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GUIDANCE

Emotionally regulate before we educate: Focusing on psychological wellbeing in the approach to a new school day

INTRODUCTION

On 23 March 2020, schools and nurseries closed, to the majority of pupils, in Northern Ireland due to the implementation of lockdown restrictions brought on by the global pandemic of Covid-19. It has been announced that schools will start to reopen from 24 August 2020 for certain year groups and for those considered vulnerable and for the rest of pupils from 31 August. As staff and pupils return to educational settings, careful consideration has to be placed on how schools re-integrate back into education, whilst adhering to governmental guidelines.

The Education Restart Programme for Northern Ireland outlines wellbeing as one of the priorities in the reopening of schools⁴. Children look to the adults which surround them for safety and security^{1,3}. If the adults they look to are feeling high levels of stress, they themselves can absorb this stress unintentionally. The term primary caregivers may not only relate to the adults within the home setting, but those within our educational settings too. An emotionally regulated adult can help calm an emotionally dysregulated, stressed, and anxious child. However, an emotionally dysregulated adult can **never** emotionally regulate a dysregulated child⁸. With the restarting of formalised education in August 2020, it is advised schools prioritise the psychological wellbeing of **both** staff and pupils before considerations to academic work. Children have to be in a state of 'readiness' before they can learn, but also educational professionals have to also be in a state of 'readiness' to be able to return to the classroom for a new school day.

This paper, devised by the Division of Educational and Child Psychology Northern Ireland Branch, is proposed to outline how stress can affect the brain and our ability to learn, and provide practical, psychological advice to support all adults and children to re-integrate into a new school day.

HOW STRESS AFFECTS THE BRAIN AND LEARNING

Humans have a hierarchy of needs ranging from basic needs, psychological needs, and self-fulfilment needs^{10,15,16,17}. Prior to the pandemic of Covid-19, levels of poverty were increasing throughout the UK, making up approximately one in five of the population⁹. Therefore, a high percentage of families did not have their fundamental basic needs met which was already impacting upon learning outcomes^{13,14}. Upon the re-opening of schools, it will be important that particular focus is given to meeting fundamental basic needs (e.g. eating, drinking, warmth, and sleep) and psychological needs (e.g. belonging and nurture) of the school community; to provide a strong foundation for learning to take place. If these needs are not met this will likely result in the increase of feelings of stress and anxiety, which will particularly be felt by vulnerable groups, such as those experiencing poverty.

Stress is a natural human response which evolved as a survival mechanism and is often referred to as the 'flight/fight/freeze' response⁶. A level of emotional arousal (e.g. stress) is required to motivate and draw the attention of the learner which increases learning performance¹⁹. When we are in a state of calm we are able to use parts of the brain which are used for rational thinking, problem solving, and complex thoughts. However, when we are overwhelmed by feelings of stress, these parts of the brain are used less frequently, and activation is redirected to parts of the brain focused on basic needs⁸. This is why it is not possible to rationalise with someone when they are extremely upset, because this part of the brain is not activated. Therefore, before we can educate, we must first focus on a strong foundation of emotional regulation across the school community: staff, pupils, and caregivers.

Emotionally regulate before we educate

NOTICE THE SIGNS

An emotionally regulated adult is able to calm the emotions of an emotionally dysregulated child. However, an emotionally dysregulated adult cannot calm and regulate a dysregulated child⁸. Stress signs will vary from person to person and it will be vitally important for staff, caregivers, and pupils to know when they are stressed⁵. Some people may behave differently than usual. This may include not being able to concentrate on activities you usually enjoy, feeling restless, avoiding people, becoming hypersensitive to touch or noise, loss of appetite, overeating, difficulties sleeping, over-sleeping, or eating unhealthy foods. Some people may have physical reactions to feeling stressed¹⁸. They may feel their heart beating faster, changes in their body temperature, headaches, increased muscle tension, feeling tearful, and/or feeling sick¹⁸. Others may find themselves thinking more negatively about themselves e.g. 'I'm not good enough'. It will be crucial for adults to be able to recognise theirs and those of the children around them.

SELF-CARE

Self-care is important for managing stress. Just as they say on aeroplanes, first put on your own oxygen mask before helping someone else, the same goes for self-care. Adults must first plan and prepare how they are going to look after themselves during this uncertain time. Try to eat healthily, drink lots of water, take part in activities you enjoy, socialise (even if through technology), go out into nature, and/or exercise. Be kind to yourself as this will help the body to decrease those stress hormones, and help those around you feel calm too.

SAFE SPACE

Careful consideration should be given for mental health needs during key transitional periods, such as how children and staff arrive into school, break time, lunchtime, and how they leave school. Schools may wish to consider how they are going to provide a 'safe space' for both staff and pupils, and how this is going to be communicated to each. These 'safe spaces' should focus on how they are going to meet both their fundamental basic needs (e.g. eating, drinking) and psychological needs (e.g. belonging and nurture) of both staff and pupils.

CONNECT

The global use of the term 'social distancing' has been misinterpreted to mean that we cannot be social, whereas we can still engage in social interactions and be emotionally present from a distance apart. Language is important. We should communicate to our children we want them to physically distance, not socially or emotionally distance from others.

With children physically distancing themselves from their peers, they may require more affection (e.g. hugs), at times, from their caregivers as these can help our children soothe their emotions and feel calm. But not all children will require or want this, it will be important to listen to them and follow their lead to how they want their needs met. It is also OK if children do not seek this additional affection – everyone is different.

COMMUNICATION

- Connecting with children** – Caregivers and staff should not be afraid to discuss Covid-19 with children and the changes it has created. Use language they will understand and discuss in advance about any changes in routines and boundaries. Discussing the knock-on effects of Covid-19 will normalise their feelings and help them process what is happening, why it is happening, and what they are feeling⁵. Children can be very resilient when they understand what is going on as it helps them to feel safe and secure. Discussing it with children openly allows them a safe space to ask questions, communicate their thoughts and feelings, which reduces their feelings of stress. Listen to what they say and validate what they communicate⁵. It is important to emphasise they are having normal reactions to abnormal events. Avoid statements like 'don't worry' as these run the risk of minimising their experiences and may make children feel like their thoughts and feelings are not serious or valued⁵. Be realistic, factual, and supportive. Use phrases such as 'It's OK to feel [name emotion], I am here to keep you safe' or 'I can see that you are feeling [name emotion], I am here with you'⁵. Some children may require adults to help them name the emotions they are feeling, which will help with their understanding. Be creative in how you connect with children. Some children may prefer to engage in an activity they enjoy whilst you talk. Some children may also prefer different methods of communicating their thoughts and feelings (e.g. drawing)⁵. Allow children to express themselves in a way that works for them. It is normal to be worried and scared about not knowing all the answers to their questions. You do not have to know all the answers. If you do not know an answer, let them know you don't know but will try to find out. Where possible try to find out the answer as this helps to foster and build trust. The key to building resilience is: Relationships! Relationships! Relationships!⁵
- Connecting with staff** – Schools may wish to consider daily 'briefings' or 'check-ins' to inform staff of new changes and updates, but also to allow them to express any worries or concerns. Having this protected time will help to lower staff stress levels and help to foster a sense of community and support amongst the staff. This process should be open to all members of the school staff community.

- **Connecting with caregivers** – It will be vitally important for schools to communicate clearly and concisely the changes which are occurring in school in a format which is suitable for the caregivers of their pupils. This may require for multiple formats to be used to ensure all caregivers have been informed. Communication between school and home will be vital in lowering the stress levels experienced by pupils so that they do not absorb any unnecessary stress from the adults which surround them from the different systems which surround them.
- **Fact checking** – Facts regarding Covid-19 are ever-changing, and with communication ranging from face-to-face to online interactions, misinformation regarding Covid-19 is easily communicated and can raise unnecessary stress levels⁵. It will be vitally important for caregivers and schools staff to have up-to-date facts from trustworthy sources and discuss how media stories may be inaccurate, out of date, or based on rumour. For current and up to date information regarding Covid-19 in Northern Ireland, please visit the Public Health Agency on <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/>

EMOTIONAL AGE

Children who are considered vulnerable and/or have complex needs may have a lower emotional age to their chronological age. Use words and explanations that are appropriate for their chronological and emotional age⁵. For example children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or those who have experienced trauma, may have a significantly lower emotional age to their chronological age and may require explanations tailored to a younger age group¹⁸. Only use the information which you have properly fact checked to ensure the correct information is given and that you deliver it at a level which is appropriate for them. Children will not require the same level of detail as an adult requires, and some may require visual aids to support their learning.

REASSURE

Children can feel responsible for situations which are not within their control, especially if there is not a clear plan in place for tackling Covid-19⁵. It is important for adults to communicate with children that they, and other adults, are managing the situation. It is vital for adults to be calm and talk at a slow pace, as children will not only pick up on stress through what is said, but how it is said. In essence, it communicates to children that they can continue to be children⁵.

ROUTINE, STRUCTURE, AND BOUNDARIES.

Stress levels can increase when we feel the things around us are not predictable, which may result in us feeling unsafe or not secure within our environment. When children do not feel safe or secure, they can seek control. It is advised both school and home continue many familiar routines, structures, and boundaries where possible^{5,6}. Provide structured activities for children to feel in control with both within school and within the home. Where possible, allow pupils to be part of the decision making process where new routines are replacing old ones⁶. It will be vitally important for both children and adults to feel a sense of achievement throughout the day as this will increase self-esteem, lower stress levels, and increase confidence and resilience.

MODELLING

When those around children are calm, this can help them to feel calm⁵. However, when children do not know what to do this can make them feel unsafe and stressed. Many children will require adults within the home and at school to show them what to do, even though they have had it verbally explained. By modelling what is to be done, it not only makes clear *what* they have to

do, but also tells them *how*. Modelling can be done to communicate and demonstrate what new routines and structures are put in place, but also for self-soothing techniques. For example, when we feel more stress we breathe more quickly, which increases our levels of oxygen in the bloodstream and can activate our stress response. One simple technique is to reduce the pace of our breathing. Inhaling through the nose for 4 seconds, and exhaling through the mouth for 6 seconds, and repeating till the person feels calmer. Adults can do this to lower their own stress levels, but they can also model it *for* children and practice it *with* them⁵.

PLAY

Children use play to make sense of the world around them and what is going on. It allows children to express their emotions in a different ‘language’ and helps them to process what their emotions mean⁶. Play encourages the release of positive chemicals in the brain, which has positive effects on wellbeing, the immune system, and readiness for learning. With the inevitable changes to social time within the school environment, educational staff may be concerned how children will be able to play and social interact within the governmental restrictions. Children will always find opportunities to engage with play and this will not go away. In today’s modern world, our children’s, and our own time is packed with activities and competing stimuli. Between attending different clubs, social gatherings, increased workloads, and even checking social media, we have forgotten what it is like to be bored⁶. Boredom is not a negative experience. When we constantly and consistently give our children activities to engage with (including technology) we are, in essence taking away their learning opportunities to be creative, to self-soothe, to be inquisitive, and to become independent. Try not to fill all your child’s free time with activities, allow them to explore their imagination and cultivate how to entertain themselves, away from technology⁶.

Adults need play too. It can be a fun and creative way to bond and communicate with children. Within educational settings, adults may need to structure play activities to adhere to physical distancing. Many play activities, which have disappeared from the playground, can be used with physical distancing. Skipping rope, hopscotch, and musical statues, to name but a few. The process of play is more important than the outcome and there is no right or wrong way to do it – have fun!

OUTDOOR PLAY IN THE SCHOOL DAY

Play is a vital component to positive development and increasing playtime has shown to improve academic performance¹¹. Some research has also shown that being outside in natural environments (e.g. nature) can decrease stress and improve mental health^{2,7,12}. Structured play activities (such as hopscotch and skipping rope) can be planned and facilitated by educational professionals to allow children to socialise, increase physical activity, and improve their mental wellbeing. Adults can also enjoy these outside spaces to interact with children and each other, which in turn will help to improve their own psychological wellbeing during a new school day.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr Marie J. Hill, Chartered Psychologist, Educational Psychologist, Chair of the British Psychological Society’s Division Of Educational Child Psychology Northern Ireland Branch

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RESOURCES

During the Covid-19 pandemic the British Psychological Society convened a Cross Divisional Coordination Group to facilitate the rapid production of psychological advice and guidance to inform and support the UK response.

All productions from this group can be found [here](#)

[Dr Bruce Perry: A 16-minute video where Dr Bruce Perry talks about Neurosequential Network Stress & Resilience in response to COVID](#)

[Mind, for better mental health: Coronavirus and your wellbeing](#)

[Mental Health Foundation: Looking after your mental health during the Coronavirus outbreak](#)

[World Health Organization: Coping with stress during the 2019-nCoV outbreak](#)

[Using Digital Stories to support children with autism spectrum disorder](#)

[Using Social Stories to support children with autism spectrum disorder](#)

[Social Stories \(Carol Gray\)](#)

[British Psychological Society: Teacher Resilience during Coronavirus schools' closure](#)

[British Psychological Society: The psychology of play](#)

[YoungMinds: Hope Clouds](#)

[Chalkbeat: Back to school ideas](#)

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St Andrews House,
48 Princess Road East,
Leicester LE1 7DR, UK

 0116 254 9568  www.bps.org.uk  info@bps.org.uk