

Returning to School using the 5 Principles of Recovery

Research findings from Stevan Hobfoll et al (2007) offer five essential elements of intervention for disasters and mass trauma. Everyone will have a different story about the COVID-19 lockdown and the resulting time away from school. While we must be mindful of the many positive experiences which children have had during this period, and the fact that many have coped well with the unusual circumstances in recent months, others may have found it very stressful depending on individual risk and protective factors.

Professor Barry Carpenter (2020) outlines a range of potential losses during the pandemic - including structure, friendship, routine, opportunity and freedom – which can precipitate anxiety, bereavement and trauma. This article will look at each of Hobfoll et al's five key principles and consider how they can be applied when supporting children with the return to school.

Safety

Hobfoll et al explain how a sense of safety helps to reduce the impact of both the biological responses to disaster and trauma (i.e. the fight/flight/freeze response) and the cognitive inhibitors of recovery (such as lacking a balanced view of how dangerous a situation or context continues to be). The sense of safety is not simply related to the health and wellbeing of oneself, family and friends, but also negative news, misinformation and other factors that cause the perception of threat to persist. Making the school environment a safe and welcoming place is therefore a priority.

Emphasise what is staying the same: An obvious starting point is focusing on what hasn't changed. The staff. The building. The playground. If there were particular games, activities or routines which a class enjoyed with their pre-lockdown teacher, perhaps their new teacher could continue these or adapt them in some way to maintain some continuity.

Describe and show what is different and why: It will be important for students to understand the necessary adaptations to the school environment. Information delivered about hygiene measures, use of masks/face coverings and changes to entry and exit times and locations should be clear, honest and age-appropriate. Photos, videos and Social Stories can help students to walk through a typical COVID-secure day and allow for new rules and routines to be discussed at home. Emphasise what to do, rather than what not to do.

Establish a welcoming atmosphere: We can communicate lots of positive messages and affirmations during the return to school. *"We are so happy to see you again". "We can't wait to get to know you". "You belong here". "We are making school a safe place for you". "It's ok to feel worried/frustrated/confused". "You can talk to an adult at any time". "We will get through this together"*. We can convey these messages both in words and using signs and posters on the walls of classrooms, corridors and foyers.

Promote structure and routine: Children will benefit from having clear expectations about the school day. Use a "First...then..." approach with younger children, helping them to anticipate

what is happening now and next. Appropriate visuals (whole-day timetables, part-day schedules, checklists, timers and countdown cards) can break down tasks into more manageable chunks and provide feedback on the aims and duration of the activity. Older children may benefit from a personalised timetable which is colour-coded to specific subjects and locations. Simple flow charts can be used to show where to go to and who to speak with when they have a worry. If possible, have a designated safe space for all students to access, allowing for opportunities to talk or chill out for a few minutes.

Consider how safety has been created elsewhere: Let's not forget the many children with SEND and additional needs who were not attending school before lockdown or have struggled to obtain an appropriate placement. This is an opportunity to engage with their parents and caregivers and liaise with other professionals who have developed relationships with the family. We can learn from what made school unsafe in the past, in order to create more personalised support measures, and adapt the strategies and resources which have worked well at home both during COVID-19 and before.

Calm

While initial increased levels of arousal and anxiety are an expected consequence of exposure to disasters and mass trauma, Hobfoll et al note that this becomes problematic when such anxiety does not subside. Continuously high levels interfere with our daily functioning and can lead to neutral or ambiguous events and interactions being perceived as threatening and stressful. Promoting a calming and regulating environment will be essential for those children who are nervous or frustrated about new rules and others who have preferred the virtual and self-directed nature of learning at home.

Talk about emotions in developmentally appropriate ways: Naming and empathising with emotions is a great way of connecting to a student's inner experience. This not only helps them to feel listened to and validated, but it also expands their emotional vocabulary so that they can express their needs in words in the future. Younger children or those with additional needs may need alternative methods. Matching emotions with colours, animals, emojis or characters related to the child's personal interests may be helpful.

Be mindful of sensory needs and coping mechanisms: If you need to open windows and doors for ventilation, consider if some students should be seated away from these sources of noise and visual distraction. You may need to add a pleasing scent to the classroom or their seating area in order to mask the alerting odour of cleaning products. Some children may already engage in stimming to keep themselves regulated and we may see an increase in fidgeting, rocking and humming as they adapt to new experiences. We need to be respectful of these preferences and incorporate opportunities for movement, rhythm and proprioception throughout the day.

Teach calming strategies: Simple breathing techniques, such as square breathing or five finger breathing, can be helpful in regulating the nervous system and these could be quickly modelled and applied on a whole class basis during transitions and changes in activity. Grounding techniques, such as the 54321 approach or finding objects in the environment to correspond with each letter of the alphabet, can help to anchor the student in the present moment. Younger children may find it easier to simply name what they see around them or take a few moments to share what they can hear. Tensing and relaxing different muscle groups can also be useful. A preventative approach which applies such strategies on a regular basis is likely to be more effective than responding after stress has escalated.

Acknowledge and challenge thoughts: Exposure to media and anxious conversations between adults may result in a range of thoughts about returning to school. It's important that we give time and space to listen to these thoughts and teach about common biases. For example, it's easy to magnify the negatives in a situation and discount the positives, generalise one bad experience to other events or predict that the worst outcome is the most likely. We can help students to become detectives. They could write down evidence for and against the thought, reflect on past experiences and discuss in groups what advice they would give to others in a similar situation.

Don't forget the positives: Promoting a calm environment can't just be about mitigating stressors and teaching coping techniques. In the early days and weeks of the transition, we also need to lean into positive emotions. How can you make your students smile and laugh as often as possible? Younger children may enjoy silly songs and voices, the use of puppets and lots of opportunities to learn through play. For older students, we can introduce new topics and skills through games and discussions and make time to be playful and share funny jokes and stories.

Connection

Connectedness is essential for creating a sense of belonging, developing shared narratives and facilitating co-regulation of emotions. There has been so much emphasis on social distancing, despite the fact that relationships can endure despite restrictions on physical proximity. Just as families have experienced lovely reunions as COVID restrictions have eased, the return to school represents a further opportunity to invest in relationships and strengthen connections.

Share stories: Whether it's as a whole-class or in smaller groups, we can ask children to share their likes, dislikes, fears, hopes and personal stories from recent months. This can be an important "Get to know me" stage for students transitioning to a new school and it can convey how there is no right or wrong way to think and feel about the lockdown and the return to school. Keep in mind that some of the children we may have worried about in recent months ended up thriving, while others may have struggled in unexpected ways. We also need to be respectful of those children who are not exactly thrilled to be returning to a place which they found stressful or unfulfilling in the past – this is our chance to provide a "reset" and help them to develop a different story about school.

Check in: Try to have some one-to-one time with all of the students in your class over the first week or two, as they may be reluctant to share their stories and views in a group setting. Spontaneous check-ins and chats can reinforce connections and make it more likely for the children to approach you when they want to talk about a worry or need help with a problem. When a child is anxious or reluctant to attempt a task on their own, reassure them about when you will be back to check in with them and talk through what they can do in the mean-time.

Show that you remember them: Making reference to the child's strengths and interests and telling them how you have been thinking about them during the period of lockdown is a great way of helping them to feel kept in mind. We can consider transitional objects for children who are worried about separating from parents or are missing staff who worked with them before the lockdown. These can be as simple as a button or pebble, a small photograph or both the child and adult having a heart drawn on their wrists.

Reinforce a sense of community: For early years children who are meeting each other for the first time, you can use circle time activities to show pictures of their favourite toys, games, food, characters from books and TV shows. Older children could complete an "All About Me" page

and share similar information with their peers. Explore different methods of socially distanced gestures, such as throwing a high five or hug through the air or showing a thumbs up, so that everyone has a personalised and comfortable method of connecting with others. We can also rethink staff profiles on the school website and make space for them to share their interests, positive quotes, what they do when they are worried about something, their favourite methods of relaxation, etc.

Random acts of kindness: Noticing when young people are kind to each other and the adults around them – giving a peer the first turn at a game, holding the door open for someone, praising a friend’s achievement or helping others to tidy up – can help to create a positive ethos. You could ask your class to write down one thing they like about everyone else or one thing they missed about each of their peers during the lockdown. These can be revealed on a daily basis with each day dedicated to a specific student. Staff can also convey these acts with both children and their parents using short post-it notes, thank you cards and “We miss you” cards during periods of illness or absence.

Self and Collective Efficacy

This concept is based on the belief that circumstances are within our control and that decisions and actions we take can and do lead to positive outcomes. A “Can do” attitude must be preserved during difficult times, as our sense of agency and competence can be overwhelmed by external stressors; especially if our typical avenues of support and coping are restricted or closed altogether. Hobfoll et al emphasise that self-efficacy cannot be fostered within a vacuum. It requires co-operation and collaboration.

Respect children’s voices and choices: While it’s natural to focus on all the things we are doing to help them return to school, it’s essential that their voices are heard. They may enjoy creating signs and posters for new rules and routines in school. Hygiene measures may be more fun when they’re talked about through a class mantra or rap song. The bubble concept may be more personalised if they can bring their own photos and drawings to the classroom door and walls. They may wish for increased use of technology and opportunities for self-directed learning, if these were particularly motivating during the lockdown period.

Tap into the lived experienced of parents: No-one has more knowledge and insight into the impact of lockdown on children than their parents and caregivers. While it may take time for a child to feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts and feelings to school staff, particularly if they are entering a new school environment, we should actively collaborate with parents. What worked well at home to help them manage stress and change? How are they talking about the return to school? If they dreaded school before the lockdown, what can be done to make it better?

Give clear goals and roles: Young people are more likely to succeed when tasks or routines are achievable. In the early days and weeks of the return to school, we should consider breaking things down into small steps, offering more opportunities for practise, normalising mistakes and setbacks and seeking feedback to ensure that children feel comfortable and confident with what they are being asked to do. Assigning jobs and responsibilities which promote their personal strengths, and empowering them to set their own targets, will also help them to feel valued.

Reflect on previous success: Encourage students to look back at times where they coped with a difficult situation or solved a problem. Can they remember what it was like and what helped

them in the end? There may be a strategy, resource or mindset that we can replicate for the here-and-now. It may be even a previous period of school absence due to illness or other factors, where they were able to settle back and overcome initial nerves.

Utilise the power of the peer group: Circle time and open discussions can help to promote coping strategies and problem-solving skills, through exposure to the personal experiences of peers. Older peers could also play a powerful role as mentors. The school's website and social media could feature students from higher year groups talking about their first day in secondary school, how they coped with anxiety in the past, what they do to relax when they are stressed, etc.

Hope

Hobfoll et al described how hope can often be the first victim of mass trauma, as people's view of the world is quickly shattered. It can be easy for children to feel ill-equipped to overcome adversity in their lives, especially when they watched endless media coverage and political figures giving grim warnings. Hope is something that needs to be actively cultivated. To help students feel hopeful about the future, we need to latch on to the smallest moments of success and positivity.

Reflect on what they enjoyed about lockdown. Not only do we need to be respectful of the many positive experiences which children may have had during these unusual times, but this may also help to mitigate the impact of local or national lockdowns in the future. Ask them to draw or write about their favourite day, a positive memory for each of the five senses or the new skills and hobbies which they developed. You could also talk through the possibility of a future lockdown and lean into these memories and experiences for reassurance.

Share good news. Make time to talk about positive stories in the news and acts of generosity and kindness. This will be even more powerful when school staff and students bring their own experiences to the table. Similarly, we should keep photos and records of their play and work as concrete evidence of how they have coped with the transition and adapted well to changes in rules and routines.

Make a Wellbeing Calendar. This could be mapped out over a week or a month, where the student can record their feelings each day using a word, a colour or a 1 – 10 scale. Such a resource may be important in showing that feelings can lessen and pass with time. It also provides natural avenues to look for exceptions to a feeling. If yesterday was a 7 and today is a 4, what was different about today that made the student feel less anxious? Where were they? What were they doing? Who was with them?

Think good, feel good: "Three Good Things" has become a very popular technique and it is the perfect antidote to our natural bias for negative thoughts. We can ask students to say three positive things, write them down, draw them, make them into a song or a poem, etc. This could be applied flexibly – it could be three things about the whole day or three things about a particular activity which is usually anxiety-provoking. Keeping a gratitude journal can also help children to actively reflect on the things they appreciate and promote a more hopeful and optimistic mindset. These might include teachers, friends, family, TV shows and movies, books, trips, unexpected but positive experiences, etc.

Write a letter to their future self. This could be a nice activity for reinforcing how they overcame a challenge or difficult period and giving reminders of successful coping strategies. It can also include hopes and goals for the future, allowing for reflection on how to make these a reality. The idea could be further developed through a class time capsule or individual memory boxes which are unopened for a period of time. Collecting concrete and visual evidence of good times – through pictures, diary entries, certificates and compliments – ensures that students will experience a dose of positivity when these are unearthed in the future.

Safety

- Emphasise what is *staying the same*.
- Show what is *different* using photos, videos & social stories.
- Positive messages and affirmations: "You belong here"; "This is a safe place"; "It's ok to feel..."
- Promote *structure & routine*. Create safe spaces to talk & relax.
- Learn from parents about what made school unsafe & difficult in the past.

Calm

- Talk about *emotions* using words, colours, animals, emojis, etc.
- Respect *sensory preferences*. Integrate movement & rhythm into the daily schedule.
- Teach *calming strategies* – breathing, grounding, muscle relaxation.
- Acknowledge and challenge *negative thoughts*.
- Look for ways to make students *smile & laugh*.

Connection

- Share stories about lockdown experiences and discuss fears and hopes.
- Show you remember the child's interests and strengths. Link in with previous teachers.
- Keep the student in mind with *regular* check ins.
- Sense of community – virtual show-and-tell; "All About Me"; socially distanced gestures.
- Random acts of kindness and appreciation.


Efficacy

- Respect children's *voices and choices*. Involve them in creating new rules and routines.
- Collaborate with parents and *adapt what has worked well at home*.
- Set *realistic and personal goals* and assign key jobs and roles.
- Reflect on *previous success* & achievements.
- Have *older students & staff* share experiences and coping techniques.

Hope

- Explore what they *enjoyed about lockdown*.
- Share *good news stories* to boost positivity.
- Record feelings with words or 1 – 10 scales to *show exceptions and change over time*.
- Buffer negativity through "3 Good Things" & gratitude journals.
- Promote *optimism* with letters to their future selves, time capsules and memory boxes.

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