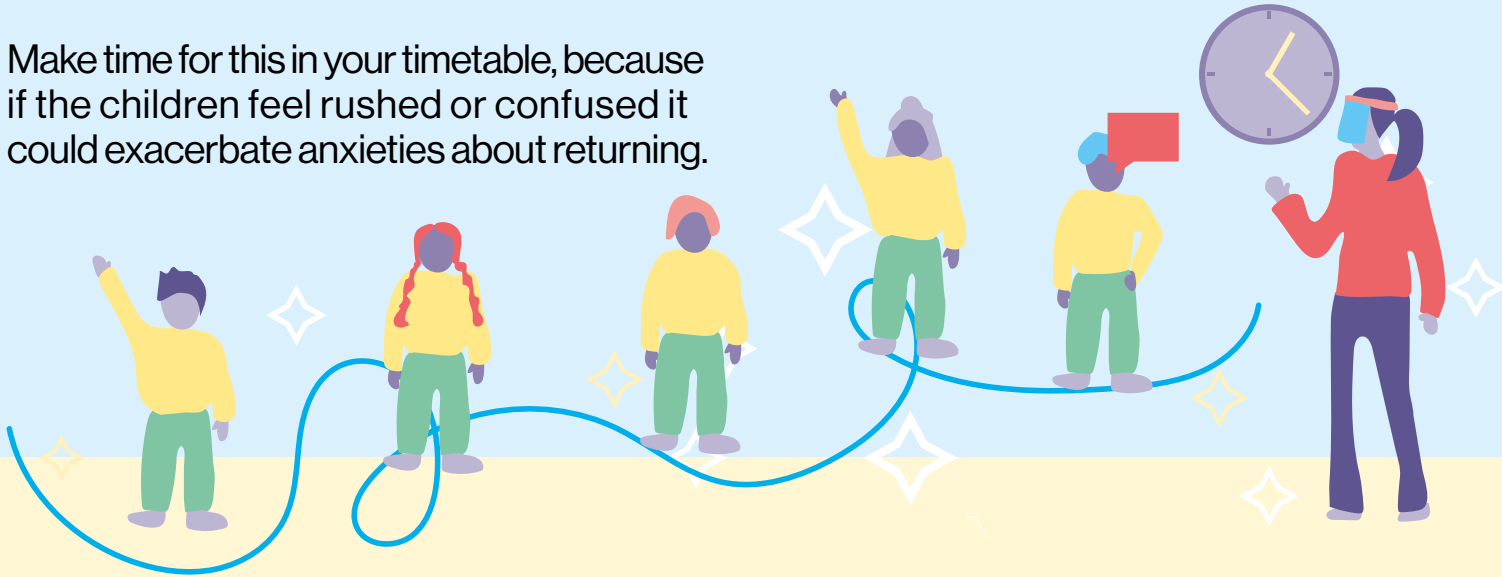
Further resources:

- [Mentally Healthy Schools transition toolkit](#)
- [Whole school action plan – reducing separation anxiety after lockdown](#)
- [Mindfulness calendar: daily five minute activities](#)

Manage expectations

The majority of children will not have been in school for a long period and will have forgotten basic expectations of behaviour in school. You will likely need to spend some time reminding them of the rules and boundaries in schools, and rehearse basic school behaviours such as lining up.

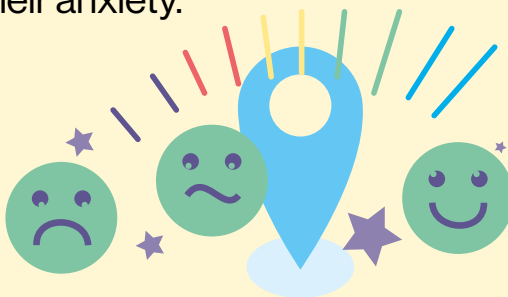
Make time for this in your timetable, because if the children feel rushed or confused it could exacerbate anxieties about returning.



Children who need extra support

Identifying feelings

Where children find it difficult to articulate what they are feeling, it may help to ask them to use a scale to represent their feelings, such as the [anxiety thermometer](#) or [emotion wheel](#). For older children, the [emotional check in tool](#) may be more suitable. Once settled, you could ask the child to describe where on the scale their feelings are at various times e.g. playtime, assembly, morning drop off, to identify what is triggering their anxiety.



While boundaries are important, we must also realise that some children will no longer be used to sitting at desks and concentrating for long periods, which will impact on behaviours. So try to break up the lessons with physical activity, such as [brain breaks](#) or tasks around the classroom.

Coping strategies

Once children have identified their feelings, they may need to develop a number of strategies to help them to re-focus and relax. This may include mindful colouring, relaxation techniques or breathing exercises. You can find a number of activity suggestions in our [anxiety toolkit](#).

Parent and carer support

If a child is displaying signs of anxiety, speak with their parent or carer and identify if there are particular triggers. If the anxiety appears to be separation anxiety at the start of school, it will be useful to work with the parents to plan out a way of supporting this. We have produced some [guidance and activities](#) for parents, which may support you and them to work together.

Individual plan for separation anxiety

Where a child needs additional support, you may need to develop an individual plan with the support of the school and their parents/carers. There is a [template plan](#) you can use on Mentally Healthy Schools.

Some things you may want to consider when filling out this plan are:

- The history of the child and whether they have had issues previously. They may have had difficulties of separation anxiety when starting school, so referring to their previous teacher or teaching assistant may inform your plan.
- Are there any other underlying concerns i.e. is this part of a bigger anxiety issue, or are they on the autistic spectrum?
- Why is the child finding it hard to come to school or leave their parent or carer? Does the wider family need support? Perhaps the child is a young carer and concerned more for their parent than themselves.
- Is there a pattern to the anxiety? Is it at a particular time of day or circumstance? It may be that an adult's fear of separation is affecting the child, or things like the number of people in the playground is increasing their anxiety.



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Once you have considered the above you can create an individual plan for that child using the [template plan](#). Some ideas to reduce separation anxiety might include:

- Varying the child's start time to avoid crowds
- Varying the adult who does the drop off
- Keeping the goodbye from a parent brief
- Having a teaching assistant or friend meet the child at the gate to walk in with them
- Allowing the child to bring a familiar item in with them until settled in class e.g. a small toy or photo
- Assign a key adult in the school for them to visit when anxious
- Giving the child a role to help the teacher in the morning
- Allow the child to go to another room before joining the main classroom

The above may work for the child depending on the root of the anxiety. If the behaviour reduces, the above measures can gradually be reduced and removed. If there are further concerns, professional support should be sought.

