

## Transitions Guidance for Children Looked After & Previously Looked After Children

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## Why may Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children find transition challenging?

Change is a normal part of life and can provide opportunities for children to develop their resilience. School transitions, including returning to their class from recent school closure, needs to be carefully managed as a difficult transition can have a negative impact on the wellbeing and academic achievement of our children and young people.

Children in care will often have experienced chaotic home lives and will have attachment issues due to their early life experiences. As a consequence of these attachment difficulties, our children may find transition back into school, into a new class or between schools particularly challenging. Children with attachment difficulties will be coping with a fear of rejection and abandonment, a survival instinct to be in control yet a sense of helplessness, a need to please but a need to pretend they don't care, a sense of loss, frequent overwhelming emotions (panic, rage, grief, excitement). They may be constantly checking their environment for danger and focussing on feeling safe.

This can mean that significant change in their daily routine can be traumatic and result in severe anxiety around:

- The change in how they arrive at school, navigating around an unfamiliar building, remembering all essential equipment, books and uniform and moving between lessons.
- Making friends, building new relationships and getting to know several different teachers rather than one class teacher.
- Completing and submitting homework on time.

For children in YR – Y6 the transition to the next year group can also be traumatic as the relationship between a class teacher/TA and any child is important, but for children looked after it is especially significant. Building relationships with trusted adults is often difficult for children in care and takes time and patience, therefore any change needs to be managed carefully.

## Which overall strategies will support transition for this group?

In normal circumstances, transition preparation for CLA takes place over several weeks and includes; visits to the new school/class, allowing the child/young person to acclimatise to the new building, sounds and smells. There would be meetings between the current DT/Class Teacher and the DT at the new school, allowing the new DT to have an understanding of the child/young person and their specific needs. Knowledge of homework and behaviour expectations and consequences would be shared in addition to comprehensive information about the pastoral care at the school and how to access the service.

During the current situation these strategies could be adapted:

- Virtual tours of the school with the DT and new Form Tutor, explaining routines at lunchtimes, break times and between lessons. Introductions to Heads of Departments, Head of Year and Head Teacher could be made during the virtual tour,

allowing the child/young person and foster carer to ask any questions, providing the child with a sense of control over, something particularly important to CLA & PLAC. Questions should be answered honestly and with clarity.

- Skype meetings should still take place between schools and all information shared.
- Where possible, advance copies of timetables could be issued, with a map of the school with relevant classrooms and teachers marked, offering reassurance about upcoming changes.

### Which strategies will support transition planning in the following areas:

#### Places - increasing the child's knowledge and familiarity with the place where they will be?

- A virtual tour of the school could be uploaded to the school website, including the toilets, cafeteria and Pastoral Support Area or equivalent.
- Journeys to and from school could be rehearsed, whether walking, driving or using public transport. Who else will be travelling with the child or young person? Where do they arrive at school? Who will be there to meet them?
- In the event of schools being accessible prior to reopening to the general school population, it may be useful to attend the school for a general orientation around the new building or classroom.

#### Relationships - increasing the child's sense of familiarity and connection with the adults and children they will be spending their time with?

- Video calls between children, foster carers, DT's and form tutors would help CLA to identify the adults they will have immediate involvement with, and would enable them to begin to build a relationship with them.
- Photos books of key adults they may meet – class teacher, form tutor, DT, Headteacher, office staff, lunch staff, caretaker

#### Routines - increasing the child's participation in and confidence with routines which will be in place during and following transition. These routines may be home based, travel between home and school and school based?

Comprehensive information sent out about how daily things happen, like:

- Where do I get my lunch and how do I pay for it?
- What are the rules about using the toilet during lessons?
- Where do I get my bus at the end of the day?
- What equipment will I need?

It is important to practice the home morning routines and organisation of daily equipment.

Sharing information – increasing understanding of the child’s needs during and beyond transition. This will involve settings working together to share information, discussions with the family and the involvement of other professionals where appropriate?

DT’s from both schools should continue to communicate via telephone, sharing information regarding the specific needs of the child/young person transitioning. Specific plans will need to be established to support the transition of each CLA, identifying obstacles and mitigating against potential challenges.

Carers should also be consulted by the new setting, to ascertain any specific concerns the child/young person has regarding the transition and how these anxieties can be alleviated.

The Virtual School will play a significant role in coordinating between schools, social care and home to ensure, as far as possible, all CLA are prepared for the transition.

<https://www.place2be.org.uk/our-services/parents-and-carers/getting-ready-to-start-secondary-or-high-school/>

<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/school-based-risk-factors/transitions/>

<https://nasen.org.uk/uploads/assets/d120f943-7f8b-48c6-bc5b0d2ab448c54d/transition.pdf>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/our-work/employment-education/moving-on-to-secondary-school>

<https://www.pac-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Example-Transition-Plan-and-Strategies-V1.0.pdf>

## Further considerations:

### Relationships

Key to all of this is going to be re-building relationships. We need to be aware that this will not happen overnight. We need to give ourselves time, be well planned and be kind.

Be explicit that our new normal won't feel normal

It is highly unlikely that schools will go back to a usual routine. Start and end of the day might be staggered, lots might be different. Being explicit about the fact that things will feel different and strategies to notice and manage that will be key. When schools come together as a group, individuals will have had very different experiences. For the CLA there will be a sensed awareness of difference. Staff will need to be very vigilant in noticing what is happening for each individual.

### In Trauma Informed Schools UK terms

Re-affirming connection and belonging

- The role of PLAY, SEEKING and CARE and in particular social joy and delight in the presence of others

Understanding the impact of prolonged activation of the FEAR and PANIC/GRIEF systems on behaviour

- Recognising those behaviours
- The importance of regulation, increased need for play and sensory breaks
- Using the outdoors for learning and regulation, connecting back to the school environment

Re-experiencing the world as safe

- Social engagement- upping safety cues
- Continuing rituals to encourage children to feel safe - might include hand washing, etc increase the sense of agency - this is what I can do, hand gel, catching coughs and sneezes in tissues
- The law of propinquity in re-establishing the sense of community and connection - involving parents and carers

### Re-establishing routines

For many the re-establishment of routines will be difficult. This will not just be for school routines; it will also be for those basic daily life routines, such as sleep and getting up. We know that this is difficult and a source of anxiety at the beginning of every term, but this will be on a larger scale. We will need to allow a period of adjustment and be aware of the impact of trying to re-establish these routines for staff, parents and children. We will need to re-learn the rhythm of the school.

### Re-establishing expectations

We are aware that different people will have had very different experiences during the lockdown. Some will have been in school throughout, though for them school will have been a very different place. The majority of children will have been at home and each of them will have had their own experience. It will take time to re-establish and re-learn the expectations of school behaviour and learning. We know that much of learning is based on practice and we will all be out of practice with this.

### Differences in learning

Across schools there will be a huge range in what learning children have engaged in while not in school. There will be children who have spent every day, including the holidays, engaged in formal learning activities and completed every piece of work set by the school. Equally, there will be children who have not engaged in any focused learning activity for the entire time they were not in school. Most children will come somewhere in between. We need to be clear that learning from home is not the same as learning in school. We will need to respond to what children have learnt, not what we expected them to have learnt. We will need to understand what children have learnt and what they have forgotten.

We need to remember that much of what children may have learnt will be very different to 'school learning'. We will need to take time to find out who has learnt to bake a cake, build a wall, become an expert on worms..... Even more, those who have had difficult personal experiences during lock down.

**This learning and possible trauma is not on the curriculum but will be key to who our children are. Teachers' responses will be key to how children are able to reintegrate into school and to their ability to reflect.**

### **In terms of TISUK learning:**

Supporting transition back to school

- Utilising the time structuring model to recognise where adults and children may be in their needs and to frame school responses and provision
- role of transitional objects
- Re-establishing contact and connection
- Repair

- Re-establishing routine and relationships (some children attending school will have experienced their teachers in a very different way - care rather than teaching).

### Loss / Bereavement

There will be few communities that will not have lost members to the coronavirus. It is essential that we recognise this and take time to mark and celebrate their lives. Also, it is essential that we are clear with children who has died and who has not returned to our setting for some other reason- house moves, job changes, parents deciding to continue with home education, etc. This will need to be discussed, or children and social media will build up rumours and stories that will be neither helpful or healthy.

Even for those who have not experienced a death in their family or community, any illness will become a greater source of anxiety as the link between illness and death will have been reinforced in a way that was not common experience in twenty first century Britain. This will lead to more anxiety and may make many children (and adults) more risk adverse.

### Acknowledging Loss

- Rituals - for all loss experienced by the school community in a shared experience - cover all aspects - conceptual loss, bereavement, birthdays/anniversaries not celebrated, exams not taken, rites of passage - Y6 or Y2 or Y11, loss of freedom and for some loss of safe place
- REFLECT - supporting the school community to reflect on their experience of lockdown - I wish my teacher/SLT/parent/carer/staff knew
- Talking circles - opportunities to honour the experience of others and receive an empathic response aimed at both children, parents and staff

### Sensory needs

Many children will be looking forward to the return to school but some may find being around people difficult, frightening and overwhelming, particularly if we move rapidly from social distancing to a return to school. We will need to be aware of this and support it. For some children this will be exacerbated by a fear of people in general, particularly depending on their attachment styles. Having experienced weeks, or even months, of social distancing, children will have received an implicit message that other people are dangerous. Further, their experience of other people, beyond their immediate family, within their personal space will have been limited. For many the hustle and bustle, movement and number of people in school will be difficult. We need to be aware that many will express their sensory issues and anxieties about the proximity of others physically.

### Separation anxieties

Depending on their placement and attachments, CLA will have been exclusively with their placement families throughout lock down. Even for those who are excited to regain their freedom and see their friends / Emotionally Available Adults, separation might be a potential source of anxiety, or a trigger for past separations.

## Transitions

If we are not back until September, there will be particular issues with children who are transitioning from one school to another. Normally, we spend much of the second half of the summer term preparing children for their moves from primary to secondary etc. But potentially there will be many children who have left a school without a chance to say 'goodbye'. It will be essential to mark this transition. We need to consider ways to invite children back to have closure, say goodbye and mark the transition. Remember that this should include any staff who are leaving and children making transitions at non-standard times.

Equally, there will be issues for children starting in a new setting. Some of whom may even be starting in a setting that they have not visited. It will be key to support their transition into school. We need to think about and consider the processes, we would have implemented for information exchanges with previous settings and parents, visits to the school or home visits to meet the children. We need to consider how much of this can be moved online and how much needs to be moved to September. It will be important for children starting at a new setting at any age to have a staggered start, slowly allowing them to become accustomed both to the new setting and either the new or returning experience of school.

## Uniform

Most children will have grown over the time that they have been out of school and so their uniform may not fit or might now be for a different season. Particularly if we go back to school on short notice, many will struggle to get new uniform. This may be exacerbated by financial issues faced by carers and issues related to production, import and sale of non-essential goods. So, schools may wish to consider relaxation of their uniform codes. Children will need to be welcomed back into school, rather than worried about not having the right uniform.

## Ideas to consider for supporting children back into school

Use of staggered starts. School is going to feel overwhelming as people return and we will need to re-establish routines and relationships. Consider using staggered starts and part-time timetables to support everyone to adjust and allow children (and staff) time to talk about and share their experiences and learning. A slow start will enable us to build resilience in the long term.

Focus on rebuilding of relationships and establishing routines. Most schools start the school year with this. In this case, we will need to extend this process so that we establish a firm basis to move on from. Unless we give this priority, schools will struggle later on.

Talk with children / young people about Covid19 in a way that is canvassing what they know or believe, what their fears and anxieties might be, to create an open forum where they can bring their questions or check out thoughts. Do this in a managed and practical way, an activity that can be revisited over time not a 'one off' so that it underpins reflection

Avoid formal assessments of what children have learnt. Balance the need to move on with the curriculum with the more important need to re-build relationships and mark the new start.

Mark the transition, including inviting leavers back to say goodbye and mourning those your community has lost.



Safeguarding training to ensure that all adults are ready and able to listen to children's experiences during the lock down and respond appropriately to disclosures and indicators of abuse.

Consider providing extra time and support for DSL. After every school holiday, there is a rise in the number of disclosures of abuse. As children return to school after the lock down, this is likely to be even more true. The DSL will need time and emotional support to manage this effectively.

Provision of safe places and trusted adults for children to talk to.

If we are not back until September, would it be possible for children to start the school year with the teacher and/or in the same classrooms that they had last year and then change teachers at the October half term? How could this be managed and how would you support children where their previous teacher was not available?