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Support Pack 4: Home school communications

Supporting connection and relationships at this time is important for children and young people *and* for the parents/carers and teaching staff who are supporting them.

This document has been put together to support families and schools while keeping in mind the changes and adaptations that are occurring during this challenging time.

Connection and home school communication - COVID-19

In light of Covid-19 parents, carers and school staff have found their routines adapting and changing on a regular basis. Supporting connection and relationships at this time is important for children and young people and is equally important for the parents/carers and teaching staff who are supporting them.

This document has been put together to support families and schools while keeping in mind the changes and adaptations that are occurring during this challenging time.

The following tips may be useful for supporting home school communication.

Home school communication

- **Virtual communication** – where it is appropriate and where you are able to do so, check in with students and families through virtual communication e.g. email, a telephone call, a school based communication platform, email, Microsoft teams or another appropriate method.
 - Some children and young people may require more frequent check in's, for example, vulnerable learners and those with limited access to computer based technology. ***It is important to check the school policy/seek parental permission before home school communication takes place.***

Please see appendix A for further information including a home school contact script produced by ABUHB's community psychology team.

- **Connecting with families via the school website** – for example, placing messages and resources online. Some schools have made video clips including messages from school staff with updates on what they have been doing and to show that they are keeping their class in mind. These clips can be added to the school website so that children and young people are able to see staff, can feel connected and know that they are being kept in mind even when they are unable to attend school.
- **Online learning spaces** - Providing children and young people with an online learning space or resources can help them to feel connected to the school, allow them to have choice in learning activities and can be helpful to parents/carers who are looking for activities to support their children at home. Providing a space where students and parents can ask questions about resources and learning activities can also support communication and connection with school staff.
 - Checking in with children and young people, sharing interests and identifying preferred areas of work at this time may help to show regard for children and young people which may lead to the development of a sense of autonomy. Continuing to show a sense of ongoing care and letting them know you are holding them in mind may support feelings of belonging and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000).
 - ***For additional information and resources on learning from home, see BG Educational Psychology Service Support Pack 2 (Resources for Home Educators)***

Note: It is important to remember to be kind to yourself during this time. Aim for communication to be meaningful and plan an agreed amount of time for communication to

take place. The British Psychological society have provided a helpful document on resilience and maintaining connection which includes information for teaching staff on seeking support and help (**See Appendix A**).

Relationships and connection

Children and young people may need to be reassured that the key adults in their lives are present even when they are unable to connect with them directly. This connection is also important for adults who are unable to see their children at this time.

Being able to show that you are holding someone in mind, helps to remind them that they have not forgotten even when it is not possible to be with them. The following tips may be useful:

- **Photographs:**
 - Give the child a picture of their parent/carer/family member.
 - Show your child that you are carrying a photograph of them.
 - It can be helpful for children/young people who are unable to see their loved ones at this time to see a photograph of their parent/carer or family member that they miss, this can help to remind them that although they cannot be with this person, they are still connected.
 - Young children may require support to understand the idea of permanence. This means that they may need support to remember that a person still exists even when they cannot be seen. This requires the child to be able to form a mental representation of the person (this is known as a schema). Hide and seek based games such as peekaboo or hiding objects for the child to find can support the development of permanence.
- **Transitional objects:** A key adult, parent or carer may choose to give the child or young person a small item or object to look after and then remind them that they will come back for it when they next see them. If the key adult or parent/carer is expected to be away from the child or young person for an extended period in light of Covid-19, it may be possible to ask the child or young person about the object when you speak to them virtually. ***It may be important to consider what happens if the object is lost.***
- **Sensory activities:** Keeping a piece of scented fabric as a sensory reminder of home e.g. a piece of fabric with perfume or a familiar scent on it.

5 Senses Walk – Walking around outside, notice what can be heard, smelled, felt, tasted, and seen. You can also collect things on your walk to describe. You may want to make a checklist of items that you know you can find on the walk, they can be checked off as they are found and so that you are able to share your experiences with one another.

- **Reassurance that they have not been forgotten:** I will be going to work at *(time)* I will see you/call you at *(time if known)*.
- **A check in card** to allow children and young people to indicate when they would like to spend some time talking to a key adult. This may be useful for children and young people who are attending hubs.

- **Recording a story:** Parents/carers or key adults in the child or young person's life can record themselves reading stories. Children/young people can listen to the stories and listen to a familiar voice while also being reminded that they are being thought about. Schools could add stories to their school website.
- During this unprecedented time, children and young people may be experiencing a range of emotions and may require support to help them to build an awareness of their feelings. Joining in and supporting children with activities can help them to become more aware of their emotions. For example:
 - **Providing a commentary and wondering aloud** (Bomber, 2008): *I noticed that you (smiled, became quiet, walked out of the room), I wonder if you felt (name of emotion).* This helps the child to understand that their emotions can be shared and understood.
 - Body scan/relaxation script (**See Appendix A**).

For further information and resources BG Educational Psychology Service have put together the following information packs, already shared with all our schools:

1. **Managing worries**
2. **Resources for Home Educators**
3. **General Emotional Health and Wellbeing**
4. **Transition support**

Appendix A – Activities, resources and further information

- **The invisible String by Patrice Karst** – A story to support children’s understanding of separation and keeping connected to their loved ones even when they cannot physically be with them.
- **Help I've got an Alarm Bell Going off in My Head! By KL Aspden** – this book helps children and young people to understand responses that happen inside their bodies when they are feeling worried or anxious.
- **Duffield, S and O’Hare (2020) *Teacher Resilience during Coronavirus school closures*. The British Psychological Society** - This resource includes information on promoting teacher resilience during school closures such as keeping connected with others, relationships and seeking help.
<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Member%20Networks/Divisions/DECP/Teacher%20resilience%20during%20coronavirus%20school%20closures.pdf>
- A Beacon house Resource on transition tips for parents, carers and teachers:
<https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Supporting-Transitions-2.pdf>
- **InnerWorld Work #wholeclasshappy** – this resource provides some class based grounding activities to support children and young people to self-regulate with the support of key adults in their education setting. These activities may be particularly useful for the children who are attending hubs at this time.
<http://www.innerworldwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Whole-Class-Happy-Pack.pdf>
- **Gratitude Jar** - each day choose something to be thankful for. This can be something big or small. For example, it could be that you are happy to have received a certificate or that you are thankful that it is a sunny day. Once you have chosen something to be thankful for, write it down on a small piece of paper or draw a small picture, fold it up and place it in the jar. At the end of the week, empty the jar together, read/look at each of the entries together.
- **Affirmations and positive self-talk** – to practice self-praising and celebrating successes. Each day focus on an affirmation or an “I can” statement.
- **Breathing activities** – 5 finger/5 star breathing – Hold up one of your hands with fingers stretched out, using the index finger on your other hand, trace around each finger breathing in through your nose as you follow your finger up then breathing out through your mouth as you follow your finger back down. **Blowing bubbles** – Blowing bubbles encourages a focus on breathing. You can also use this activity to imagine the bubbles are worries that you are blowing away and can watch them pop.

Thoughts and questions when calling Children and Young People

(Gratefully adapted from ABUHB's Community Psychology Team)

Many children or young people may find it unusual to be called by a member of teaching staff. This could be because they don't like talking on phones generally, they are not used to teaching staff calling them at home, or they may feel uncomfortable talking about things that are going on for them at home during this time. It is therefore important to be sensitive to each child or young person's need to build trust and to expect a limited amount of feedback from them in the beginning.

Some children and young people might be worried about what to say to people outside of the home. If possible try to listen to the child/young person's tone of voice as well as the content of what they are saying. For example, do they come across differently than usual?

If the phone call is perceived as being an interrogation, the chance of them opening up to you may be slimmer. Just listening and showing empathy might be all they will allow you to do, and that in itself can be a great support to them.

- Some children may refuse to talk to the teaching staff calling them. This might be hard to accept knowing the call is being made with the best of intentions. There might be lots of reasons for refusing to talk and it is important not to take the refusal personally. Depending on the level of concern for this child in general, it might be necessary to speak to other staff about ways to check in with them at this time. This might include a kind text, contact through a school based communicative platform or a chat with the child's carers/parents. It is important to check the school policy/seek parental permission before home school communication takes place.

Before deciding on which staff member is most appropriate to call the child/young person, it may be important to consider the relationship the staff member has with them. What is the child/person's perception of the staff member who is calling? Generally the better a relationship the caller has with the child, the more supportive and effective it is likely to be.

It may be important to call all children/young people from the school setting and to be clear that all children will be receiving a call from a member of school staff. This may help to reduce worries about the purpose of the call.

It can be helpful to prepare parents/carers and the child or young person in advance. This can be done through the usual way of sending out information from the school.

Below are suggestions to a structure and questions you might want to ask the children. Using PACE (Playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy) as a general guideline will be more important than the actual questions though.

Note: It is important to keep in mind the age of the child when considering the suggested questions and whether they are appropriate.

Please don't see these questions as a tick list you *have to* ask about, more as ideas of what you *could* if the child seems up for it and maybe only over time.

1. Starting the conversation

We know that lots of children and young people find phone calls quite difficult and/or intimidating. A lot of children are more comfortable with text conversations. Some children and young people may therefore show that they are unfamiliar with phone calls from school staff and may be very quiet and may not want to open up.

- Hi..., it is..... your.... I know you might not have expected a call from me as we don't usually talk together on the phone. Don't worry I am not calling you because there is anything wrong or anything to be worried about, I just wanted to hear how you are doing. I know this is very different from how we usually see each other, and I have been thinking of all of you in the class, which is why I am ringing everybody. I am planning to ring all of you every week, while the school is closed. I just wanted to hear what is going on for each of you, hearing whether you are okay?

If the caller can hear that the child is surprised and feels anxious being called by a member of teaching staff, the caller can try to help them regulate and feel safe enough to feel comfortable with the conversation. The caller can for instance try and 'ground' the child by asking them to share what they can see when they look out their window. To create a common experience the caller than then maybe say what he/she can see out of his/her window. This can possibly create a little informal chat that doesn't feel threatening and therefore enables the child to be in the present and be able to connect and listen to what else the caller wants to talk to the child about.

- I imagine it must be strange not going to school as usual and having to stay in the house for so much of the time now. I certainly find it strange not being in school seeing all of you. What is that like having to stay at home?

2. Setting up the conversation & why you are calling

Acknowledge the current situation is difficult and that lots of people are finding it hard. Let them know that if they are finding it difficult, you'd like to help them if you can

– be clear that you might not be able to solve their problem but sometimes it helps to talk and if you can help, you will. Their response to this might be quite telling as to what is currently on their mind (e.g. do they want you to help their mum or sister, are they worried about someone in the house who is poorly, do they have enough food. Of course a lot of children would no doubt say they are fine).

- I know it can be quite a tricky time at the moment for most people for lots of different reasons. Some because they are not used to being together in this way as much as they are now, and some because they are missing their friends and the things they are used to doing either in school or outside of school. How are you coping with that?
- You might not want to tell me about things as you and I aren't used to talking while you are at home, but I just wanted to let you know that I am happy to listen if there is something you feel a bit worried about and together we can think of the best way forward. As always, if I get worried that you or someone else is getting hurt we will have to think about who else can help make sure everyone is safe.

Again if questions and comments like the ones above seem to create anxiety for the child, the caller can maybe comment in a light way. For example, 'I am fully aware that it probably feels a bit strange talking about things like that, and I understand if you need to take a deep breath or two not to feel too overwhelmed by us talking together. I sometimes need to take a few deep breaths to be able to think. Shall we try to do a few breaths together and see how many big outbreaths we can do?'

- First of all I want to let you know that it is okay not to be okay in this strange time.

- Some children are telling me they are a bit worried at the moment, it could be they worry about whether their family will be okay with money (if their parents aren't going to work) or whether their family will be okay despite maybe starting to argue a bit more than usual, (or they don't know what will happen with their exams) or something completely different. I just wanted to check whether there are things you are worried about at the moment? I cannot promise you I will be able to solve it for you, but I will certainly listen to you and together we can see what the best way forward is.

3. Questions to check how they are doing:

(With lots of curiosity around their answers i.e. what makes you say that? What have you noticed?).

- So what is the best thing that has happen the last week for you? (once trust is established (and that could take weeks) you could also ask about what the worst thing that has happened has been)
- Who out of your family is coping the best with this situation? (once trust is established (and that could take weeks) you could also ask about who out of the family is finding it the most difficult)
- Who in the family has been most creative in thinking of things to do when we aren't able to go outside much?
- Are you getting out much? Are you getting fresh air?
- Some children tell me it is hard going to bed and getting up at normal time now when everything else is different. What has this been like for you?
- Is anyone else at home with you? (if not: How are you managing for your food? Can you cook? Are you okay being on your own?)
- Have you been able to talk to your friends? How often are you doing it? Are everyone being okay with each other online?
- On a scale from 0-10 how happy are you at the moment?
- What are you missing the most during this time?
- Has anything good come out of this staying at home directive from the government?
- I also wanted to make sure you and your family are okay. Do you still have enough food? I know it can be hard both with money as well as with getting to the supermarkets. When did you last eat?
- Have you got someone to talk to if there is anything you get worried or upset about? Who would that be? Do you know where else you can talk to someone confidentially?
- I am sending the numbers of some of the phone lines for children to all the children in the class, just so you have them if you should ever need them. Let me know if you have any questions about them.

- Is there anything you need any help with?
- I am planning to ring everyone in the class once a week because I am still thinking of all of you even though we don't go to school as usual at the moment. You might not feel you need that, but then we can just make it a shorter call if all is okay, I just want to give you the opportunity to talk to someone outside the family if there is something you want to have a chat about.

It is also important to have plans as a school of how a child or parent/carer can contact someone and talk about any concerns they may have before the next phone call from school. This might simply be a matter of sharing generic helplines with both parents/carers and the child as well as informing them if there are any specific services the school or staff are offering or have access to.

The above will need to be considered in conjunction each schools plan regarding what to do if they become worried about a child. For example, if they are unable to make contact with a child or young person.

Lastly, phone calls should be considered a hand reached out to children/young people so they can accept it if they want/are able to. Some children might not want to take that hand, but the fact they know it is there might be helpful in itself.

Thank you all for being there for the children.