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RESOURCE PAPER

Coronavirus and UK schools closures: Support and advice for schools and parents/carers

Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP)
British Psychological Society (BPS)

This advice was produced in response to the UK Government's announcement of school closures as part of the response to Coronavirus. As the situation continues to develop, guidance may be updated as further details emerge.

INTRODUCTION

As educational psychologists and in our work with schools we know that they are flexible and will be able to use this advice to meet their own particular needs. Local schools know their communities, their families and their children and young people. The aim of this advice is not to be prescriptive but to offer suggestions at a time of uncertainty.

Psychologists recognise that for some children, being at home for extended periods of time can be difficult. It is for this reason that we have explicitly considered continued liaison between schools, families and relevant professionals while the current measures are in place.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

The UK Government has advised that schools will be closed to **most** children with the exceptions of:

- Children with EHCPs.
- Children of key workers (e.g. nurses, police – though the government will publish a list of jobs that constitute 'key workers' shortly).
- Vulnerable children – broadly defined as children with a social worker i.e. those children classed as 'Children in Need', on a Child Protection Plan, or in local authority care.

The government has also indicated that there will be provision for children who are eligible for free school meals. Gavin Williamson, Education Secretary, announced that schools will have the flexibility to provide meals or vouchers to children eligible for free school meals. The government will be launching a national voucher scheme as soon as possible. The value of the vouchers is to exceed the amount the government pays schools as parents do not have the capacity to bulk buy food in the same way that schools are able to.

DECP POSITION ON THE GOVERNMENT'S ANNOUNCEMENT

Vulnerable children: The DECP is mindful that the definition of 'vulnerable children' is not static and not solely dependent on statutory 'categories'. Whether or not a child is vulnerable may change given their current circumstances, for example, should a child experience bereavement.

Vulnerable children and safeguarding: It is important to provide clarity that schools and parents will be able to continue to access and seek advice and support from child protection agencies.

Children with EHCPs: The DECP's view is that there needs to be a broader consideration of children with Special Educational Needs and Disability. Government guidance and advice should extend this to mean children who currently have a draft EHCP and those who are going through the needs assessment process. We appreciate that this may lead to difficult circumstances for parents or carers of small families, to make one child attend school while the other stays at home and so individual circumstances would need to be considered.

Specialist provision (special schools): A significant number of specialist settings require that children who attend have an EHCP. The implication may be that specialist settings remain open to educate these children and young people. The DECP recognises that children attending specialist provisions, particularly those settings that educate children with profound and multiple learning disabilities, may have an increased likelihood of living with underlying health conditions. The government should provide clarity for these settings regarding their obligations. If these settings remain open, the DECP believes that the implication is that social distancing measures take on a greater level of importance, as do hygiene measures, to ensure that children and young people attending these settings remain healthy.

STRESS IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Being out of school for an indeterminate length of time, with reduced access to outdoor play facilities and social spaces is likely to be difficult for many children. For families living in overcrowded conditions this will add to the stresses of daily life considerably. Families living in close proximity for extended periods are likely to find this to be stressful.

Adults will need to be aware of their stress responses, and also able to recognise how children and young people are exhibiting signs of stress. Signs of stress will vary for every child. Some children may verbalise their worries, others may withdraw in to themselves, others may engage in challenging behaviours.

Some children and young people, particularly those who are older, may be able to self-manage their stress, but this is more difficult for younger children. Adults will need to help younger children to understand and label their emotions, and help them to do things that will reduce their stress level. Exercise, art, drama, music and other creative activities are good choices.

It's good to talk, the DECP have published advice on [how to talk to children about coronavirus](#). Our advice was summarised as:

- Be truthful but remember your child's age.
- Allow children to ask questions.
- Try to manage your own worries.
- Give practical guidance e.g. how to wash your hands.

ADVICE FOR SCHOOLS

We know that schools have been working exceptionally hard at this time. This advice is provided with the confidence that schools are able and committed to meeting the needs of children and families.

- **Contingency planning** – Senior leaders should pull together information regarding all vulnerable children who attend their setting. Ensure that you have the most up to date contact details for parents, carers and social workers, if appropriate.
- **Daily briefings** – Most schools are already implementing daily briefings for all staff. Ensure these are planned in to the timetable for the rest of the week. These daily briefings can continue once schools are closed by using software like Skype or Zoom and will help provide reassurance to staff.
- **School contact details** – Make sure that you have a clear plan and accessible information about how parents and allied professionals can contact school leaders if necessary, about an individual child. Make sure that the school office number continues to be monitored and/or diverted as necessary.
- **Keeping in contact with some children** – Some children have strong relationships with key adults in school. The current closures are unplanned and may adversely affect children who need a consistent relationship with an adult in school. Put in place plans for key adults, or senior leaders, to keep in contact with such children during any periods of school closure. These children are highly likely to need the consistency, reassurance and connection that will come from being ‘held in mind’.
- **Make time to talk** – For those children still attending school, use the timetable to provide children with time to talk and to understand this unexpected change in their circumstances. Use tutor times, carpet times, or small group sessions to encourage children to share their thoughts and experiences. Normalise feelings of concern or worry. Children knowing that others feel the same way can promote a sense of belonging so that they know they are not alone.
- **Providing education** – Schools are still responsible for the education of their children and young people. Reassure parents that during the time that children are away, they will have access to learning materials as appropriate. Many schools use online learning platforms already and it may be necessary to provide more detailed information to parents about how to access and use these services.
- **A ‘full school timetable’ won’t be possible** – Schools should be sensitive to the fact that setting a child a ‘full timetable’ of work, as if they were at school, is not going to be possible. Such an approach risks leading to conflict and heightened stress at an unsettling time. This is particularly important where households have a number of children attending school – five children in different years could potentially mean 5 different timetables. It is highly unlikely that parents and carers will be able to manage this.
- **Not all children will have access to IT** – Where possible and appropriate ensure that children have access to online learning resources however there will need to be sensitivity and adjustments for children who do not have access to high speed broadband or suitable IT equipment at home – we would anticipate that most schools would know who these children are. *It is not appropriate or possible for children to be completing online learning via small mobile devices with limited data contracts.*
- **Early years children and IT** – For children in the early years, online learning is not a suitable approach. Consider how you can share your expertise with parents and carers regarding play-based learning.

- **Psychological wellbeing is paramount** – There will be some cases where children and families may be experiencing significant levels of anxiety due to the general situation or a family member being ill. This may mean that for these children focusing on their wellbeing and mental health is the priority, rather than educational activities.
- **Parents withdrawing children from school** – Some parents or carers may not want to send their children to school due to concerns and anxieties. Schools will need to be mindful of these concerns and consider how best to respond to this situation with a view to maintaining strong relationships.
- **Supporting parents and carers to talk with children** – You may have phone calls from parents and carers who are worried about how to address their child's concerns. You can signpost them to the DECP advice on [talking to children about coronavirus](#).

ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

- **Schools have not 'shut down'** – Although most children will not be able to physically attend school you will still be able to communicate with senior leaders or, in some instances, teachers.
- **Don't try to replicate a full school timetable** – It won't be possible to replicate a full school timetable for a variety of reasons. Giving yourself and your children permission to accept this can be a big weight lifted.
- **Expect stress** – This is an uncertain and unpredictable situation, stress and anxiety are normal.
- **Reassure children** – Children can sometimes believe they are responsible for things that are clearly beyond their control. Reassure children that it is the adult's job to make sure things are OK and to keep them safe.
- **Help children stay connected to their friends** – Friendships are a key resiliency factor for children and young people. Most children see their friends nearly every day of the week and so not being in contact with them for some time might be upsetting. Is it possible for children to talk to their friends on the phone? Perhaps establish a group Skype or WhatsApp call? Perhaps they could write letters to each other.
- **Normalise the experience** – Normalising the experience is likely to reduce anxiety for many children. Reassure children that lots of adults and other children are in the same situation.
- **Have a routine and structure** – Having a plan and a predictable routine for the day can be very reassuring. As adults we like to know what is going to happen, and children like this too. A consistent routine lets everyone be secure about the plans for the day. It is often useful to involve children in creating this routine, so that they feel part of the plan, rather than the plan being imposed on them. You could display the routine using a timeline, or maybe pictures and visuals. Encourage children to develop independence by referring to their own routine/plan themselves.
- **Don't worry if the routine isn't perfect** – Remember, this isn't a normal situation. If you find that planning and sticking to the routine is causing more stress, friction or conflict, then it's OK to be more 'free-flow'. Perhaps be guided by the activities that children want to do.
- **Avoid putting too much pressure on academic work** – Most parents and carers aren't teachers and so it's OK not to be doing 'school work' for six hours a day. It might be more important to be spending time together, building relationships, enjoying shared activities and reassuring children, as opposed to replicating the school timetable.
- **Try to keep work in one place** – If children are doing school work or project work at home, try to keep it all in one place so that it doesn't spread out over the house. This can help to maintain a work/home boundary. We know that people live in different circumstances that might mean

this isn't always possible, so perhaps there might be other ways to 'signal' the end of working e.g. putting away the work and then enjoying a favourite song or shared dance!

- **Reduce access to rolling news** – It is important to keep up to date with new developments and announcements, but it can be hard to switch off from the constant stream of news from media outlets and social media. Reduce the time spent hearing, reading or watching news – at the moment it might be overwhelming for adults and children. Try to protect children from distressing media coverage.
- **Supervise children with screens** – It is likely that children and young people will be using screens more often over the coming weeks e.g. phones, tablets, gaming consoles and the internet. If this is the case make sure they are supervised. Ensure appropriate content filters are active – the UK Safer Internet Centre offers [guidance on setting up parental control](#). Try to ensure all children have a balanced range of activities each day. Involve children and young people in these discussions so that they feel part of the plan.
- **Provide reassurance about exams being cancelled** – Young people may now be concerned about the announcement that exams later this year will not be going ahead as planned. They may feel like all their hard work has been for nothing. Reassure young people that the Prime Minister has said that all children and young people will get the qualification they worked towards, but acknowledge that the plan is a bit uncertain right now. Reassure young people that the government and Department for Education are working on a plan.
- **Play** – Play is fundamental to children's wellbeing and development – children of all ages! It's also a great way to reduce stress in adults.

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