

# Coping with the easing of lockdown after shielding

**This leaflet gives information about coping with some of the feelings your child might have after shielding due to coronavirus (COVID-19). If you have any questions or concerns, 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 was thought to be at a higher risk of serious illness if they caught coronavirus because of an underlying health condition. As a result, you were told to be particularly careful to protect yourselves from coming into contact with coronavirus in the community. This is called shielding.

Guidance on shielding will probably continue to change. While you might still be advised to stay at home as much as possible, and to continue to be careful when out of the house, you might be able to go out to more places and see more people. This means that your child might also return to school. For families that do choose to pause shielding, going back to more of a 'normality' after being at home for a period of time might feel very worrying. There are lots of reasons why going back to school might be worrying or upsetting for children and young people. This booklet will look at some of these reasons and also suggests some strategies to cope with worry, sadness or other feelings related to returning to normality after a period of shielding.

It is completely normal to be feeling worried about returning to activities after shielding. Through the pandemic we have all become aware that the outside world might be unsafe, and it is understandable that leaving the home environment may bring up a variety of difficult feelings.

## Shielding has reduced our contact with the outside world

During shielding, young people and their families have had to stay away from the outside world.

Some of these children and young people have felt really safe at home, and have found shielding was actually more okay than they thought it would be. 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 shielding, your child will have had to stay away from the outside world. They also may have had fewer chances to be apart from you, and this might make them feel more worried about being away from you when they are back at school.

Children might also feel worried about going to school as things might be quite different from before the pandemic. For example they might have to go back to new classrooms, year groups or teachers, or start school at a different time in the morning because of social distancing guidance.

## Missing out on important things while shielding

For some people, lockdown or shielding at home may have helped them to feel safe and they might have found it enjoyable. For others it will have been a challenge. You will probably have felt some highs and lows. Some of the challenges your family might have faced could relate to missing out on:

- important events (such as special end-of-school events, celebrations, exams)
- seeing important other people outside of the home (such as extended family, teachers or friends)
- things that you were looking forward to (for example, holidays, celebrations)
- the easing of lockdown restrictions because your family needed to shield.

These challenges mean that young people may be feeling sad about their experiences and may need a chance to process these as they prepare for going back to school.

## Managing the unknown

For many people living through the pandemic has meant getting used to not knowing what might happen next. We have needed to get used to, a 'new normal' which has been changing all the time. This can lead us to have more 'What if ...?' thoughts, which can make us feel even more worried. Unfortunately, there are still a lot of things about coronavirus that we do not know. 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**

Some schools may have prepared factsheets, videos or letters for children returning to school to tell them what school will be like now and what changes have been made to keep them safe. It could be helpful to speak with your child's school to find out what changes have been made and what steps have been taken to prepare returning pupils for these.

### **Talk to your child**

You may know what changes your child might face when they return to school. Talk to your child about what going back to school might be like and what might be different. It is possible that you might have to get to school a different way, or that teachers and teaching assistants might be wearing different clothes (including masks or aprons) or working with different classes. 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 lockdown easing:

- Talking about returning to school/easing of lockdown 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 okay to say that you don't know the answer to a worry or concern.

## 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 may feel nervous about doing things outside the home after a period of shielding. Confidence in trying these activities is best built 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 may find it more 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 in this 'new normal' 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.

Draw on 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 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

As we are living with so many things that are unknown at the moment, we can get stuck in the decision making process:

- If you are choosing between two different 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 okay not to 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 be make us feel unable to move forwards as though we are frozen. You may 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.

## Strategies for managing worry when lockdown has eased

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. Follow asthma plan if breathing changes relate to underlying respiratory condition.

- Get your child to sit comfortably in a chair with one hand on their chest and one 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 okay. 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 is important for children to be aware that it is okay to feel differently to others.

There is no one right way to feel.

Understanding what we can and can’t control in the current moment is important. When we focus on things we **cannot** control we may 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.

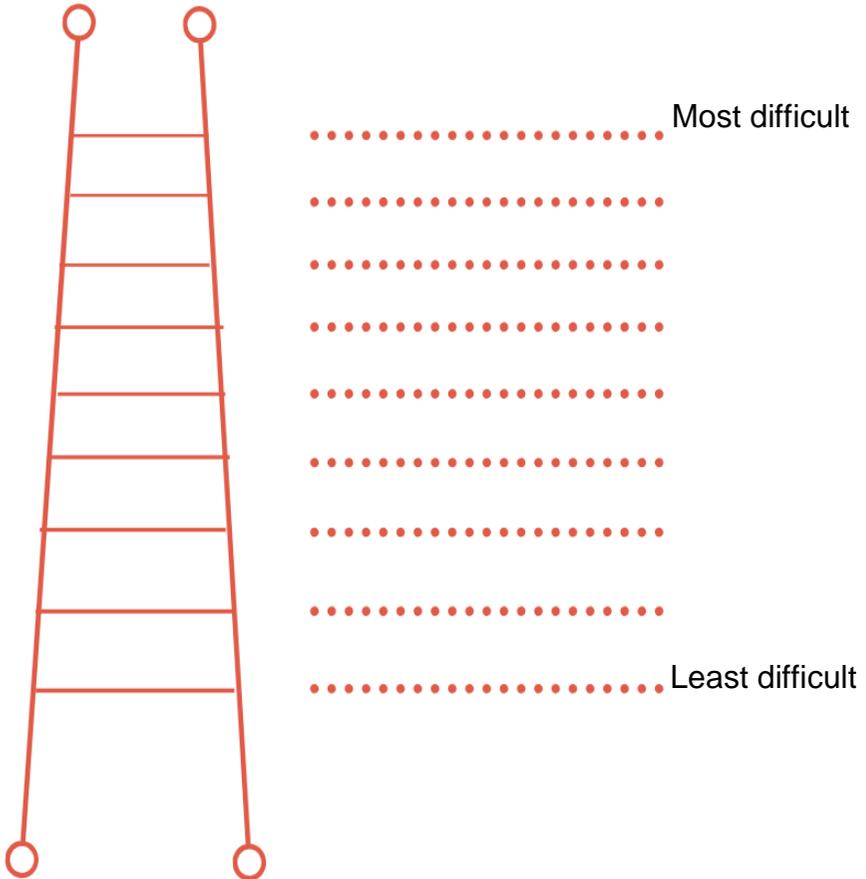
Self-care can take many forms and it is important that you take time to find what helps you to feel soothed and calm. Think about ways to include these things as regular activities in your week. Good self-care habits can help you to address your physical, psychological, social or spiritual needs. Examples 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, one step might be 'practice the trip to school', or 'spend an hour away from Mum and Dad'.



## **Achievement log**

Use this achievement log to list the things your child has overcome since being back at school.

I am working towards:

<b>Date</b>	<b>What you did really well</b>	<b>How it made you feel</b>

## Decision making

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

<b>Positives of making a change</b>	<b>Negatives of making a change</b>
<b>Positives of not making a change</b>	<b>Negatives of not making a change</b>

## Useful sources of information

### Websites

#### Childline Calm Zone,

**w:** [www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/](http://www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/)

#### NSPCC

**w:** [www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/away-from-home/at-school/#coronavirus](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/away-from-home/at-school/#coronavirus)

**w:** [www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/talking-about-difficult-topics/](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/talking-about-difficult-topics/)

**w:** [www.learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2020/june/returning-to-school-after-coronavirus-lockdown](http://www.learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2020/june/returning-to-school-after-coronavirus-lockdown)

#### YoungMinds

**w:** [www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/looking-after-yourself/coronavirus-and-mental-health/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/looking-after-yourself/coronavirus-and-mental-health/)

**w:** [www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/activities-and-conversation-starters-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/activities-and-conversation-starters-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/)

### Story books

The invisible string, by Patrice Karst (2018)

While we can't hug, by Eoin McLaughlin (2020),

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

Coronavirus: A book for children (PDF), by Elizabeth Jenner, Kate Wilson and Nia Roberts (2020, available online only),







## Contact us

Respiratory psychology service,  
3rd Floor Becket House,  
Evelina London Children's Hospital, Westminster  
Bridge Road, London SE1 7EH, **t:** 020 7188 4640,  
Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm.

For more information leaflets on conditions,  
procedures, and services offered at our hospitals,  
please visit **w:** [www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets)

## Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

## Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS)      **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

**e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto: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.

**t:** 020 7188 8815    **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

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