Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Managing unexpected endings and transitions

A practical guide to support pupils and students to manage change during periods of disruption

Schools are preparing for a gradual reopening, although at the time of writing it is unclear exactly what this will look like. Managing the transition for children and young people to return to school will be key to maintaining their wellbeing.

This is not a process on its own, but a continuation of the communication and support work that school staff have been providing to their pupils and families since lockdown.

Previously we've talked about the importance of stability in helping children and young people to navigate their way through and process the experience of change. Children and young people are preparing for hugely important events in their lives: moving to secondary school; taking exams; leaving school; starting work or university or college. These transitions involve complex social arrangements and processing loss as they prepare for new beginnings.

Without well-managed transitions, children and young people are likely to struggle with change. Not taking exams that they have prepared for; not having the rituals connected to leaving primary school and starting secondary school; not saying goodbye to friends: these are all significant losses and need to be managed. Children and young people are already negotiating multiple changes and stresses in dealing with the outbreak of the coronavirus and living in lockdown. Any raised level of anxiety and uncertainty will make managing additional changes and transitions that much harder. Below are some evidence-based actions that teachers and school leaders can take to support pupils, parents and carers in successfully managing unexpected endings and transitions into the next stage of their education.

Communicating honestly

Teachers and school leaders can encourage pupils to look to the future positively, whilst avoiding making unrealistic promises about when activities will resume or what the future will hold.[1] While honesty and openness about the future is key[2],

optimism and hope that things will get better are also important for promoting a positive outlook and managing worries and anxieties.[3] Wherever possible parents and carers must be included in these discussions and consideration of pupils' past experiences and developmental stages must be taken into account.[4]

Normalising worries and anxieties

Transition and change are challenging for everyone and there are lots of reasons why children and young people may find them difficult. For example, a child or young person who has neurodevelopmental difficulties, underlying anxiety or has experienced trauma, may find their conditions triggered by an unexpected change. It is important, therefore, to remind pupils that it is normal to feel worried or anxious when activities and supportive relationships end during times of change and uncertainty.[5] It is important to encourage children and young people to talk about their feelings or worries and to give opportunities for discussion about concerns. Home-based self-management strategies, including physical activity and breathing exercises, may help to reduce feelings of anxiety.*

* See our research bite on self-management strategies for young people experiencing anxiety for more information.

Case study: sustaining connections during coronavirus

Goldfield Infants' and Nursery School Goldfield Community Art Project

Our school community is close and relationships and emotional wellbeing form the core of our provision. How can we maintain this ethos, this feeling of togetherness when we are forced apart so suddenly? Retaining that sense of community is key to our ethos so that we can support positivity and connections during this time of isolation.

We planned to begin the new term with a joint project that would inspire and unify our families. Already a rich source of communication, our website and Instagram accounts became essential for keeping in touch during lockdown. Through these platforms we created a slogan 'we stand together even though we are apart' (#letssticktogether #caringcommunity #goldengoldfield) and a display featuring members of our community joining hands around the perimeter of our school to reflect this message.

Children, parents and staff were asked to contribute A4 full body self-portraits in any medium with hands outstretched to the edge of the paper to link up along the fencing. These were then either emailed or taken to our post box at the end of the school drive. Creativity and physical exercise are central to wellbeing and mental health and this project combined the two. Families sent their works of art, along with photographs taken during their daily exercise, then have been walking, cycling, or scooting to see their picture and to spot those of their friends/teachers and watch the number grow. We made a video of the portraits so that everyone could feel part of it. Over 200 of us now stand together and the portraits continue to arrive.

Messages and comments from our families, neighbours, local town and other schools around the country demonstrate the project's impact in unifying and building spirits. It has shown that even though we have been separated our shared goal has helped us sustain contact, provided us with a platform for emotional support and has been a source of great pride, not just for our own school but our wider community.

Debbie Stevens, Headteacher at Goldfield Infants' and Nursery School

Focusing on accomplishments, rather than losses

It can be helpful to frame an ending as a moment of transition and growth, rather than as a loss and final closure.[6] While it may not be possible to mark change through physical celebrations, schools are holding virtual achievement assemblies and are planning to mark the end of the academic year in a formal manner. Giving children and young people the opportunity to share and celebrate some of their achievements whilst on lockdown is also important and can be done via class newsletters or on the school website. Year 6 pupils could be encouraged to write down positive memories from their time at primary school which could be shared. Providing students with certificates and year books will allow them to have physical memories to look back on and share with their family.

Sustaining social support networks

Maintaining social connection can be difficult for some pupils during periods away from school or in the transition to a new school. The coronavirus pandemic means that young people are experiencing endings without the usual social support systems of schools and activities. Sustaining social ties with friends, siblings and other loved ones (online and by phone for instance) is important to help young people feel connected and supported.[7,8,9] Schools can support pupils to build these relationships by setting up virtual social activities and promoting online safety with parents and carers.

Preparation

Preparation gives young people time to come to terms with change and for support networks to be established.[3,10,11] Schools who are looking to welcome new pupils in September can do so virtually through posted welcome packs. New pupils may benefit from hearing from existing pupils and using a peer support model is one way to reduce potential anxiety. Parents and carers

More about Schools in Mind

Schools in Mind is a free network for staff working in schools and colleges, and allied professionals which shares practical, academic and clinical expertise regarding the wellbeing and mental health issues that affect schools. Join us here.

play a big part in helping to prepare children and young people for transitions and this can all still happen! Supportive conversations at home about starting secondary school, planning conversations about journeys to the new school and trying this out, speaking to cousins/older family friends about their experiences of moving on can all help.

As always, what matters most in this is knowing your community, understanding the needs of your students and their families and applying these approaches in a tailored and flexible way. These are all skills that school staff have developed over the years and have a great deal of experience in applying, while keeping the wellbeing of pupils and in mind.

[1] Constantino, M. J., Arnkoff, D. B., Glass, C. R., Ametrano, R. M., & Smith, J. Z. (2011). Expectations. Journal of clinical psychology, 67(2), 184-192.

[2] Dalton L, Rapa E, Stein A. Protecting the psychological health of children through effective communication about COVID-19. Lancet Child Adolesc Heal. 2020 Mar; DOI: 10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30097-3.
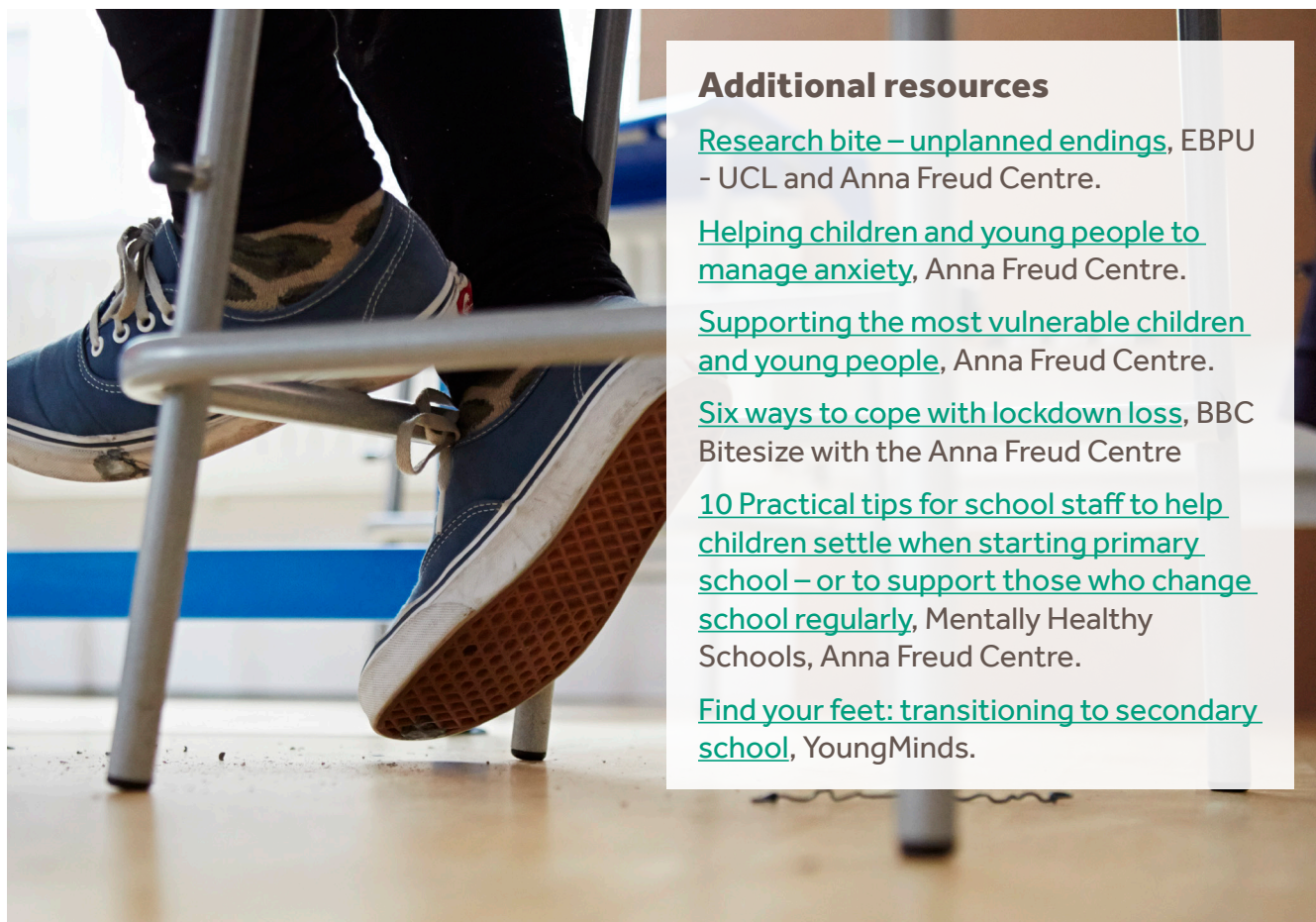
Additional resources

Research bite – unplanned endings, EBPU - UCL and Anna Freud Centre.

Helping children and young people to manage anxiety, Anna Freud Centre.

Supporting the most vulnerable children and young people, Anna Freud Centre.

Six ways to cope with lockdown loss, BBC Bitesize with the Anna Freud Centre

10 Practical tips for school staff to help children settle when starting primary school – or to support those who change school regularly, Mentally Healthy Schools, Anna Freud Centre.

Find your feet: transitioning to secondary school, YoungMinds.

[3] Bear, H.A. (2020) Investigating the expectations and reality of child and adolescent mental health: considering treatment outcomes, outcome expectancy and illness belief models for anxiety and depression and the role of clinicians in management (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University College London, London, UK.

[4] Stein A, Dalton L, Rapa E et al. Communication with children and adolescents about the diagnosis of their own life-threatening condition. Lancet. 2019; 393: 1150-1163

[5] Danese, A., Smith, P., Chitsabesan, P., & Dubicka, B. (2020). Child and adolescent mental health amidst emergencies and disasters. The British Journal of Psychiatry, 216(3), 159-162. doi:10.1192/bjp.2019.244

[6] Zilberstein, K., & Spencer, R. (2017). Breaking bad: An attachment perspective on youth mentoring relationship closures. Child & Family Social Work, 22(1), 67-76.

[7] Hiles, D., Moss, D., Wright, J., & Dallos, R. (2013). Young people's experience of social support during the process of leaving care: A review of the literature. Children and Youth Services Review, 35(12), 2059-2071.

[8] Mc Mahon, C., & Curtin, C. (2013). The social networks of young people in Ireland with experience of long-term foster care: some lessons for policy and practice. Child & Family Social Work, 18(3), 329-340.

[9] Perry, B. L. (2006). Understanding social network disruption: The case of youth in foster care. Social Problems, 53(3), 371-391.

[10] Dalzell, K. Garland, L. Bear, H. Wolpert, M. (2018). In search of an ending: Managing treatment closure in challenging circumstances in child mental health services. London: CAMHS Press.

[11] Zilberstein, K., & Spencer, R. (2017). Breaking bad: An attachment perspective on youth mentoring relationship closures. Child & Family Social Work, 22(1), 67-76.

About us

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 65 years. Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment. We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

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