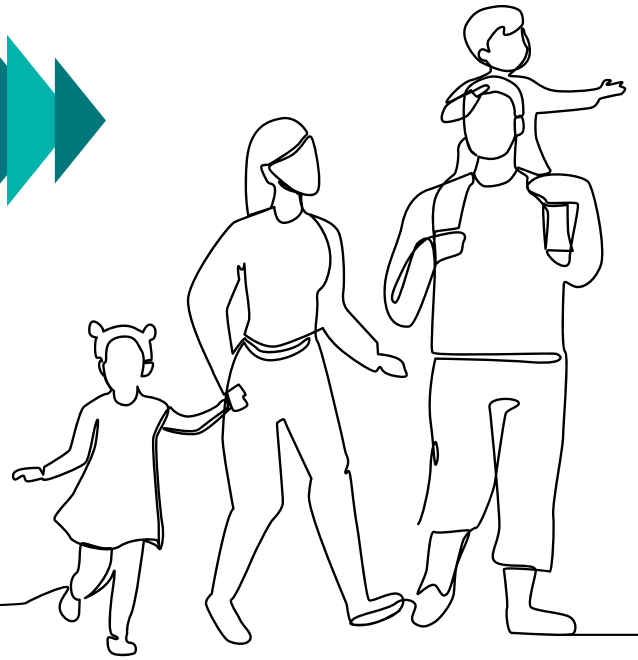


BARNET

**HELPING CHILDREN
BACK TO SCHOOL**

Return to school



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Over the past few weeks we have seen endless debate about whether schools should reopen. TV and social media has become a hive of home schooling parodies and every person and their dog has posted homeschooling effectiveness tips.

We've seen everything from the 'just spend time together that's more important than school work' to the 'they'll fall behind!!!' panic poster.

With schools reopening the reality of school under the COVID19 cloud is about to hit. I wanted to share some thoughts on what the return to school might look like for lots of children.

I am writing this with full acknowledgment that I do not have school aged children and so I am borrowing the experiences, thoughts and feelings of BICS clients, my friends and family. In this post I thought I would write wearing my professional hat more than my personal one.

I want to write about what we may see in our children when school goes back. Especially our young primary school aged children. Before I do that, I want to start with what I am seeing in all the adults around me. From either side of the schooling fence both parents, carers and teachers are doing more than we would have thought possible only a few weeks ago. I see parents and teachers wearing all their hats.

Parents are trying to support their schools and children by hustling their kids to do as much work as they can, and I see teachers doing metaphorical backflips to tailor their online classes to their student's needs/attention span/capacity. All adults are doing heroic efforts to buffer their children and students.

I see lots of anxiety about how children are coping and worry over the potential long-term consequences of this academic disruption. Unsurprisingly, I will not be focusing on children's academic development throughout this period as this isn't my area of expertise. What I want to highlight is the need to consider the potential emotional responses our children will show upon their return to school. I want to focus on the necessary emotional scaffolding children will need to engage in any work that we subsequently ask of them.

For many children the return to school will be a delightful experience. It will mean reconnecting with friends and school teachers and they will race out the front door ready to get back to normal. This however won't be everyone's experience. The return to school may stir up some anxiety for our kids, ourselves and our teachers. Emerging from the sanctuary of our homes and back out into public spaces is likely to be a little confronting. This is at odds with our concurrent feelings of wanting to break free from this lockdown.

Now I'm feeling stifled being at home. In my mind I'm ready to get back into the world after shielding myself for the last twelve weeks.

I remember when I first took my first adventure to the local supermarket, I started to feel nervous. I suddenly remembered that the world was not as safe as I wanted it to be. I was confronted by the hand sanitizer at the door, the restriction of how many people could be in the shop at any one time, I remained vigilant about keeping a respectful distance from other shoppers and staff, and I had to stand a socially uncomfortable distance from the check out. It wasn't the outing

I envisioned. I left feeling sad and a little irate. Something like this might be our children's experience of returning to school. First, our children will be hit by the anticipatory anxiety of going out into a world that feels unsafe. Over the past few weeks we've had to teach them that the outside world is dangerous and that staying home is a must. Soon we will renege on that claim and ask them to go back into the world we just told them was unsafe.



Return to school

It's going to a tricky transition for them. Second, once they are at school they'll discover it isn't the same experience that they knew before Mid-March 2020. There will likely be many differences whether it be that all their peers will not present in their year, the initial lack of other year levels, or the additional safety procedures the school is implementing.

This lack of congruity is likely to be uncomfortable. For children the 'not quite the sameness' and anticipatory anxiety will only be compounded by their innate desire to be near their caregivers and places of security when they feel distressed.

Some things you might start to see in the coming weeks include:

FOR PARENTS

- ▶ Reluctance or refusal to go to school
- ▶ Increased clinginess in the morning
- ▶ Increased tearfulness
- ▶ Poor sleep on nights before school
- ▶ Temper tantrums on school mornings
- ▶ Feeling sick- especially stomach aches, headaches and any other ache related to muscle tension (sore legs, jaws etc.)

FOR TEACHERS

- ▶ Kids being reluctant to leave their parents
- ▶ Poor concentration and memory
- ▶ Hyperactive behaviours or withdrawn behaviours
- ▶ Increased clinginess with teachers
- ▶ Oppositional behaviours and refusal to do work
- ▶ Behaviours more suited to an earlier age
- ▶ Distractibility

We might be tempted to see these behaviours as signs of being naughty, attention seeking or just wanting to stay home because it's easier than school. However, lessons from research into trauma and anxiety indicate that these behaviours have a far more primal and adaptive base.

There's heaps of great neuroscience behind all of this, but I'm going to explain it at its most practical level. We've told our children that the outside world is dangerous. We've told them this with every conceivable messaging tool we have.

We've literally told them, then we've modelled it (by staying home etc.) then we've subtly taught them again via our own anxiety.

Right now, the most sensible thing their little bodies can do is react to the invisible danger. The lower parts of their brain in charge of bodily protection have swamped the parts of their brain in charge of clear thinking, reasoning and emotion control. So, they're on high alert. Their bodies are ready to respond to a threat and they will attempt to avoid or attenuate that threat in any way they can.

This might mean that they become hyper vigilant of their environment, paying attention to every small noise in and outside of the class room. This is an evolutionarily adaptive response to threat as it protects them from anything that might jump out at them.

However, it also makes them easily distracted and unfocused. Similarly, having your emotional engine revving makes you quicker to react to threat. You can pounce like a coiled spring if your muscles stay tight, your body focuses its energy on your circulatory system so you have heaps of lovely fresh blood and oxygen pumping through your body, and the parts of your brain that unleash anger are in the driver's seat.

However, this also makes your body hurt and feel sick, it's exhausting and you're constantly a little grumpy. Some kids will be functioning this way a little bit, and many kids will be in this mode a lot.

You know who else will be in this mode? Us.

We're likely to send our children back, or receive our students, with a fair amount of trepidation. Add to that the external pressures of departmental requirements and parental work changes and our stress centres will be singing. Plus, schools are likely to get thrown back into face to face learning with the same sort of lead time they got when they got thrown into online learning.

Schools are likely to be trying to pull themselves back together while dealing with new safety measures, department of education requirements and all their own personal stuff. It's going to be hectic.

So, what's my grand solution? The truth is there is no one great solution. I will attach a list of strategies at the end and you can feel free to choose any if they suit you. But, the main thing I want you to take away from this piece is curiosity, knowledge and understanding.

Question the behaviours you see in the children around you and question your response. Approach problematic behaviours with good faith. Predict and assume that you are facing a frightened child rather than a disobedient one.

We have far more sympathy for our children's behaviours when they're sick than when they're well. We can tolerate and nurture more whining and clinging when given a medical context.

Right now, all our souls feel a little sick. Take that empathy and patience and reframe children's behaviours in your own mind. You'll be amazed how powerful the presence of a sympathetic, contained and curious adult can be on the most violent of children's behaviours.

Secondly, observe your own responses. We've all had those days when we feel like the whole world is just being a jerk. However, when we break it down its far more likely that, as the common denominator, there's something about us that's making us think everyone's a jerk.



Return to school

Pay attention to days when you're feeling more vulnerable, reactive and in sensory overload (i.e. days when noises and touch annoy you more than usual). Acknowledge and notice any anger as it starts to build and be aware that you might be less patient and more reactive than you'd like to be.

Awareness is key to implementing any change or strategy. When you approach aggressive or regressive behaviours from a perspective of understanding and empathy you help the person (whether it be a child or yourself) understand and let go of the emotional energy that's driving them. As people we will persist in our behaviours until we are effectively heard by the people around us.

Expecting ourselves, or the children we serve, to get back to normal without acknowledging the omnipresent weirdness we are currently living is unrealistic. Returning to school will be hard on multiple levels (and joyful on others) so expect anxiety to rear its head in some weird and wonderful ways. Stay curious and stay empathetic.

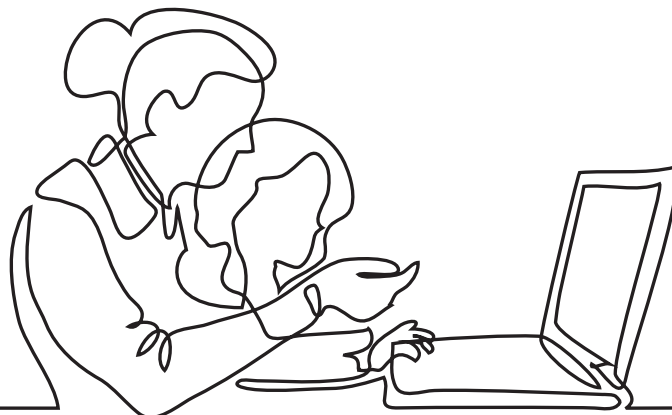
Some strategies to try

Basically, you want to gradually expose your kids to all things school related. You can try:

FOR PARENTS

- ▶ Start your normal morning routine a week before school starts
- ▶ Visit school before it starts
- ▶ Start using language such as “when you go to school” rather than “if you go to school”
- ▶ Use visual aids such as calendars to count down to school starting.

- ▶ If you know what safety procedures your school will be implementing discuss them a few times before school starts (i.e. you'll still be doing lots of hand washing, your teacher will still be using the hand sanitiser, Mrs. X won't be back at school till the virus has gone down a bit more).
- ▶ Be especially mindful around any “goodbye” arrangements as children may react strongly if they were expecting you to walk them to their door.



Return to school

We can also start to prime our children emotionally

- ▶ Give emotions names. These can be names such as “sad”, “angry” or “worried”. But they can also be descriptive words such as “shaky”, “fuzzy”, “spiny”, “gurgley”, “heavy”.
- ▶ To describe my trip to the shops I might say; “I was so excited to go, but then when I got there I felt surprised and disappointed because it wasn’t the same. I felt a bit fuzzy the whole time, a bit wibbly wobbly and I was happy to come home. But it was also fun to get out, see other people and see the summer flowers grow, feel the warmth of early summer, which felt good”
- ▶ Check in with kids before school starts. Ask them what they’re looking forward to, what they think might be different, what they’re expecting. Validate any fears and correct any misconceptions.
- ▶ Problem solve with kids - if something is a worry, work with kids to help come up with a few solutions. Include kids in this problem solving.
- ▶ Use your own feelings as a model.
- ▶ Stay calm ourselves.

This point may likely to be difficult. Stay calm ourselves. To do this in a genuine way we need to focus on ourselves as parents. Think about what you’re going to need to help support your child back to school. All this stuff takes both emotional energy and time. Think about your own resources and what

you can give. If you can, build in buffers to help yourself. Recruit helpers where you can, lighten your load for a week or two in other areas of your life. Plan your own respite, even if it’s just sympathetic friends who can listen to you, or training your own internal voice to be compassionate to yourself.

Communicate with your school

Normally I would say to parents that in cases of school reluctance you should plan and coordinate with your school. Perhaps for you this will be possible, but it’s also likely that our teachers will be managing the emotional load of many children. Speak to your teacher if you can but remember that they’re going through a pandemic too and their work world has

been totally flipped around. The school might be struggling to get itself back together and might not be able to respond in a way that you would like. Take the return to school slowly. It will be an exploratory process where you, your child and likely their school all figures out what’s happening together.



Contact services like BICS

We have support lines dedicated for you to support with any dilemmas you may be having. We can also support you by signposting to relevant services including ours. We are holding also many groups, workshops specifically around supporting recovery for parents and carers as well as looking after the range of needs of your children.

FOR SCHOOLS

- ▶ Acclimate students back into the school environment
- ▶ Do activities to help them reconnect with peers
- ▶ Spend time going over new safety procedures
- ▶ Move slowly back into assessment tasks

PROCESS GRIEF

- ▶ Do play based activities that acknowledge the time away, such as
- ▶ What new skill I learned while I was at home
- ▶ What I missed most about school
- ▶ Show and tell- use photos
- ▶ Being back together chain (children make paper chains linking all the reasons they're glad to be back together)
- ▶ Catching butterflies- write down worries on little cut out butterflies, chuck them in the air, catch them and put them in a jar.

- ▶ While remaining positive in your focus acknowledge previous anxiety and current nervous jitters
- ▶ Share books about worries and anxiety and how you as a team might manage worries- link to your school's wellness program with others'. Most schools do some sort of mindfulness activities, link them explicitly to return to school anxiety management.

SEEK SUPPORT.

- ▶ Phone BICS support lines that can support with dilemmas, referrals to relevant services
- ▶ Come to Pastoral/school staff consultations with schools starting from June 10th
- ▶ Come to our psychoeducation workshops and be part of our on-line training modules
- ▶ Schedule a teacher debrief session preferably run by a wellbeing type person. BICS staff can support you with this.

Please visit Barnet's Helping Children Back to Schools website



<https://www.barnet.gov.uk/backtoschool> which provides information on all resources and provisions offered to children, parents and schools in Barnet.