

Returning to School: Supporting Staff Wellbeing


The importance of prioritising staff wellbeing.

For many children and young people, the return to school will be challenging, and they will need the help and support of school staff to navigate this transition successfully. It is likely that many children's emotional wellbeing will have been affected during the pandemic; acknowledging and supporting this will be an important priority on the return to school.

It is equally important to remember and acknowledge that many adults within the school community will be experiencing a range of emotions and reactions similar to the children in their classes and their families. These may include experiences of bereavement and loss, physical and emotional exhaustion, worry and anxiety. The adult members of your school community, like children, will also have varying levels of resilience at this time, and different experiences and exposure to school since school closed. Staff wellbeing and mental health is closely linked to children and young people's mental health. We need to acknowledge this and prioritise the wellbeing of school staff both during this transition process and as an ongoing priority. Before we can help others, we need to help ourselves.

It is crucial that we foster a working environment and situation that is supportive of all staff members, and which models the type of provision and ethos that we want to provide children that are in our care. Fundamental to establishing this is accepting that it will not be possible to simply pick up where we left off. A focus on academic learning and "catching up" is appealing, but risks alienating individuals by not acknowledging what has happened to them. This approach might miss out crucial healing opportunities. With the strategies below in place, there is every possibility that school communities will grow from their experiences and create perhaps even more positive learning and work environments than before the schools closed. How schools do this will be different from school-to-school, however, the following framework and ideas have been collated to act as discussion points and ideas within your setting.

Hobfoll et al. (2007) identified five key intervention principles that can guide a community following a disaster. These can be applied to school community contexts as central elements that will help in the process of setting policy and designing your strategies for support.



Promoting a sense of safety

Promoting Connectedness

Promoting Calm

Promoting Self Efficacy and Community Efficacy

Instilling Hope

	Things to consider before the return to school	Things that will require ongoing consideration
Promoting a Sense of Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Plan for inset days when you come back. Try to give as much time as possible for teaching staff to be in work before the children. Allow time for social opportunities within the day and try to reduce any surprises on the day. - Ensure that staff have been party to discussions around the risk assessment within school and adherence to government guidelines on safe workplaces. - Ensure a consistent message around safe working and that these messages are clearly displayed around school/reiterated within staff briefings and assemblies. - Think about how to make sure staff feel heard and listened to and how to let them know that staff wellbeing is of genuine importance to the school community. Clearly discuss the steps and actions you are taking to make staff wellbeing a priority and discuss with staff the support that they would value. - Ask for volunteers to form a working group of different roles across the school community. Could this group have protected time to meet and respond to concerns and developments? It may be useful to think about and plan how to promote hope and growth within the school community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meet regularly with your established team. Have a structure and encourage updates from the different team members. - Review protocols in light of specific issues and practicalities. - Ensure any changes are fed back to all staff, pupils and families. - Develop an open and non-stigmatising system for monitoring the ethos and the wellbeing of staff. Is it possible to complete a staff audit? Discuss this with your staff and adjust accordingly. Continually discuss staff wellbeing as a priority for the school community and encourage feedback from staff in this area. Create a timely system to identify anyone who is struggling to attend or participate in support. Ensure that the individual doesn't have an access issue and that they know someone is there for them. Try to use "do's" rather than "don'ts" within guidance around physical distancing/new protocols as this will help to reduce panic and anxiety.
Promoting Connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relationships will need to be invested in before staff return. Having positive relationships will support coming back to work, and so planning social opportunities both within and outside the working day will be important. - Consider in advance the areas where staff currently meet up. With physical distancing more may need to be created. Make these as welcoming as possible, including work free spaces and calming spaces. - Think about your system of support, from universal to more intensive individual support. Plan to give protected time within the working day for staff to engage in the support that is on offer. - Ask staff before they return to think about another adult in school that they trust and two adults that they can go to for support if they need it. - Consider a welcoming postcard or handwritten letter for each member of staff with a personal message from someone else at school. - Keep in mind the idea of "social buffering", that the presence and availability of one or more social partners in the presence of a threat reduces stress (Kikusui et al., 2006). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the connectedness needs of members of staff who may not be able to return to school initially; could they be included virtually in social activities, buddy systems, team meetings, etc. Encourage that staff members spend some time in their day to check in at home or check in with other family members and those that they may be supporting outside of the work environment. Create a Covid-19 time capsule with your staff. Consider offering staff supervision for all staff including the senior leadership team. Staff supervision is not the same as line management. Regular planned supervision can play a role in ensuring that staff have appropriate support. Please contact your school Educational Psychologist for further information. Plan opportunities for social time and enjoyment with your staff team, for example, activities in your outdoor space. Consider a range of different types of activities and discuss these with staff. Consider a buddy system for staff to provide support. If staff are being asked to create a social bubble with one another, consider creating fun mini tasks to help them form a group identity.

Promoting Calm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share the timetable for the first day and first week back. - Acknowledge feelings of anxiety and worry as natural feelings in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Prepare information and support focused on calming, for example, grounding exercises, mindfulness, yoga, opportunities to staff to take a walk in the day etc. - Review how welcoming and relaxing/comfortable your staff room is. Consider in advance how all staff will have access to a safe and quiet space and how calming activities can be introduced into this space. - Think in advance about all individual staff and those who may, on the return to school, benefit from a more intensive package of support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Think about those things that may be triggering for some staff, e.g. the news/social media. Discuss this as a staff group so that the staff team can be aware of the things that may be triggering for each other. - Share ideas in a staff meeting about how staff have been supporting themselves to feel calm. Encourage staff to share their experiences over the last couple of months in a safe way. - Provide ongoing access to calming activities such as Yoga and Mindfulness. - Communicate regularly with staff concise emails, helping people to stay informed.
Promoting Self-Efficacy and Community-Efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Define what a “good day” in school looks like with regards to the current situation to recalibrate expectations. - Before they return, ask staff to think about a member of staff that they trust and two members of staff they would go to for support. - Plan a review framework to think about regularly with staff, asking questions such as, how will we know we are doing well? What will the indicators be that things are settling? - Try and give a sense of control. Involve the school community in being part of the solution. Hold discussions with groups of parents/staff/children to come up with their own ideas regarding systems and protocols e.g. playtime, arriving at school, going home. Senior staff will need to be part of this in order to agree any changes. - Acknowledge that everyone has personal limits, and promote that it is ok for staff to say “no” if this is necessary and they need to. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish tasks and projects linked to staff interests. Offer opportunities for individuals and groups to become leaders/specialists of a particular skill set/project/idea - Talk about achievements in the staff community, talk about what staff have been doing whilst at home, has anyone developed a new interest or skill that they could share with the staff team. - Hold regular celebrations of school community to help combat the isolation that may be felt by many. - It is important to hold on to the idea of a <i>transition period</i> as we develop new ways of learning together, rather than rushing or putting unnecessary pressure on ourselves or each other to “feel” or “get back to” normal.
Instilling Hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Think about breaking up the large task of recapturing normality into smaller chunks, create a clear path forward with some milestones to aim for. Having small steps and seeing movement along a path is important in fostering hope. - Consider who in your staff team might be able to lead others in celebrating progress and generating hope. - Plan for ways to acknowledge the situation and model both vulnerability and honesty e.g. within planned briefings and meetings. This can help to build trust and hope. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider ways to broaden the context and take long term perspectives e.g. planning for the future. - Encourage staff to develop their interests and to build on any new skills or training that they have been part of during lockdown. Showcase these and offer opportunities to others. - Celebrate successes, finds things to be grateful about. - Look for opportunities to be kind to yourself/patient with yourself - Plan fun and joyful events (in line with recommendations) in the school diary to have things to look forward to. - Staff wellbeing should be clearly and frequently discussed as a priority.