

Tips for creating a resilient and well-being focused classroom

As much as returning to school may feel like a relief, or even feel exciting for some children and young people, it is also likely to be a time when many children and young people feel anxious, particularly those who have underlying health conditions or who live with someone who is shielding.

Feeling safe may have come to be associated with 'staying at home', 'social distancing' and frequent handwashing and so we all need to learn new ways to continue to feel safe whilst connecting with our friends and peers and learning together back in our school setting.

Teachers can help to create classroom environments that provide reassurance, for example, how they are following the latest government and scientific guidelines, and make expectations clear about how we can all look after ourselves and each other.

This may take time and it is important for us to hold on to the idea of a **transition period** as we develop new ways of learning together in the aftermath, rather than rushing or putting unnecessary pressure on ourselves or each other to 'feel or get back to normal'.

Look after your own emotional needs

Many of you within the school community could be experiencing a similar range of reactions and feelings in response to the pandemic and lockdown period as the children and young people in your classes. This can make it particularly difficult to focus on the needs of the others.

As adults, we have a wider range of coping skills than are available to children and young people and know that we can survive adversity. Children and young people often haven't yet learnt through experience that they too have these coping capacities.

Working with children and young people who have had a particularly stressful and frightening experience of the pandemic could be challenging, and it is possible that in hearing their stories you may also experience stress symptoms. It is not uncommon for teachers to feel some of the anxiety, helplessness and anger that their children and young people feel.

Create a safe classroom and school environment

For children and young people to feel as safe as possible, schools and classroom environments need to be **high in both nurture and structure**, and to be **predictable and organised**, with clearly stated, reasonable expectations. **Ground rules** focusing on how we can keep ourselves and each other as safe as possible together can be co-constructed with groups and classes, with reviews planned to allow for changes and adaptations in response to new developments. New routines and boundaries can be discussed and agreed to provide reassurance to allow children and young people to negotiate their day with confidence.

Help children to regulate their emotions so that they can learn

Children and young people respond to adversity in a range of ways, including changes in their capacity for learning and physical and psychological wellbeing. These behavioural changes may indicate confusion and uncertainty, or underlying, ongoing distress.

Some groups to be especially aware of are:

- Students who have experienced significant loss or bereavement.
- Students who have been shielding during the pandemic as a result of underlying health conditions, and siblings of those who have been shielding, whose experience of lockdown will have been even more restricted.
- Students with existing social, emotional and mental health needs (some might have EHCPs that identify this as an area of special educational need that requires intensive support).
- Students with other known special educational needs or disabilities.
- Students who are Looked After, Children in Need or subject to a Child Protection Plan.
- Students who came under Refugee and/or Asylum Seeker status who may have previous experiences of trauma.

In addition to having a calm classroom, teaching children and young people strategies to self-calm is useful and conducive to creating a positive learning atmosphere. Sometimes for there to be calmness there needs to be opportunity for movement and the expenditure of energy. Children and young people who seem to be particularly jumpy, anxious, nervous or on edge may find that safe movement breaks, physical activity, games allows them to resettle.



Talking about feelings, having posters around the classroom that provide words for feelings and emotions and cueing children and young people into their feelings are all strategies that develop emotional literacy and help children and young people to understand their own and others' feelings. If they seem particularly upset, distressed or angry, it is important to first let them calm down before helping them to identify their feelings.

Believe that the child or young person can achieve academic success

Although the capacity for concentration may be affected it can be re-developed through good teaching strategies, support and time. Make all expectations clear, break tasks down to subsets and provide supportive and clear feedback during and after each subtask to check that they are on task and have understood the task correctly. Scaffold the task and the skills required to achieve learning. Acknowledge successes and provide explicit feedback on what has been achieved.

Restore a sense of control and personal efficacy

Provide opportunities to have quiet, calm down time, where children or young people take time to regain composure and reduce stimulation. Individual packs of play doh or plasticine where agitated hands can work on calming activities. Use of breathing or mindfulness activities, word searches, search and find activities, art and craft activities etc.

Build strengths and capacity

Every child and young person has strengths, aspirations, hopes and dreams. Use solution focused conversations to find out about these. (Asking with interest, *'what are you good at? And what else?'* and if possible deepening the conversation *'When you are at your best what are you pleased and proud to notice about yourself? What does this tell you about what you might be capable of?'*) Promote opportunities for the child or young person to experience success and help them to work out ways they can put these skills to use in other areas of their learning and life. Sometimes they will need help to make the connections and generalise the skills.



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Social scientists tell us that everyone possesses all 24 of the above character strengths in different degrees, and these are universal across cultures and nations. Ask young people to identify their top five strengths (and do the same for yourself!) Discuss other strengths you and they have noticed and build in opportunities to remind them of these. Planning actions and activities to help children and young people to be their best helps to bring a sense of personal control and achievement to the day-to-day life.

Understand the connection between emotion and behaviour

A child or young person that has difficulty regulating emotions may frequently engage in behaviours that appear impulsive and that are challenging to manage. The strategy of 'Stop, Think, Do' is a good mantra. Stop and think about what the behaviour might be communicating, were these patterns of behaviour evident previously or could they be a reaction to recent events and a result of painful memories being stirred up? Respond calmly and clearly. These children and young people need to be aware that their behaviour has consequences however they require patient teaching, reminders and clear boundaries and expectations that are repeatedly explained in different ways and enforced consistently. Respond to the underlying emotions rather than the behaviour. Talk to

children and young people about how they can support their own sense of well-being by building positive actions into their daily life such as '*Keeping active, connecting with others safely, taking notice, giving and keeping learning.*' ¹

Be hopeful and optimistic

Some children may experience a loss of trust in the world after a global pandemic; they may believe that because a terrifying thing has happened, they can no longer dare to hope that life can be happy and safe again. Modelling optimism and encouraging them to see the strengths and coping skills



they have and encouraging them to notice acts of courage and kindness will help develop a sense of personal efficacy and future. It is not uncommon for children and young people to have a less optimistic view of the future after events such as these. Reminding them of their strengths and providing opportunities for setting goals and achieving them will help them to take a positive view of their lives. Remember optimism can be taught and that it is contagious.

Engagement, social connection and trusting relationships that are built on respect and positive regard

Communities and societies provide resources which are key to facilitating resilience - being part of a social group is protective and can help people overcome adverse events. However, after events that are frightening such as a global pandemic and social distancing, communities and school communities can change. School provides a community of care for children and young people and it is through the relationships that they have with friends and teachers that they can begin to recover from and make sense of the events.

Some children and young people (and staff) come to school for normality. They don't want to have to talk or think about sad or frightening things that have happened as a result of the pandemic but would rather have a normal school day of learning and play. Being sad and dealing with the emotions and consequences takes a lot of energy and head space. Not talking about what happened doesn't mean that the child or young person isn't thinking about it or is being unusually avoidant. It's important to take our cues from the child or young person and for them to know there is no one right reaction. It's okay to ask them quietly what their preference is.



For some children and young people, their teacher is an adult in whom they can confide and ask difficult questions. Many children and young people express the view that they don't want to upset their parents or further stress them by asking questions or saying that they are struggling. This is when a trusted relationship with an adult at school will allow the child or young person to gain the help and support they need.

¹ *Five Ways to Wellbeing* New economics foundation. Centre for Well-being. 2008

