



How schools support pupils to cope with the frightening experience of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is certainly an unusual, unexpected event that is causing people to worry and even panic. Many children and young people are seeing and hearing frightening and disturbing news on television, social media or new sites. Some have family members or other people they know who are sick or may have died.

How children and young people might react

Frightening events can alter the way a child or teen sees the world, making it suddenly seem a much more dangerous and frightening place. Common responses to such an experience, whether the child or young person directly experienced the event or just heard about it, include the following:

Some children may be jumpy, volatile, hyper-vigilant, still operating in a survival mode for quite a while after a frightening event and easily triggered into fight and flight reactions. Some children may find it hard to concentrate, seem more forgetful or seem like they are daydreaming. Some may manifest physical

ailments such as headaches or stomach aches. For some children, images of frightening events can pop into their heads unexpectedly causing them fear and distress.



It is normal to be upset, even for quite a while after a frightening event. But over time these reactions will usually lessen.

What schools can do to help pupils

School is an important part of a child's life, providing security and routine when everything else may be in a state of uncertainty.

1. Reaffirm boundaries, rules and routines

Routines serve to create a sense of safety because they are predictable. Returning to a school routine helps children feel that troubling events have not taken control over every aspect of their daily lives. On the other hand, re-joining a community can be frightening for children who have internalized the message that outside of home is dangerous.

Because of the pandemic, schools have to put in place new rules when pupils return. Schools can help them feel safer sooner by establishing the 'new normal' quickly and providing visuals as well as verbal reminders. It will be helpful to think of all pupils as new starters, in need of clear and reassuring instructions. Consistency will be

critical. Rules, some of which may well be COVID-related, should be stated in a positive way ("do" as opposed to "don't") in simple, limited language and kept to a small number that can be easily remembered and recalled by all pupils and staff.



Children's fears decrease when they know that schools are doing what they can to take care of them and make them safe.

2. Identify pupils who are in need of social buffering

Schools will have identified vulnerable children and families through their prior knowledge of the school community. Some children may have expressed their need for additional support through their distressed behaviour. A simple wellbeing rating scale completed by all pupils – 1 to 10 – and the instruction to "name an adult in this school whom you can trust and can talk to" can help schools identify children who may need more support to cope and guide them to seek help from trusted adults. As well as worry boxes, a morning or an afternoon check-in as part of the daily routine, circles and drop-ins are all worth introducing.



The message from school is that we want to know if you are struggling and need help so we can support you.



3. Help pupils understand and talk about what happened

Some children carry enormous emotional burdens and school is their only place to talk about these. Adults in school can provide them with opportunities to talk rather than shielding them from what is going on in the world. Children may prefer to express their feelings through play, drawing, writing, songs, etc.

Children can also benefit from hearing facts and being given explanation of overwhelming events. They may have questions about life, death, justice, etc. Allowing them to explore these questions can help to reduce their anxiety.

Children may need to ask the same question several times as a way of coming to terms with what happened. Be patient and take time to explain using language that they can understand. Honesty is important. Do not be afraid to answer, "I don't know. I wonder how we can find out together." Do not jeopardize children's trust by making something up.



Be available to talk with children and young people, as and when they are ready.

4. Help pupils keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook

The pandemic may have brought up unrelated fears and issues. Reassure pupils and help



them look at the situation in a broader context. Help them see that there is a future beyond the current situation and that the future can be good. An optimistic and positive outlook enables pupils to see the good things in life and keep going even in the hardest times. In school, use history to show that life moves on after bad events. Do some research and have some links or clips available to share with pupils of positive stories in the news.



Create a collage with children of any age, of positive news and actions – celebrate these events with craft and art.

5. Focus on building resilience

Building resilience can help pupils manage stress and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Teaching pupils basic emotional literacy and emotional mindfulness is vital for developing resilience. It helps them take control of their emotions rather than their emotions controlling them.

Help children remember ways that they have successfully problem solved in the past. Adults in school can help children see how their individual accomplishments contribute to the wellbeing of the class as a whole.



Share with parents the school's resilience programme so they can continue to support their child at home.



6. Look after yourself as well

Adults in school may be so busy helping pupils that they neglect themselves. Make sure that you find ways for you and your colleagues to support one another. Try to manage your own emotions so that you can provide calm reassurance to pupils and offer a secure base.

7. When and where to seek more help

If a pupil continues to be very distressed over a lasting period several weeks later, or if their behaviour or emotional state is affecting everyday activities or causing concern, you could seek advice and support from your school's Educational Psychologist.



Useful Websites

- <https://childmind.org/our-impact/trauma-response/guides/>
- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-pupils>
- <https://youngminds.org.uk/youngminds-professionals/360-schools/>
- <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/helping-children-cope-with-traumatic-stress.htm>

