

REINTEGRATION SUPPORT

Coming back together

We may not yet know when schools will reopen for all, but as we all continue to speak, it is clear that we are all certain that our approach will need to be nurturing, kind and responsive when we do come back together.

Trauma always falls hardest on still-developing children. Being fit for purpose and meeting our children's needs will mean placing wellbeing and relationships at the centre of all decisions that will need to be made.

Research has shown that the potential of schools to support traumatised children, or to prevent an escalation of need, is huge and that it is through the school community that we can wrap our children in the safe and consistent place that will nurture and begin to create normality again.

The children most severely impacted by the pandemic will not find it easy to 'settle to learn' (Bomber, 2013) and as we know they will communicate this to us through their behaviours. We know that chronic stress disrupts the nervous system and impacts everything that we do.

We might see

- children who are jumpy, volatile, hyper-vigilant; still operating in survival mode and easily triggered into flight or fight reactions.
- Children who are excessively quiet, dazed or tuned-out and whose reaction is to freeze or to dissociate. They will retreat from a frightening and unpredictable outside world into one within the mind that feels safer.

What can we do?

Make relationships the scaffolding of everything that will come next.

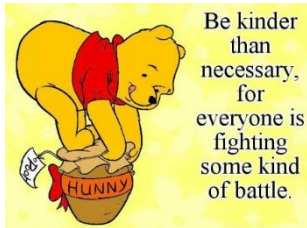
"The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love."

Bruce D. Perry

The good news is that anyone can help with this part of "therapy" – it merely requires being present in social setting and being, well, basically, kind.... The more we can provide each other these moments of simple, human connection –

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even a brief nod or moment of eye-contact – the more we'll be able to help heal those who have suffered traumatic experience. (From The Boy who was Raised as a Dog – Dr B Perry)



- Relationships between all members of the school community should be a deliberate strategy and not a by-product or something that is left to chance.
- ‘Every interaction is an intervention.’ (Dr. Karen Treisman) and although it may be tempting to plan and organise interventions this information should form the basis of all that happens as we return. Maybe each day starting with a circle time – reassuring the children that their day will begin with being heard and that it will continue in the same way.
- Information sharing between adults will be crucially important, so far as confidentially allows it, the emotional climate of a school can and will change daily and the needs of individuals will change just as often. With this in mind, there will also be a need to deploy kind words and acts strategically and in a planned way to support those who are particularly vulnerable at that time and rebuild their trust in adults and school as a place of safety. Things such as planned and timetabled individual story times will develop bonds and encourage trust.

Be a listening school.



Everyone in the school community will be reassured by understanding what a listening school is and that the school community they are re-entering into is a listening school. Anxiety levels will be unusually high for everyone in the school community – including parents – and to address this there will need to be a consistent and authentic message that the anxiety is understood and understandable and that support is genuinely available so that everyone can begin to relax into normality together again. That there is no expectation or aim for it to be business as usual.

- Daily greetings, worry boxes, whole class Boxall assessments, circle times, drop-ins, nurture groups, shared meal times and open-door policies will continue to be of

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immeasurable importance and all these strategies and are worth introducing if they are not already in place.

- Flexibility around curriculum and timetables will be so important. Familiar adults who listen with empathy and without feeling the pressure of a timetabled curriculum will support the rebuilding of trust and the making sense of experiences. Some children will be carrying enormous emotional burdens and school might be their only place for talking about these. By creating and respecting opportunities for children who need them, we are avoiding blocked grief and this in turn will avoid dysregulated behaviours and ultimately mental illness.

Boundaries, rules and routines

A nurturing approach that puts well-being and flexibility at its heart does not mean an absence of routine and / or rules because this will result in both emotional and physical chaos and research is very clear that children need clearly demarcated boundaries to feel psychologically as well as physically safe and secure. The importance of these will need to be emphasised and consistently applied when we come back together.

- Consider thinking of the whole school community as new starters.
- Routines will need to be simple and consistent. Reteaching routines using verbal and very importantly visual prompts and reminders will quickly create a sense of safety and order and support children to lower their guard and be in charge of their thinking. Children who feel chaotic will be acting from their limbic brain and will therefore be in constant state of fight or flight and not able to engage in any thinking due to their hyper-vigilance and need to work out their environment and stay safe.
- Coming back to school may be frightening for those children and parents who have internalised the message that people outside the home are a threat to life. Validating these feelings and showing understanding will be essential to making everyone feel calm and safe. Consistency will be critical – if we are allowed to shake hands again, then it is because it is safe to do that and everyone within a school community will need to be comfortable and supportive of decisions made to reassure children that adults are in charge of their safety and that can relax into that knowledge. Again, facilitating the frontal cortex part of their brain to re-engage and enable them to be ready for school and all that it entails.

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- Rules should be kept to a minimum, expressed positively and explained to the whole school community. Some of the rules may be Covid-related and new, these should

"It is more fun to talk with someone who doesn't use long, difficult words but rather short, easy words like "What about lunch?"
- Winnie-the-Pooh by A.A Milne



be stated in simple, limited language and illustrated visually. Messages around rules should be communicated with kindness and patience and ideally not as a basis for an actions and consequence discussion but as another tool to making children feel safe and secure within their environment and parents feel reassured that they know what is

expected at school and what the priority really is. School communities will be anxious and stressed and it could be that forgetting homework or having the wrong shoes is a final straw for a family – prioritising what matters and when will give a supportive message.

Hold a formal act of remembrance as a community (within social distance guidelines.)

It will, of course, be very important to tread carefully and not trigger the children to be re-traumatised, but there is very strong research that supports a school community coming together for organised reflection and collective meaning-making

In [a relevant piece](#), Kalayjian wrote:

Massive traumatic losses not only create a crisis in the community, they create opportunities for survivors to understand their obligations to one another it may well be a paradox that traumatic disasters which disrupt the way of life of a community may well lead to spiritual evolution as long as the community can learn from and find positive meaning in a communal crisis.

A remembrance event could take a wide range of forms.

- The whole school could clap for carers again and honour the NHS. This may provide a link between home and school and a sense of familiarity.
- Perhaps some of the things that pupils achieved when they were out of school could be shared and celebrated on display boards outside of the classrooms and on the class website pages.
- When possible, these achievements could also be the basis for an assembly. An alternative to a whole school assembly could be one class at a time going into the

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school hall to look at examples and photographs of creations and maybe leaving notes that could be given to the individuals – a celebration of our successes as a community. Parents and carers could be invited or a Podcast of the event could be shared with families.

- Some children will have lost family members and all children will be aware of loss that has happened. It is important that bereavement is not a subject that is too difficult to talk about in school and children will need opportunism and in the moment support. (There is a separate TISS support sheet for supporting bereaved children – please let us know if you would like to receive it or talk it through)



- *Adults within the school community will need support and confirmation to understand the difference they can make, through simple connection. It is likely to be a worry for adults that they are not doing enough and that they are not equipped to deal with the trauma that children may have experienced. Knowing that the small things they do and say are the most powerful in supporting healing and immeasurable in making a difference will give confidence and reassurance that everyone is on the same page and on the same journey.*