

Returning to school after illness

This leaflet gives information about coping with some of the feelings your child might have when returning to school after being unwell either in hospital or at home. If you have any questions, please speak to a member of the psychology team, or one of the doctors or nurses caring for your child.

Please note that not all of the strategies included in this booklet will be helpful for everyone. You should support your child to stop, take a break and try something else if your child has any significant discomfort or distress while trying any of these exercises. Please talk to your child's consultant if there is any medical reason why deep breathing exercises may not be appropriate

Introduction

You have been given this leaflet as your child has had time off school because they've been unwell. There are lots of reasons why going back to school might be worrying or upsetting for children and young people. This booklet looks at some of these reasons and suggests some strategies to cope with worry, sadness or other feelings related to returning to normality after being unwell.

It is completely normal to feel worried about returning to activities after being away from them. Often, young people and their families tell us that they feel worried about going back to school, or back to normal activities, as they want to protect themselves from any illnesses. For these children, being at home or in hospital can feel really safe, compared to being in the outside world.

In the short-term, staying away from real or possible threats can make worry smaller, and helps us to feel safe. Avoiding them is a really useful way to protect ourselves.

Unfortunately, when we need or choose to avoid a threat, it often increases the worry in the longer term.



While being in hospital (or at home) your child will have had to stay away from the outside world. They might also have had fewer chances to be apart from you. This might make them feel more worried about being away from you when they are back at school or doing their normal activities.

Children might also feel worried about things being different to how they remembered when they were last at school. This might be because they've missed school milestones, or because they will need some adaptations to support their physical health.

Managing the unknown

For many families, having a period of ill health has meant getting used to not knowing what might happen next, or having to adapt to new medicines, medical teams or environments. This can lead us to have more 'What if ...?' thoughts, which can make us feel even more worried. Unfortunately, with some illnesses the treatment and prognosis can be very hard to predict. This can be very difficult and can make us feel lots of difficult things, such as worry, anger or sadness.

Ideas to support your child with going back to school

Talk to the school

It could be helpful to speak with your child's school to find out if any changes have been made and what steps they can take to help your child to prepare for returning back to the school environment. Speak to your child's medical team about any adaptations that they would advise when your child returns to their normal routine.

For some children, it might be appropriate to arrange for a 'phased return' to school. This is likely to involve a gradual increase in the amount of time your child is at school. For example, your child might just visit school first, attend for 1 class, then attend for alternate mornings, building up until they are able to return full time.

Talk to your child

Talk to your child about what going back to school might be like and what might be different. For most children, preparing for these changes can help them to feel less worried.

Encourage your child to talk to you, or another adult that they trust, about any worries or concerns they have. As well as being open to listening to any worries or concerns, you could think with your child about what they might be looking forward to about going back to school. Here are a few tips for talking to your child about returning to school:

- Talking about returning to school does not have to be a one-off chat. Instead, take the pressure off and think of it as an ongoing conversation.
- For some children it is easier to draw or write things down rather than talk face-to-face about difficult things. Try sitting next to, not opposite, your child and help them to draw or write down the thoughts they are having.
- Make sure that you can find a time when you can listen without any distractions.
- Use clear, factual language suitable for your child's stage of development.

- Use open questions (questions that are not answered with ‘yes’ or ‘no’) if your child can answer these (this will depend on your child’s age and understanding).
- Notice your child’s worries and experiences, and accept them as true. Try to understand where the feelings come from rather than moving to problem solving immediately.
- It’s OK to say that you don’t know the answer to a worry or concern.
- For some children, it can be helpful to prepare a few lines that they would like to use to explain to their classmates about why they have been off school. If this is something your child would like to do, think with them about what they would like their friends to know, and practice ways that they can share this information.

Practical tips

- Start getting back into a routine.
- Practice the route to school.
- Build up your child’s confidence by returning to ‘normal’ activities by trying a ‘worry ladder’ (see workbook). Your child might feel nervous about doing things outside the home after being inside for a long time. It is best to build their confidence up slowly, using a structured approach, such as a worry ladder. A worry ladder can help to break up the goal (such as spending a day at school) into many smaller steps that can be tried at your child’s pace. For example, the first step might be going outside of the house or going for a short walk.

- Your child might find it difficult to be apart from you when going to school. When goodbyes are difficult or upsetting for your child it can be tempting to 'sneak off' when your child is distracted by friends or teachers. For some children, realising their parent has left without them knowing can feel scary. Instead, try to agree a way to say goodbye before getting to school, and make sure that your child is aware that you are leaving.
- For younger children, if being apart is feeling difficult introduce a 'cuddle button'. Put a small mark (like a transfer tattoo or a little heart) on your forearm and your child's. Agree with your child that when one of you presses it, the other will get a hug.

Decision making

Making decisions as you adjust to a new routine can feel difficult and overwhelming, especially when we are trying to decide how to keep ourselves and our families safe. Though decision making can be difficult, it can also give us a sense of choice and control.

To make decisions people will often weigh up the positives and the negatives (pros and cons) of each option. It can be helpful to write these down (see workbook).

Top tips for decision making

Think of how much each positive and negative means to you, your child and your individual family situation.

Use sources of support and information that you can trust. Think of people and places you can find this (such as, family, friends, support groups, medical team).

Think about what support you might need if choosing to make a change (or choosing not to) and how easily you can access this.

Older children might be trying to make some decisions for themselves. You can try brainstorming, which your child might be used to doing at school already. Help them to write or draw the options available, and then think of positives and negatives. You can support them to talk to their friends, who might be making similar decisions too.

Top tips when feeling stuck with decision making

When we are facing lots of change or uncertainty, we can get stuck in the decision-making process:

- If you are choosing between 2 options (for example, 'A' or 'B') you could try planning for the best and worst possible outcomes of both, thinking about what you and others can do in each case.
- Talk it through with someone you trust. Put your thinking or worries into words with someone who can understand your point of view. They might ask questions and help you spot gaps or different ways of thinking.
- Remember that it is OK to not have the answers and to ask for help, or to change your mind based on new information or experiences.
- Take a break from making decisions. Feeling stuck can make us feel unable to move forwards, as though we are frozen. You might feel there are lots of decisions you need to make every day. Don't forget to keep some time for you and your child to do something which feels safe, enjoyable or reminds you of all of your skills.

Managing worry when returning to school

Below are some techniques to use with your child, to help them to manage worry. It is really helpful to try these first when your child is feeling calm so they are used to using them when they are feeling worried.

Deep belly breathing

When we are feeling worried, our breathing can become quicker and more shallow. Taking slow, deep belly breaths tricks our body into thinking we are calm, which can make us feel calmer. Always follow medical guidance (such as your asthma plan) if breathing changes relate to an underlying medical condition.

- Get your child to sit comfortably in a chair with a hand on their chest and the other on their tummy. When breathing in the tummy hand should go out, and when breathing out their tummy hand should go in. The hand on their chest should not move too much.
- Or, you can get your child to lie on their back and put an object on their tummy (such as a small toy). Have them breathe in to move the object up, and out to bring it back down.
- Using their hand as a guide, support your child to trace the outside of their hand with the fingers on their other hand, breathing in while going up the finger and out while going down until all fingers have been traced. Make sure the breathing rate is slower than normal but still comfortable.

Grounding exercises

These help us to tune out of worrying thoughts and feelings by helping us to focus on the present moment.

When feeling worried, your child could try:

- naming 5 things they can see, 4 things their body can feel, 3 things they can hear, 2 things they can smell or taste, and taking 1 deep belly breath
- jumping up and down on the ground, noticing the feelings this makes in their feet and legs
- rubbing their palms together quickly, noticing the sound and warmth this makes
- reaching their arms up to the sky. They can stretch like this for 5 seconds, then drop their arms and relax
- taking a special object they can keep in their pocket. When they feel worried, they can try to notice everything they can about this object using their different senses (for example, touching it, looking very closely at it, knocking it to hear the sound, smelling it).

Making space for emotions

Children need to understand that whatever they are feeling is OK. They should know that other people in their situation have probably felt the same as them. For example, you could try telling them “I know you feel disappointed because we can’t do our normal summer activities. I feel disappointed too”. Equally, it’s important for children to be aware that it is OK to feel differently to others.

There is no 1 right way to feel.

Understanding what we can and can't control in the current moment is important. When we focus on things we **can't** control we can feel worried and overwhelmed. If we focus on what we **can** control it can help us feel calmer and less worried.

With your child you could draw around their hand, or draw a big circle, writing inside what is 'in my control' and outside the shape what is 'outside of my control'.

Postponing worry ideas

Sometimes we worry about things that are out of our control. These thoughts often start with "What if ...?" Instead of getting into a 'tug of war' with these thoughts by trying to solve them anyway, we can choose to recognise the worry but to deal with it later.

- Support your child to write down their worry. They could even make a 'worry post-box' to post it in.
- Agree a time, later that day or week, to think about this worry. Agree that you will think about any worries that have been written down for a set amount of time (for example, 15 minutes).
- Focus attention on the present moment by trying out a grounding exercise or do something more fun than worrying. They could watch their favourite show, play a game, do some drawing or chat to their friends or family.
- Come back to the worry together, at the agreed time, to think about what would be helpful to reduce this worry.

Looking after yourself

As parents or caregivers, you are very important in helping your child to understand their emotions. It is important that you look after yourself, so that you can calmly and consistently respond to your child when they are angry, upset or worried. We often call this self-care.

Self-care can take many forms and it is important that you take time to find what helps you to feel soothed and calm. Think about ways to include these things as regular activities in your week. Good self-care habits can help you to address your physical, psychological, social or spiritual needs. Examples of self-care habits that you could try are:

- eating regular meals
- speaking to, or asking for support from, friends and family
- listening to music or reading a book
- finding time to yourself
- practicing mindfulness or meditation
- expressing emotions
- doing exercise
- practicing some of the worry management strategies included in this booklet

Workbook

Facing my fears

To get more confident with facing your fear, you need to build it up slowly, just like climbing a ladder. Write your big fear (this might be 'going back to school') then on each step, write down a smaller step you can take to work towards this. For example, 1 step might be 'practice the trip to school', or 'spend an hour away from Mum and Dad'.

Most difficult

Least difficult

I am working towards:

| Date | What you did really well | How it made you feel |
|-------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | |

Decision making

Use this worksheet to help with decision making. List all of the positives and negatives of making or not making the change.

| Positives of making a change | Negatives of making a change |
|---|---|
| | |
| Positives of not making a change | Negatives of not making a change |
| | |

Support and more information

Websites

Childline Calm Zone,

web www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/

NSPCC

web www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/talking-about-difficult-topics/

web <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/away-from-home/at-school/>

YoungMinds

web <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/coping-with-life/problems-at-school/>

Story books

The invisible string, by Patrice Karst (2018)

My back to school bubble, by Hilary Rogers (2020; available online only)

Contact us

Respiratory psychology service,
3rd Floor Becket House,
Evelina London Children's Hospital,
Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7EH,
phone 020 7188 4640, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

For more information on conditions, procedures, and services offered at our hospitals, please visit
web www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets

Evelina London Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's medicines, please speak to the staff caring for them or contact our helpline, **phone** 020 7188 3003, Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm **email** letstalkmedicines@gstt.nhs.uk

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS), **phone** 020 7188 8801 **email** pals@gstt.nhs.uk. To make a complaint contact the resolution department **phone** 020 7188 3514 **email** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch, **phone** 020 7188 8815 **email** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

This service offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day, **phone** 111 **web** www.111.nhs.uk

NHS website

This website gives information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing, **web** www.nhs.uk

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