

Acorn Psychology Services

Transition Back to School - Support for Parents and Guardians

Over recent weeks we have looked at the ways in which we can begin to support our children, staff, and school communities in the transition to a 'new normal' after the coronavirus lockdown. This week our focus is on supporting parents to help their child(ren) prepare for the transition back to school. As in previous weeks we will aim to share some general advice that may or may not be appropriate given a child's educational setting/circumstances, their readiness to return to school and their temperament/sensitivities. Here at Acorn Psychology we passionately believe that parents are the experts on their children, so we implore parents to trust their instincts and provide their child(ren) with as little or as much support as what they feel is necessary. As always, we are here to navigate these uncertain times with you, and we hope you find these resources helpful.

Advice and resources for parents:

LET'S TALK

If your child is able to, get them talking about their thoughts and feelings around returning to school.

Some of our team here at Acorn Psychology have undertaken further training in talking therapies, here are some strategies that have been derived from our learning that may serve to help facilitate those conversations.



- ✓ **A Distraction Free Zone:** More often than not we engage in conversations whilst 'busying' with other activities. Try to make time to talk in a space that is free from distractions. You may wish to schedule this time each day/week, whatever works for you and your family.
- ✓ **Child-Centred Approach:** We often find in school settings that children take some time to start sharing their thoughts and feelings, even with an adult who they know and trust. Given the hierarchical nature of adult-child relationships in school, children often need time and practice before they will talk more than they will listen, or before they will attempt to find solutions to their problems instead of being told what to do by the adult. Parent-child relationships are of course quite different, but still most children look to their parents to lead a conversation or speak for them. It can be powerful opening up a space for your child to talk and not filling the gaps with our own thoughts, feelings, and conclusions.
- ✓ **Active Listening:** Have you ever had an experience where you felt someone listened, but they didn't really **hear**? This skill is used in counselling and takes a long time to master, but it is useful to be aware

of. Features of this skill include looking at the person talking, not interrupting, and really trying to process and take on board what is being said, as opposed to forming a response in your head as they are speaking.

- ✓ **Effective Questioning:** Try to ask questions that encourage your child to really explore their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas. We often find children require significantly more prompts than adults due to their developing self-awareness, examples include questions such as 'how does that make you feel?', 'what do you think about X?'.
- ✓ **No Judgement:** Try to reserve judgement when your child is opening up about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. We as adults often minimise children's experiences because they appear disproportionate to us, for example when a child is inconsolable because their balloon has flown away. During this time, try to fight the temptation to do this, or to label any feelings or behaviours, for example suggesting that a child is being silly.
- ✓ **Mind Mindedness:** This is an approach that recognises that children are independent beings with their own unique thoughts and feelings. The idea is that parents 'tune in' to their children's emotions, desires, and interests. To use mind-mindedness with your children in this situation you will be 'tuning in' to what they are thinking and feeling to open up conversation. Examples of phrases may include 'I wonder if you are quiet because you are feeling nervous about going to school today?' or 'I wonder if you are jumping around because you are excited to see your friends at school' followed by a strategy they could use or a chance to talk e.g. 'do you want to tell me why you feel nervous?' or 'it's great that you are so excited but we need to get ready now' etc.
- ✓ **Be Kind to Yourself:** Listening to your child's anxieties is emotionally draining. It takes years of personal therapy, training and supervision before therapists are considered emotionally robust enough to work with strangers, yet parents and guardians are expected to carry the weight of their own anxieties alongside that of their children. Remember you cannot pour from an empty cup, so sometimes having these conversations might not be appropriate. This has been a difficult time for everyone. So, for anyone who needs to hear it, you are doing a wonderful job.

CIRCLE OF CONTROL



The relationship between control and anxiety is well documented in research with the idea being that the more control we have over a situation, the less anxiety we will experience in relation to it.

Unfortunately, there are some things we cannot control, and a global pandemic undoubtedly falls firmly in that category. Often for children, this can be a difficult concept to grasp.

This circle may prove useful in providing a visual representation to children regarding what they can control and what they cannot. Completing this with an adult may also open up opportunities for discussions about how it makes us feel when things happen that we cannot control.

In relation to children's impending transition this may be a useful resource to use in conjunction with information from your child's educational setting regarding new rules and expectations; more specifically, drawing your child's attention to all the things they can control during this uncertain time (for example, I can control washing my hands and who I play with in my bubble even though I cannot control who is in my bubble and which classroom I learn in).

TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS

In human childhood development, a transitional object (sometimes known as a comfort object) is something, usually a physical object, which takes the place of the primary care given-child bond. In early childhood this object is often used as a substitute for a parent who is absent (usually temporarily) to help them deal with separation. Common examples include dolls, teddy bears or blankets. An example of a situation where a comfort object might be used is a young child taking their favourite toy, or a dummy to their first day at nursery or a child minders. Transitional objects can make us feel safe and provide us with a sense of familiarity during uncertain times.

For many families, lockdown has meant children have spent more time than ever with parents or guardians. Many have established new routines which has provided them with a safety net to escape the uncertainty. As a consequence, a number of children may experience separation anxiety upon their return to school even if it has never been a problem before.

If you think your child might struggle with separation anxiety you may wish to use a transitional object. You might use a physical object during the holidays

such as a special piece of jewellery, a painted stone, a toy etc. Taking physical objects into school may not be possible however, here are some strategies as alternative when your child returns to school due to COVID-19 restrictions.



- **Draw an identical doodle on both your wrist and your child's wrist.**
- **Sew a little shape on the inside of your child's uniform and do the same on a piece of your clothing.**

The idea here is that when your child looks at the object, doodle, or embroidery they will feel that little bit safer if they are feeling uncertain as they navigate their school setting post COVID-19. Some children like the idea that when they press the doodle or shape their parent will feel it and know they are thinking about them.

MINDFULNESS FOR CHILDREN

'Mindfulness is useful for children and adults alike, with some children as young as nursery age learning about it in school. If you watch a child absorbed in play, you will see they are mini mindfulness masters! Mindfulness is **paying attention, noticing what is happening outside of you, as well as your thoughts and feelings, and letting it all be as it is.** It's a skill that helps us cope with big emotions and challenging experiences and, just like a muscle, it's something we can all build with practice.'

Here are our favourite mindfulness exercises:

(The following strategies have been taken from <https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/howto/guide/10-mindfulness-exercises-kids>)

1. Visualise your safe place – to feel grounded

Where are your favourite calm and safe places in nature? You can visit them anytime in your mind. You could write or draw a journey to your favourite place, describing with all your senses how it feels to be there.

2. Sound meditation – to fuel curiosity

Snuggle down somewhere safe, close your eyes, and listen to all the sounds around you. What can you hear? The clink of coffee cups, snippets of conversation, sounds from nature. Get curious and feel the buzz of life around you.

3. Warrior pose – for confidence and concentration

Stand up tall with your feet wide apart. Turn your right toes out and press your left heel away. Bend your right knee deeply, stretch your arms out at shoulder height and make like a surfer. Hold this pose for a few relaxed breaths, feeling the strength of your body, then shake out your legs and try it out on the other side. This is a great distractor from worried thoughts.

4. Balloon belly breathing – to soothe

Lie down somewhere comfy and imagine there is a balloon in your tummy. As you breathe in, imagine the balloon slowly inflating, as you breathe out, the balloon deflates. Children can rest their favourite toy on their tummy and let them join in!

5. Savour your food – to encourage gratitude

The next time you have your favourite treat, see if you can make it into a ritual of happiness and thanks. Don't let a second of pleasure pass you by unnoticed – the scent, how it feels in your hand, against your lips, the flavour on your tongue, the texture as you chew and the sensation as you finally swallow it. Even more delicious when you savour it!

6. Embrace music – to switch up your mood

Harness the mood boosting power of music by making your own playlists – one that helps you feel peaceful, one to help you focus and another to give you a feel-good hit. A good old sing always lifts the spirits, too.

7. Make your mind garden beautiful – to grow happy thoughts

There is a garden in your mind, made by all your thoughts. Thoughts you enjoy plant the seeds for flowers you love. Worries or nasty thoughts plant the seeds for weeds. Now every garden has weeds so it's not about eliminating unhappy thoughts, but you can choose where you direct the sun and water by nurturing the thoughts that help you feel good. It all comes down to where you place your attention so choose wisely to grow a beautiful mind garden. Can you draw or describe yours?

8. Legs up the wall – to soften and drop

Grab a blanket and a pillow, take a seat with your side against the wall and enjoy some time out. Roll onto your back, slide your legs up the wall, arrange the pillow under your head and drape the blanket over you for comfort. Now let your body flop and drop, the whole length of your legs held by the wall. There is nothing to be done right now and nowhere else to be.

9. Get creative – to express yourself

Let your feelings out with a spot of art. The choice is yours! You can journal, colour a mandala, make a model from recycling, paint up a storm or make your own animation on [Scratch](#). Enjoy immersing yourself in the act of being creative – no hard work, just fun.

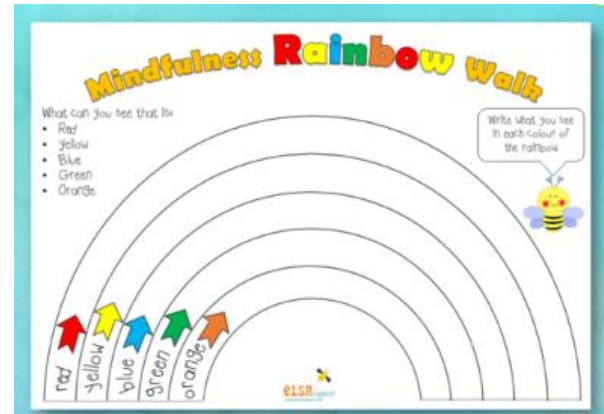
10. Hug it out – to feel connected

Cuddles are like food for the soul, helping us feel safe and calm. Enjoy building your mindfulness muscles by giving a loving hug your full attention. Can you feel your heart beating, wrapped up in care? Tell yourself or your child: you are safe, you are loved, you are held.

Below are some links to mindfulness type activities that we recommend:

- [Mindfulness support from Mind](#)

- [Smiling Mind Mindfulness Resources](#)
- [Kids relaxation techniques – Guided Imagery](#)
- <https://www.cosmickids.com/>
- [Positive Psychology – Mindfulness for Children](#)
- [Puppy Mind by Andrew Jordan Nance](#)
- [Mindfulness Colouring](#)
- [Mindfulness Rainbow Walk \(see attached picture\)](#)
- [Star Breathing](#)
- [Headspace app](#)



The following link is also recommended for information regarding your child's transition back to school: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/supporting-your-childs-mental-health-during-covid-19-school-return>

Ideas for older primary pupils and teenagers:



JOURNALING

You may already know as an adult that journaling is a great outlet to help you relax, be more grateful, process events and emotions and get to know yourself better. This is not for everyone but may be a helpful strategy for some older children and young people.

Here are some of the benefits:

1. It helps reduce stress levels through forcing the person to stop what they are doing and focus on what is happening at that moment. It also allows them to write down their many thoughts, processing them, getting them out of their head.
2. It can increase self-awareness by allowing for a period of reflection and thought processing. When they go back and re-read what they have written they are able to view events from a less emotionally heightened position.
3. It can help them process strong emotions. Taking time to write down what they are feeling and process their feelings can help young people to navigate difficult feelings. They may also begin to notice patterns in their feelings e.g. they feel anxious at certain times.
4. Journaling can help them problem solve. While thinking through problems can help you learn to solve them, there are some issues that really require the right side of the brain to solve well. This is because the right side of the brain is associated with creativity. Writing in a journal can help unleash that creativity, and this different way of thinking about events and situations can lead to problem-solving prowess.

5 Tips TO HELP TEENS COPE WITH STRESS

GET SOME SLEEP



Getting enough sleep helps you grow and develop normally, pay attention throughout the day, and maintain overall health. For teens, this means about **8-10 hours each night**.



FOCUS ON YOUR STRENGTHS



Take time to **think about what you're good at** and ways to do more of those things. By focusing on and building your strengths, you can keep your stressors in perspective.



DO THINGS THAT MAKE YOU HAPPY



Find activities or hobbies that make you happy and incorporate them into your daily life.



ENGAGE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



Exercise takes our mind off stress and releases chemicals in our brain that make us feel better. This can be anything from a stroll in the park, to a downhill bike ride or basketball game with friends.



TALK TO SOMEONE



It can be hard to manage stress alone. Talk to a parent, teacher or other trusted adult about your problems and they may be able to help you find **ways to manage your stress**.



[MHFA.org/teens](https://www.mhfa.org/teens)

SELF-CARE PLAN

Encourage your child to come up with a self-care plan that helps them to identify things they can do that make them feel good and promote their well-being.

An example of the areas you could include and questions to answer whilst filling it in:

My Self-Care Plan

Mental

What are your strengths? How can you use them today/this week? What new tasks/activities can you try or learn? What are your goals? Can you achieve any of them today/this week? Who can you spend time with whose company you enjoy?

Emotional

What positive/healthy experiences can you plan to do today? (e.g. reading, music, food, games, exercise, mediation etc) What can you be grateful for today? What small act of kindness can you do for someone else today? This week? What can you do for fun today? How can you achieve a moment of calm? Who do you love?

Physical

What can you do to take care of your body? What food can you eat? How can you move your body?