Separation Anxiety – Advice for Education Setting Staff

This document has been developed to support children/young (CYP) people who show anxiety about school as they return post-Coronavirus. Remember: there will be differing levels of need; whilst some will recover relatively quickly through the implementation of these strategies, others may need more specialist support. Please contact your link Educational Psychologist if the situation does not improve or if you have significant concerns about a child/young person in your setting.

A world with Coronavirus - and a newfound anxiety?

Over the last six months or so, we have (without warning) asked our children/young people (CYP) to cope with a lot of change and uncertainty all at once. Given the length of time they have been away from school, and the unprecedented circumstances surrounding their absence, we must expect many to hold anxieties about returning. Prior to Coronavirus, school was a safe place, with predictable routines and familiar, trustworthy adults; we now have to look at rebuilding that environment to enable children/young people to feel safe again.

Many CYP will have enjoyed the online and experiential learning at home, with only their parents/carers and siblings as company. For others, being at home may have been more stressful and they may have craved the interaction of their friends and the routine of the school day. Some CYP may feel anxious about Coronavirus itself; it has changed the world around them to unimaginable lengths. They may have suffered the loss of a relative to the virus, and may be anxious about re-joining school and separating from their parents/carers. What follows are some strategies for school staff aimed at reducing separation or school-related anxiety.

On first noticing an anxiety about school

- Talk to parents/carers; what do they think might be happening for their child and what do they think might help? Some worries are likely to be swiftly alleviated through simple measures, others may require detailed investigation and planning.

- If the child is not attending school or is anxious about getting into school and this is affecting attendance, devise a 'coming into/return to school plan' with parents/carers (Please see Appendix A below). Pay special attention to what the parent/carer and staff role will be during 'handover' when the child and parent/carer physically separate. Remember: this is likely to be a very stressful time for the parent/carer leaving their child at their most vulnerable. Reassure them that they are teaching their child how to cope. A teacher who reaches out will increase parental/carer confidence (and lower anxiety) and enable parents/carers to leave knowing their child is OK.

- Provide a detailed timetable of the day/week ahead. Ensure this is presented in a way which the CYP can process and understand. For example, Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) information can be found on the local offer here: http://eastridinglocaloffer.org.uk/coronavirus/ (tab: Supporting emotional wellbeing

and mental health → information for parents of how to support children through COVID-1→ EPS Guidance Supporting children and young people with social communication Interaction needs).

- Encourage parents/carers to have conversations with their child to prepare them for the start of the school day as much as possible (e.g. get out their uniform, walk the route, go to the school site to play football, meet with school friends etc. If staff are going to be wearing PPE, encourage the child/young person to play with masks and gloves at home, make games with them (e.g. draw funny faces on the masks, fill the gloves with water like balloons etc.) Clearly display a calendar and refer to it often to give them a sense of time.

- Encourage parents/carers to develop positive associations with school, for example by reminding them of happy times or key staff they liked in school, or by letting them choose a new bag or pencil case to take with them.

- Encourage parents/carers to talk to their child about being apart and how it might feel. They should accept and 'normalise' (but not dismiss) their child's feelings. Books such as "The Invisible String" by Patrice Karst, may be a useful resource for parents/carers. A comfort item can also be useful, particularly for younger children during times of heightened stress. Older children may be given permission to send a text message to their parents/carers at lunchtime - this will need to be kept brief and agreed with parents/carers in advance.

- Write to the CYP, keep it 'light;' perhaps include photographs of key adults, the classroom, their peg and drawer, the playground etc. Remember: increasing certainty and preparedness can lower anxiety. Consider adding a sentence or two about your own experience; this may promote relatedness between you and the CYP; conveying the message that you are a person beyond school - not just a teacher!

The physical separation

- Identify a key person who is consistently available to greet the CYP; ideally someone they knew before Coronavirus. Ensure they are waiting for them as they arrive; a delay will allow the CYP to dwell on worries.

- Have distraction techniques ready to take the CYP's attention away from the physical separation from their parents/carers; e.g. a book or toy relating to their high interests. Older children may be given a quiet and calm space to go to on entry to school, with activities they enjoy available to them - should they choose.

- Encourage parents/carers to use a consistent phrase as they depart e.g. "You will be OK, mum will be back at three o'clock". CYP with ASC can often repeat questions when they feel anxious or if they are struggling to process information. If the CYP begins repeating a question relating to their parents/carers' return, ensure the message is conveyed in a way which they understand and process e.g. supported visually.

- Bear in mind that it will be greatly reassuring for the parents/carers if a staff member contacts them at their earliest convenience to let them know their child has settled.

When in school

- Ensure the adult who greets the CYP has regular 'check in' times with them; giving them the extra special attention they need. Ensure this is somewhere quiet and calm

- Request that parents/carers provide a comfort item for the CYP to have in school. This can be reassuring for them at times of heightened stress. The CYP may keep this with them or it may go away in a 'special place' when they are emotionally calm.

- Ensure direct and regular telephone contact with parents/carers. Reaching out to parents/carers will reassure them that their child is important to staff and is being well cared for

- Explicitly teach the CYP about anxiety and what it feels like so that they begin to recognise the physical symptoms. Teach them ways to co-regulate and self-regulate when they begin to feel anxious and devise an 'anxiety' plan together (e.g. find Mrs Smith, count your breaths etc.) Share plans and additional relaxation techniques with parents/carers to reinforce key messages at home. Find relaxation cards here: https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Relaxation-cards.pdf

- Timetable regular art and craft or 'choice' activities for the CYP e.g. to make something for their parents/carers. This may excite them about their parent/carers' return whilst giving them a focus during the day. Art and craft activities can also be very calming.

- Increase access to activities such as baking, gardening and painting. When the CYP is relaxed, encourage discussion about their experiences of being away from school; sharing what they've been through can help them to process what's happened.

- Plan to help the CYP to join/re-join friendships groups. Encourage and model interactions with individual and small groups of peers. This may help increase the CYP's sense of belonging and positive experiences in school. For CYP with ASC, they may need social scripts or a structured social skills group.

Appendix A

Return to school plan: Key considerations

Considerations	Plans in place
When is the return arranged for? (Specify date and time)	
How will the parent be supported to prepare their child for the return? *E.g.* - *Visual routine/calendar* - *Social story* - *Walking the school route* - *Visiting the site when school is closed* - *Meeting school friends* - *Having a comfort item* - *Helping the child to ask questions*	
What will staff members do to let the child know they are thinking about them ahead of their return? *E.g.* - *Write them a letter* - *Send them an email* - *Record them a video* - *Meet them at home*	
Where will the parent bring their child when they arrive on the school site?	
Which staff member will be there to greet the parent and child?	
What distraction activities are there in place? (Consider child's high interests)	
What will the parent say to their child as they leave?	
What will the staff member and parent do if the child gets upset? Who else will be 'on hand'?	
Where will the staff member take the child once they are in school?	
Who will ring the parent to let them know how the child has settled?	
How will other staff members support the child's return?	
Which peer can act as a 'buddy' when the child gets into school?	