

# Coping with anxiety during unsettling times: *Advice from a Clinical Psychologist*



Advice from Dr Helen Care

## Managing children's anxiety about returning to school





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We spoke to Clinical Psychologist Dr Helen Care to find out some of her top tips and tricks for parents on helping prepare children for a return to school.

We are currently going through unprecedented times of change, and we are all trying to work out how to adjust to the 'new normal', and to find ways of managing the gradual transition away from total countrywide lockdown.

Many people find that their feelings of anxiety increase when they experience uncertainty. As advice and local policies relating to the coronavirus pandemic and easing of lockdown continue to evolve, the lack of certainty makes things even trickier. This is often true for children facing a return to school after an extended time away.

Some aspects of returning to school will be welcomed and will feel wonderful. However, some young people and parents are dreading the return. Life in lockdown became the 'normal', however hard it may have felt, and it will take time and support to adjust as we move forwards.



Some other great sources of information and guidance on **worry, anxiety** and **youth mental health** are:

- [British Psychological Society](#)
- [NSPCC](#)
- [Anna Freud Centre](#)



If you feel that you or someone you know (be they a parent, child, teacher or young person) are at risk of causing harm to themselves or others, then it is important to seek immediate professional help.

**Seek an emergency GP appointment or call 999 if you or someone you know is at immediate risk.**



The activities, exercises and suggestions in this document are those of Dr Helen Care, not of Pearson Education or Pearson Clinical.



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Here are some things you can try putting in place to understand and manage your child's stress and anxiety levels as they return to school (remember, as with all things parenting, you can't get it right all of the time and you don't have to be perfect):

## Communication

One way you can help your child with the return to school, no matter what age they are, is to be available to **talk** about and **listen** to their concerns. Open up conversations and make time, away from devices, to talk. However, don't force the issue. If children and young people know they are allowed to talk about something, they will usually find a way when they are ready.



Try some of the following:

- Acknowledge how your child might be feeling: *I wonder if you feel worried. It is OK to feel excited and worried at the same time.*
- Try an open question: *How are you feeling about going back to school? Is there anything you want to talk about?*
- Talk about what they are experiencing: *What is school like now? What is different from last year? What is the same? How do you feel about that?*
- Listen to your child's fears and worries and take them seriously, even if they do not seem very important to you.
- Talk about possible solutions. Remind your child how well they have coped with difficulties before. Talk about who can help them.
- Remind your child of the things they might be looking forward to about school, even if it is only the snacks at break time!
- Don't underestimate their resilience and ability to cope. Even if they find things hard, they may well find ways through it.

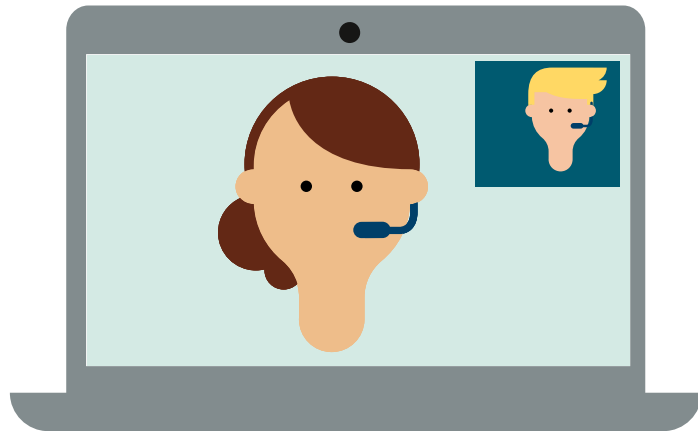


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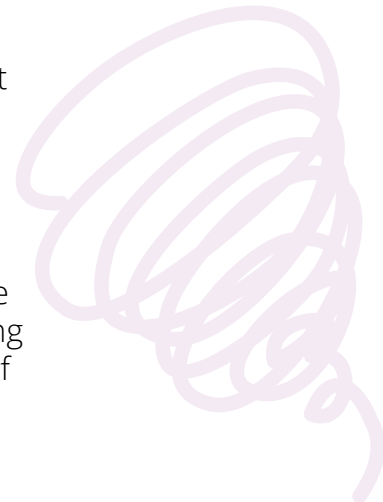
# Online learning and remote contact

In line with government policy, schools are doing their best to return to some form of face-to-face contact, but there are many reasons why some contact may continue to be online. If schools are unable to invite all students back yet, if further local lockdowns occur, or if children have to be absent during brief periods of quarantine, online learning may still be required. Some children have adjusted well to this, whilst others have found it difficult.



Top tips for helping children engage with online learning and remote contact:

- Make sure your child understands how their school's chosen approach to online learning works. Be clear about who can and can't see or hear them. Explain there are buttons that the teacher can use so no-one else can see them, or so that they can hear the teacher but that the teacher can't hear them.
- Explain how to ask and answer a question, e.g. is the teacher turning on microphones to ask questions; can they put a thumbs up symbol on the screen to show they have understood; how do they let the teacher know if they don't understand. If you as a parent aren't sure, try to clarify this prior to the session so you can make things clear for your child.
- Children engage differently – this depends quite a lot on personality. Some children don't mind being seen on screen, whereas others may well shy away from the idea of anyone seeing them at all. Try not to force being seen on the screen and let teachers know what kind of engagement is helping and what isn't.





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## Praise

The general principle of praise in any circumstance is to notice the behaviour you want to see and draw attention to it. It is far more meaningful for a child or young person to hear **very specific and focussed praise**, such as:

*I really appreciated the way you did exactly what I asked you without me having to ask again, or I love the way you thought about what colours to use on that sunset picture*, than a simple *well done*.

Praise effort and joining in, as well as achievement, especially if your child is feeling low or worried about managing school. Focus on the effort they are making to have a go,

for example, you could say:

*Your teacher will be really pleased to see that email from you or You tried so hard to get started with that maths.*





## Differences in how children engage / re-engage

Just as we adults have adjusted to lockdown and school closures in a variety of ways, so have young people. Returning to school and activities will be similarly variable. There may well not be one single 'right' or 'best' way to do it. Think about how your child usually copes with returning to school after the summer holidays. Some will be excited, some will be anxious, most will be a mixture of both. This is going to be no different, except possibly a more extreme version of it.

Some young people will definitely be relieved and delighted. But if your child was finding school difficult before, the return may not be so welcome. If you have become aware during home-schooling of just how much your child dislikes or struggles with school, or if you think that they have found home-schooling significantly easier than they usually find school, do let teachers know this. Now may be a good opportunity to flag up your concerns and try to engage support. Seek professional advice if you are worried.





## Catching up

The biggest worry for many students and their parents is that they have fallen behind and will never catch up. There has been a lot of criticism in the press and on social media about how school closures, lockdown schooling and school re-openings have been handled, and how children have missed out on their education.

The media is well known for sensationalising issues, and many of the comments in the press have been incredibly unsettling for families. It is important that the message we give to children is one of encouragement and support. The focus for children and parents now is to do as well as they can, and not feel pressured to catch-up months of missed education in a short space of time. Everyone is in the same situation.





# Resilience

Resilience is, in essence, the ability to cope when things go wrong: to bounce back and keep trying. It is about coping with adversity and with life events that place the person at risk of difficulties. (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

An important way parents can help with nurturing resilience is to make it OK to feel anxious, nervous about returning to school, and to be concerned about the health and wellbeing of themselves and family members, but not to give up and to keep trying.

There are two pieces of evidence that we can remind our children and young people of at this time:

- **Missing school isn't uncommon.** Under the circumstances, absences from school are expected and in some instances, are in the best interests of those students, teachers, and family associated. However, extended absences from school are common. It is not that unusual for someone to miss 6 months of schooling due to illness, injury or relocating country. These students can and do manage to come back and succeed. It is difficult, and they have to work hard, but it happens. The difference here is that this is true for everyone. It means that instead of it being one person on their own trying to catch up, it is everyone working together. It is possible!



- **Teachers are good at their jobs.** As parents, if you have struggled to help your children with their schoolwork, you may very well be aware that things are taught differently now! Generally speaking, teaching is better than it used to be and teachers are well-trained.



**Remind** young people, especially older ones, that the country hasn't written them off. They are not a lost generation. This is a stumbling block and it may take time, but they can come back from it.










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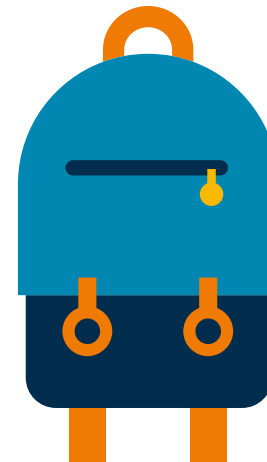
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### Take it in small steps

A fundamental principle of psychological management is to take small steps. When other emotional things overwhelm the brain, the brain finds it much more difficult to learn things at school. So, try not to overwhelm your child. Start somewhere, however small, and build up. Notice and pay attention to any win, no matter how small, and build from there. You wouldn't expect someone to ride a bike up a mountain the first time they got on it, and this is the same. If the mountain is too daunting, they won't want to try. Returning to school for some young people will be a joy and a blessing. But for some, it will feel like a pretty big mountain. We need to break it down into smaller steps and help young people find ways to start.

Start by making a list of possible tasks, and break them down into small steps, e.g. your child will need to prepare their school bag. The steps to achieving this might be:

-  find my school bag;
-  empty it of anything in there now;
-  write a list of what I might need every day;
-  get an empty box and put all my school things in it;
-  fill my bag ready for school.





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## Transition

There will be many children who are transitioning from one setting to another, e.g. primary to secondary, or infant school site to junior school site. All children are going through some form of transition, even if only from Year 8 to Year 9. Usually schools and families mark these transitions with rituals and preparations. Understandably, many of these have been impossible, or have been altered in the current circumstances. There are a number of ways to help children achieve this, even in the current climate:

- **Acknowledge and mark endings** – e.g. create a year book or memory book; online collections of photos (with careful consideration of permission to share photos etc); send letters or postcards to friends and staff, or to the whole school, to acknowledge what your child will remember and how it feels to be moving on.
- **Prepare for changes** – visit new school locations, practice the 'school run' in whatever form you will normally make it and wherever possible allow your child to become familiar with the physical buildings, even if they can't go inside
- **Look online** – many schools have produced photos, videos or virtual tours to allow young people to get a sense of what the school and life there might look like
- **Make contact** – find anyone you already know at the school, or if it is a new area, consider reaching out to local sources of information to find someone your child could ask questions to about what their new school is like.
- **Practice routines** – e.g. putting on new uniform, washing hands, wearing face masks or any other thing that may be required as part of the school routine, now or in general.





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## Problem solve

Try to maintain an attitude of looking for ways to solve or get round problems, rather than seeing problems as something to be feared.

Our young people are resilient and capable. If we can help them look for their strengths and the skills they can use to get around any worries, we will be doing them a favour.

Sometimes as parents we can be far more worried about our children's ability to cope than they are themselves. It may be important to trust them to handle this and remember to look for the fun. If you are concerned that they won't manage it, or are worried that you will find it hard to let them because your own anxiety is too high, then seek support. All parents out there are going through the same process, but only you know your child and your family situation, so it is important to take an individual approach and seek support if you need it.

