Back to School: Student wellbeing

The SecEd and Headteacher Update Back to School guides offer advice ahead of September and the wider opening of schools. In this guide, we consider how the lockdown will have affected young people’s wellbeing and mental health, what challenges we expect to see as more students return, and how schools must respond...
Spotting the signs: 10 mental health challenges

As schools open further post-lockdown, what kind of wellbeing and mental health issues will students be presenting with and what signs should we be alert for? Dr Pooky Knightsmith considers 10 challenges we are likely to see in September – and what we can do to help.

1. General failure to thrive or feeling stressed
The problem: Everyone is going through a tough time and even the most resilient pupils are likely to find that their wellbeing takes a hit.
What should I do? The best approach here is one of community and family support. Working with pupils, staff and families to create a safe and nurturing environment where children feel safe and seen, and where they can begin to reconnect socially and find a sense of purpose and belonging again will really help. It will help to revisit the well-being basics of diet, sleep and exercise. For many people one or more of these will have slipped significantly during lockdown and supporting a gentle reset now will boost both physical and mental health.

Further support
• The mentally healthy schools website has some great ideas and resources: www.mentallyhealthy.org.uk
• Try my book The Mentally Healthy Schools Workbook (JKP, 2019), which provides a helpful framework and lots of ideas: https://bit.ly/3cCwutz

2. OCD around germs and cleanliness
The problem: We expect to see a rise in healthy and hygiene-related obsessive compulsive disorder cases, and for many of those who have previously lived with the condition to relapse. Messages about health and cleanliness and the need to wash hands and take care of themselves have been a key focus of public health campaigns for many, this has resulted in a desired increase in vigilance and handwashing which has helped to curb the spread of the virus. However, for some this gets out of control and resulting OCD behaviours can become more harmful than helpful.
What should I do? Our norms have shifted but we should still be worried about anyone for whom concerns about cleanliness or contamination feel out of control. Everyone should be encouraged to follow public health guidelines, but if you have pupils who are specifically carrying out activities like handwashing and cleaning that the norm, who seem very pre-occupied by it, or you find that it is preventing them from engaging in activities, then it is time to seek support.

Further support
• OCD UK is a charity run by and for people with OCD offering helpful advice and ideas: www.ocduk.org
• The young person’s workbook and related supporting resources are available from the Institute of Psychiatry – OCD. To download a copy of the ‘Helping your child fight back’ (JKP, 2019) – is excellent: https://bit.ly/3CyAeV.

3. Bereavement
The problem: Sadly, more young people than usual will experience a bereavement in the current context. Bereavement is something that we will all experience at some time in our lives and it is normal to feel a cause for concern. But when someone dies, no matter how much we protest our grief, we all need a little extra support; this may be especially true if there are no other family members to say goodbye due to visiting or funeral restrictions.
What should I do? It is normal for some children to show intense distress briefly when parted from a primary care-giver, but this usually passes quite quickly as they engage with the adults and activities around them. If this distress does not pass and is affecting their ability to ready themselves for learning or play, additional support may be needed. For most this can come from the adults at school, but in more extreme cases the child may have developed a separation anxiety disorder which should be referred to CAMHS, a GP or your mental health support team.

4. Separation anxiety
The problem: We are likely to see higher than usual numbers of children and adults who become very distressed at being apart. This is clear when combinations of children are being poorly socialised during lockdown while spending more time with one or two key care-givers, coupled with the fear and uncertainty associated with the return to school which may feel unsafe to children and their families.
What should I do? It is normal for some children to show intense distress briefly when parted from a primary care-giver, but this usually passes quite quickly as they engage with the adults and activities around them. If this distress does not pass and is affecting their ability to ready themselves for learning or play, additional support may be needed. For most this can come from the adults at school, but in more extreme cases the child may have developed a separation anxiety disorder which should be referred to CAMHS, a GP or your mental health support team.

5. Academically anxious
The problem: We are likely to see higher than usual levels of anxiety linked with academic anxiety as children return to school. There is likely to be great disparity between the much children have accessed and engaged with the curriculum during lockdown and finding themselves with mixed feelings about this, especially for those who have struggled with this in the past as well as new cases, perhaps linked with separation anxiety, academic anxiety or social anxiety.
What should I do? It is time to worry when a child is significantly distressed by attending school and feels unable to engage. This can be accomplished by distracting or challenging behaviour and the child may not be able to articulate the precise reasons for their feelings. It is easily spotted by a change in attendance, punctuality or behaviour.

6. Emotionally based school avoidance/refusal
The problem: We expect to see a rise in emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) in the coming months both from children who have struggled with this in the past as well as new cases, perhaps linked with separation anxiety, academic anxiety or social anxiety.

Further support
• Young Minds offers excellent support around academic resilience: https://bit.ly/3cCyAcV.

7. Social difficulties and friendships
The problem: Friendships issues are part and parcel of school life...

Further support
• The West Sussex EBSA toolkit provides leaflets for children and families as well as guidance for schools: https://bit.ly/3AEoEgs
Domestic violence concerns

There has been a stark increase in reports of domestic violence during lockdown. We must expect to see the impact of this as pupils return to school.

Further support

- The NSPCC has advice, resources and support: www.nspcc.org.uk
- The NSPC has advice, resources and support: www.headteacher-update.com
- The Professional Association for Child Protection in Schools has advice, resources and support: www.pacs.org.uk
- Operation Encompass: www.operationencompass.org

Kate Johal
Senior policy advisor with Action for Children

By the time they start school, at least one child in every class will have lived with domestic abuse since they were born (Sadikova, 2017). By the time they leave, around one in five children will have experienced it (Radford et al, 2013).

And the impact of growing up with domestic abuse is devastating. Action for Children observes the evidence of this every day through the dedicated counselling and family support services we run, as will many teachers and school staff.

Domestic abuse as a child

Children who experience domestic abuse may show symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, having nightmares, flashbacks, headaches and physical pains, and becoming jumpy (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2017). Children affected are at risk of poor educational outcomes. They are less likely to reach their academic potential and more likely to experience anxiety, depression and difficulties like ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Keasal et al, 2016).

The impact of Covid-19

The Children’s Commissioner for England has estimated that more than 800,000 children are living with domestic abuse. We know that the Covid-19 crisis and lockdown could have placed families at even greater risk. Already, we know that there has been a 25 per cent increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline – with refuge reporting a 700 per cent rise in calls in a single day. This may not reflect the true extent of the problem, with concerns that in lockdown many victims may have been unable to reach out for help.

Schools closing to the majority of children has meant that many are simply not being seen by the professionals who would normally raise child protection concerns. Schools, along with the police and health services, are the top three referrers to children’s social care (Action for Children, 2018).

Supporting children

If a child displays a response of domestic abuse to you, it is important to emphasise that it is not your fault. Let them know that they have done the right thing in telling you, and carefully explain both what you will do next and that you cannot keep it confidential. Different circumstances will require different courses of action, but if a child tells you about their experiences of domestic abuse, or if you have reason to believe they are at risk, follow your school’s safeguarding procedures.

What schools can do

One proactive approach schools can take is linking in with Operation Encompass. The scheme’s aim is to ensure that whenever police attend a domestic abuse incident and a child is present, the child’s school is notified. This means teachers will be aware of what has happened, and how it might affect the child’s wellbeing and learning, and children can then receive suitable support. The government has funded a wider rollout across England, it’s hoped this might overcome children’s reluctance to talk about things, particularly if they know that their school will be aware of what has happened.

Specialist support

Support services can really help. Approved targeted safeguarding intervention has a positive effect on children’s outcomes. While not all children may need this type of support, we must look beyond children’s behaviour to try and understand what else may be going on in their lives.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Anyone worried about a child can call the NSPCC on 0808 400 500: www.nspcc.org.uk
- Action for Children: Patchy, piecemeal and precarious: Domestic abuse need intervention, for those who do, access to meaningful support and advice is often too difficult for them to use. It is outside their reach and even when they are able to access these services they simply are not there. There is significant variation in the level of provision for young people affected by domestic abuse. Our research shows that children face barriers to accessing support in at least two-thirds of local authorities; in 10 per cent there are no support services available at all (Action for Children, 2019).

Kate Johal is senior policy advisor with Action for Children.

BACK TO SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH

and supporting children to navigate their social world is part of the job for any teacher. However, things may be unusually fraught as children return to school and as they learn to engage and interact with their peers in Covid-safe ways.

When should I worry? As well as a rise in general day-to-day friendship issues, I am expecting to see a spike in cases of social anxiety. When a child’s anxiety in social situations is stopping them from engaging in regular activities, then it is time to provide additional support. This might present as lack of engagement in class or seeming withdrawn at breaks and lunch. The child might also seem angry, irritable, anxious or emotional as others to interact; becoming jumpy (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2017). Adults do not follow their gut or they assume that someone else is managing the situation. It is important to involve the family and not to minimise the child’s concerns that in lockdown many children may be seeing domestic abuse from their own home.

Further support

- The Action for Children has good advice and ideas: www.actionforchildren.org.uk
- The National Centre for Learning Disabilities and Asperger Syndrome has good advice: www.nclads.org.uk
- The NSPCC has advice, resources and support: www.nspcc.org.uk
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BACK TO SCHOOL SAFEGUARDING
The psychological impact

What will the psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic be for our older students and what kind of issues can we see as schools re-open for primary ages?

Of course, the existential issues that may have seen some children isolated from school or watching tragic scenes on the news will have left some children in a world of confusion and uncertainty. It is important for schools to ensure that children are supported in this area to understand and address their feelings.

Opportunities to talk

How can we cope with change and uncertainty as we emerge into the 'new normal' and how best can we support our older pupils, including the most vulnerable children?

Dr Sophie Thornton is a chartered psychologist and former lecturer in psychology and child development. She has written previous articles, go to http://bit.ly/2e1B9Wk

Further information

Fanz & Stein: The mental health of refugee children, Archives Disease in Childhood 87, 2002.


Angela Greenwood is an educational psychologist and author of Understanding, Nurturing and Working with Vulnerable Children: www.angelagreenwood.net

Handling difficult feelings

Regressing to an earlier anxious behaviour may be a way of managing anxiety. I noticed my six-year-old grandson regress to his three-year-old "dinosaur roar" and he would not look at me unless I unexpectedly saw him in the street. Children may feel a bit sad and abandoned, but also with an understanding of how difficult they are feeling, this may be helpful for him, a little six-year-old who likes doing rather than feeling and who is often living with powerful dinosaurs roars perhaps.

The feelings children evoke in us can be helpful points to understanding their inner worlds. Teachers can watch out for similar “transferences” which may be helpful to them by children they are close to – and use them as clues for understanding.

In school, thoughtful one-to-one conversations will be helpful for everyone, including those who cannot join in, as they hear others expressing things they cannot hear or speak about. Talking (and playing) things through, especially when they are "hot" and as often as needed, is how we process things. This could be crucial in ensuring and improving the good mental health of our children.

T he disruptions of lockdown created immediate practical challenges for many adolescents, but for more profound challenges will be existential.

More or less overnight, the bedrock of life was profoundly crumbled. And they have not the existential issues.

Anger with school staff. More easily triggered outbursts. Anxiety about any school. Will have been actively abused – have had quality family time. Some will have been more isolated and fostered different views of how safe life will be. Different families will have provided teenagers, reflecting the specific life experience or the resources to deploy the lifeboats. Theirs is the age at which false reassurance that the band can come back on. Theirs is the age at which making them hyper-vigilant to fears.

Dealing with that is the real, and often, the ingenuity of the young is a damaging exercise in denial. Instead may have been change, but there is a useful staff discussion is wondering how can we cope with change and uncertainty as we emerge into the 'new normal' and how best can we support our older pupils, including the most vulnerable children?

The scenario is this, their anxiety and reactivity. These uncertain times, doubling difficulties will be.

As children return to school in various ways, we can all appreciate and expect children’s fears and reactivity. Children’s responses will vary from basic safety to missed school and play communications with empathy and thoughtfulness. In school, thoughtful one-to-one conversations may arise from this. behaviour may be a way of managing anxiety. I noticed my six-year-old grandson regress to his three-year-old "dinosaur roar" and he would not look at me unless I unexpectedly saw him in the street. Children may feel a bit sad and abandoned, but also with an understanding of how difficult they are feeling, this may be helpful for him, a little six-year-old who likes doing rather than feeling and who is often living with powerful dinosaurs roars perhaps.

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How can we cope with change and uncertainty as we emerge into the 'new normal' and how best can we support our younger pupils, including the most vulnerable children?

Their panic and reactive states may be too easily triggered at the uncertain times, doubting their anxiety and reactivity. Even if we are wrong, and even if they do not want to talk about it at that moment, making these links will be helpful.

In school, thoughtful staff can play a similar role, offering understanding and empathic support. A secure base and a trusted relationship within which to lean may need to be rebuilt. Understanding learning regulations and what is safe at this level is crucial. Some pupils’ capacities for concentrating, thinking and making links with past knowledge may be inhibited, as they may feel scared. Stopping to concentrate may risk unbearable memories spilling over.

Opportunities to intervene

As children return to school they will offer many opportunities for empathy and thoughtfulness, and manageable conversations. Even not knowing and uncertainty can be helpful to talk about. Providing reasonable opportunities will be necessary. Planning and thinking together about what is going on, whole school and for individual vulnerable pupils is key. Trauma and risk-based approach will be helpful and necessary.

Understanding and thoughtful responsiveness to the most traumatised children and their defensive outbursts will bring the most challenge and stress. Training may be needed, especially for those working with children and young people.

For all our recovering children, it will be important not to avoid acknowledging their resulting feelings and regressed behaviours when a child indicates something is “on their mind”. Taking opportunities to make tentative links between the inevitable acting out behaviours of anxious recovering children, the strange difficult time we have been going through, and the anxieties of the return will be important.

In school, thoughtful one-to-one and group conversations will bring many opportunities for growth. Regular round circle conversations will be helpful for everyone, including those who cannot join in, as they hear others expressing things they cannot hear or speak about. Talking (and playing) things through, especially when they are “hot” and as often as needed, is how we process things. This could be crucial in ensuring and improving the good mental health of our children.

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Finding or making new friends is an educational psychologist and author of Understanding, Nurturing and Working with Vulnerable Children: www.angelagreenwood.net

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What will school ‘feel like’ for pupils and what needs to happen now so that we can support a safe return? The SWAN framework could help your school’s planning

Dawn Jotham

...is a pastoral care specialist at EduCare. Read her previous articles at https://bit.ly/2vOy6d6

In order to support the wider re-opening of schools, I developed the SWAN framework - not to tell you what to do, but rather to provide a scaffold and springboard for your thinking, discussions and preparations as we enter the next phase of the pandemic.

This framework aims to consider what school needs to feel like for children and adults as we return and considers what needs to happen now to enable us to build strong adults of the future as well as enabling us to navigate the coming months safely and sensitively.

The choice of the word swan was very deliberate, as in my training I often tell adults the need to be the swan - you need to appear cool, calm and collected, even right now a whole lot of frantic paddling goes on. The framework invites you to consider four elements of approach - Safety, Welcome, All together, Nurturing, Self

Safe

We think first of safety. Always. Right now this refers heavily to the re-opening of schools, I hope, in order to support the wider lockdown. What can we do to help and support families to ensure that we continue to feel safe as part of the process of wider school re-opening. Working closely with families to ensure that the big questions get answered, uncertainties addressed and that every child feels valued and supported.

Rereading and rereading the wider guidance and focusing on the need to build up and continue with our learning. Learning matters and there may be much ground to make up, but just as it can take a few minutes to settle a class and create readiness for learning after a lunch break, it might take a bit more time to get going. As well as physical safety, about which there has been much, much guidance, we also need to create emotional, social and cognitive safety. Children will arrive at school carrying a lot of different feelings with them and we need to create an environment where they are enabled to feel and explore those different feelings without fear of judgement or going unheard.

Social safety matters too and we need to consider what our new norms for communication and interaction should look like and how we convey these to our children in order to help them understand how they need to behave in this strange new world. Uncertainty breeds fear and anxiety, so thinking about simple things like how we will greet one another can help children to feel more secure and safe.

Finally, cognitive safety matters. How do we support learners to feel comfortable about where they are? What is likely to be great uncertainty and a lot of variation in how much learning pupils have done during lockdown. What can we do to boost and build learner confidence as we come back together?

Welcome

Now we consider how to ensure that every learner, family member and staff member feels welcome at school. How can we create a warm and welcoming environment that tells our whole community ‘We’re delighted that you’re here, we’re so excited to have you back!’

Schools will need to consider the purpose of belonging, both crucial for our wellbeing and likely concerning for our population at large, so ensuring that our community feels warmly welcomed is a key priority for distance rules, really matters.

All together

In order to make this work, we need to be in it all together, in particular we will need to work closely with families. Families will have a lot of questions, worries and ideas and it is important that they feel heard as part of the process of wider school re-opening.

We will need also to consider how we can support pupils to jump through the next testing hoops and asking instead, are we enabling children to rebuild their foundations, which have been thoroughly shaken, how can we create a warm and welcoming environment that is safe for learners and for families and staff too.

We should also work closely with any other adults or services involved in the welfare of our pupils to ensure a successful return for those with a variety of needs. How can we work together, pay extra attention, just as we would prepare extra care and specialist support around with the child, is a crucial starting point here.

Nurture

My plea to all educators is to consider how we can adapt our current curricular and non-curricular provision first to provide nurture, laughter, safety and connection for our pupils. We will continue to experience a lot of challenges and it is unreasonable to expect our pupils and staff simply to pick our heads up.

What does school need to ‘feel like’ for pupils and what needs to happen now so that we can support a safe return? The SWAN framework could help your school’s planning
SEN students and masking

Away from the academic and social pressures of school life, many SEN children have flourished during home education. But what happens when they return to school?

Julia Rowlands & Rachel Ingham...

...are specialist teachers providing SEND training for the British Dyslexia Association and National Education Union: www.us-i.co.uk

E very child is unique and one size does not fit all — both at home and at school which we are all too familiar in the world of SEND and vast are very relevant to children in lockdown.

Some parents report children who are all too happy to have an extended holiday, motivated after an initial period of resistance to keep school work and loving having permission to use more technology to “zoom” their friends. Also excited to have the opportunity to do more outdoor activities in their daily exercise slot and explore nature.

Others report confused children, unsettled and craving the routine of the school day, bored and frustrated that they cannot get out to play and see their friends, spending too much time gaming, and relaxed (sometimes aggressively so) to do any school work.

The group of children who have come to our attention are those with a specific learning difficulty whose daily mealtimes at home during the school term have decreased and even, in some cases, stopped. These are the children who mask.

We all mask to try and protect ourselves as we do not feel comfortable in a situation or an environment. In her book The Billionaire’s Budgie (2018), Jane Monica-Jones states: “We put our masks on and believe we will be more acceptable to the world than the truth of who we are. In doing so we sacrifice the gift of self-acceptance.”

These children manage to develop coping strategies to get through the school day. They hold it together, they don’t act up and often withdraw into themselves to escape notice, only to be a place of safety in school. They return home exhausted and very fragile from keeping up a pretence.

At home, they are with the people closest to them and one incident, even a wrongly chosen word, unleashes a monumental meltdown – described in The Recovering Jumper: The Inner voice of a 12-year-old boy with autism (2011) by Naoki Higashida as a “tsunami”.

This can last a significant amount of time and adversely affect the whole family, leaving them tired, disillusioned, and worse, in conflict.

What are the elements of the school day that makes it so hard for these children? Here we need to look at both the academic and the social.

Even before arriving at school, they will have faced challenges including the discomfort some find with the feel of school uniform, personal organisation in order to prepare for the day, the journey to school, being greeted by peers or, worse still, coping with a school bus, on which they may be isolated.

Academically, these children need organisation and understanding of new words and sentences coming from the classroom to understand their idiosyncratic take on life. As teachers, we need to be aware of this process and make them feel safe so that they can “unmask”. Parents need our support and understanding, especially at this time when getting a diagnosis of needs has become such a prolonged process.

Supporting transition

- Be proactive – send out a welcoming letter and an outline of any changes, especially if they are going into a new class or starting school at school. A photo and a short message from their new teacher in their new classroom reduces anxiety.
- Acknowledge their anxieties and how hard it will be for them to let go of their friends and coping with subtle bullying which often goes unnoticed.
- Many of these children and their parents will dread a return to school and the accompanying worries. Not because they do not like their teachers or respect the learning, but because they will not have put on their psychological masks and once again pretend all is right with the world.

Many of these children and their parents will dread a return to school and the accompanying worries.

In lockdown, many will not have had issues with self-acceptance, their family make allowances for their mistakes and have learnt to understand their idiosyncratic take on life. As teachers, we need to be aware of this process and make them feel safe so that they can “unmask”. Parents need our support and understanding.

As we begin to think about all pupils returning in September, one school’s approach is to prioritise relationships – both with pupils and their parents.

Julie Norman is executive headteacher at Crowcombe Primary School (key stage 2) and Stogumber Primary School (Reception, key stage 1) in Somerset

You know your children. Behaviour will tell you if they are anxious or suffering. Poor behaviour, angry outbursts, disengaged and quiet pupils will alert you that something is wrong.

When children do not have the opportunity to build their trust with you how they feel it is up to us to scaffold by talking and giving them the language, as well as time to think and time to communicate.

Lots of one-to-one chats, circle time, group work and free time to think, activities that allow them to consider their thoughts and feelings, the language offered to allow them to speak; time to listen and reflect on what others say.

Poor behaviour, angry outbursts, disengaged and quiet pupils will alert you that something is wrong.

We all like to think we have fantastic relationships with our parents (bar perhaps the odd one or two). However, the true test is whether they will come to us for support, an ear, advice and help.

Our strength here will be encouraging parents to accept that this situation is not normal, that they are not superheros, that this is a stressful and unsettling time, and that it is okay not to be okay. Until they hear that from us, again and again, they may not trust us enough to open up.

At the same time, we must prioritise the support we offer for children and staff as we transition back to the classroom.

We must build back those relationships, earn back the trust, hear the children and then address the need.

So, what kinds of things might you be facing? Bereavement, separation anxiety, witnessed domestic violence, redundant or furloughed parents, NHS workers, ill family members, not enough food to eat or some children finding school growing younger careers.

Your relationships with the children will guide you to listen to their anxieties and create a space that is safe, secure, filled with routine and care.

Break all protocol! Stop trying to do the “normal” and create the new normal. Why not phone home at lunch times to allow the child to talk to the parent, why not let them bring a toy to school (cleaned), why not distract with fun activities and help them to be calm with mindfulness time?

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It’s a form of communication

We expect to see challenging behaviours from students as they return to school. The River Tees Multi-Academy Trust is considering a number of approaches

For Sarah Birch, regional standards leader at River Tees Academy Trust, it is a form of communication.

As such, any attempt to understand and promote certain behaviour trends needs to understand the importance of communication – particularly as we consider recalibrating behaviours in relation to the post-lockdown learning environment.

River Tees is a MAT in the North East consisting of primary, special and secondary schools. The trust has four alternative provision academies and an extensive Home and Hospital Teaching Service in Middlesbrough.

During a recent virtual workshop at Celebratedx – the annual Schools North East celebration of education – Sarah said: “Take a moment to consider how the lockdown has affected your own emotions, your wellbeing, your eating patterns, your social habits and your lifestyle choices. It was probably a rollercoaster of emotions. Some of these will have been positive and enjoyable, others not so. This will be the same for every student who attends your school.”

Fight or flight
During Sarah’s workshop, we were reminded of how many of us now feel that our safety has been compromised if someone enters our physical space. And we communicate this perceived threat through our behaviour.

She said: “Physiologically, when we perceive threat, our bodies respond by going into fight, flight or freeze mode. This is the same for the learners we teach.” Sarah advises us to question the motives behind the behaviours within our classrooms.

Extend this to parents and carers too.

Pushing your buttons
Consider which behaviours in the classroom trigger your emotional responses – giving you that “how dare you” moment. In his book, When The Adults Change Everything (2017), Paul Dix discusses the significance of emotional triggers and how pupils will press these.

It is important for teachers to understand their own emotional triggers – those motivators and areas of sensitivity which lead us to direct an emotional reaction rather than an informed response.

How will you respond?
Post-lockdown, staff at River Tees have explored how to plan responses to situations that are likely to raise anxiety levels in the classroom and provoke emotionally driven responses.

Sarah and her team presented the example of a year 6 child who is likely to be feeling anxious, stressed and uncares for as they get to gates. They may be running late, not paying attention to safety instructions, or distracted in lessons. How might we frame our responses if pupils miss their staggered start time or forget about handwashing?

● “Good morning. It’s nice to see you back. Things are a bit different and we all need to get here for our start time. Can you try and help mum get you here a few minutes earlier tomorrow?”

● “Before going to class you need to wash your hands so we don’t spread germs to our friends.”

One area where it may be helpful to prepare our responses and work through these with colleagues will be how to react if and when students use the virus as part of misbehaviour.

For example, pupils who do not fully understand the severity of the virus may deliberately provoke a response from adults or peers by ignoring hygiene rules or invading the space of others. We know, on occasions, that pupils will push emotional triggers by way of distracting adults or teachers.

Consider how you might plan to respond to these situations. Paul Dix, behaviour guru at Pivotol Education, provides a range of resources and tips for de-escalating scenarios whereby pupils push our emotional buttons. Consider the tone of voice, your body language and plan in advance for these moments.

Rebuilding relationships
It is vital we meet the needs of the individual learners before we start with teaching. Top of the list, is rebuilding relationships. Students will not have been in groups or with their peers for months and therefore these relationships will need to be re-established. Making time for talk and plenty of opportunities for “re-socialisation” will be key.

Social bubbles
Many schools will be using the social bubble approach, grouping learners and refusing to allow mixing between groups. Prior to learners coming back, start with some remote activities and interactive learning in your “social bubble”. This will build relationships between the students in the group.

Be creative – remote PE sessions, a simple science experiment, some general quizzes, or some wellbeing or PSHE-style activities. For younger learners, you could start a class story with you reading aloud to them so that they want to return to school to hear what happens next.

When back in school, one of the first activities you might do is create and set-out expectations with an updated set of class rules. Create these together and discuss the language (keep it positive) and the “why” behind the rules.

If students are not complying then it is important to give a reminder with the consequence – if you continue, then “x” will happen. I find it is powerful when you are establishing the rules to discuss what you, as a class, feel would be a fair consequence and then you can remind the students that they chose the consequences.

Quick behaviour tips
Choose your moment: For some minor behaviours, it may not be the time to address them in front of the class. In these cases, it is important that the student and the others in the room understand that it has been noted. A simple instruction of “I am choosing to ignore that behaviour at this moment” sends out this message to all learners.

Praise positive behaviour: If most of the class is compliant, rather than focusing on the one learner not doing the right thing, reward the others with simple praise of their behaviour.

Clear directions: Keep the directions simple. A lot will have changed and the rules of school conduct and behaviour will look very different. The students need time to process the directions you are giving. Simple choices are also key. Ensure the two choices are both possible and things you want to happen: “Jenny, choose to use hand sanitiser or choose to wash your hands at the sink.”

Describe the behaviour: “You have not washed your hands.” “You are not on your marker.” Simply describing the behaviour often removes the confrontation which can occur when telling a child to stop but still communicates the message.

Body language: Body language is a big part of communication so stand tall, shoulders back and be assertive (not aggressive). If the students sense through your body language that you are anxious and scared, it will affect their behaviour. Non-verbal communication is vital too. The majority of a message is perceived through actions rather than words. This is why we model the expectation as well as stating it.

The SecEd & Headteacher Update Back to School Guides are a series of open access, pdf downloads offering post-lockdown advice to schools. This is the first of four guides. Other themes include staff wellbeing, teaching & learning, and technology. Visit https://bit.ly/SecEd-Back2School

Sean Harris
...is area director for Ambition Institute and a vice-chair of governors in Northumberland. Read his previous articles at http://bit.ly/2KlDQqc Follow him @SeanHarris_NE

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