

Cumann Síceolaithe Éireann

The Relaunch

Back to School After COVID-19 Restrictions

Guidance from the
Psychological Society of Ireland



This Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) guidance document has been prepared by the PSI Division of Educational Psychology in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The document is aimed at schools (primary & post-primary) that are preparing to welcome children back to school post-restrictions. It provides advice to school staff around supporting students in the transition back to school.

Contributors

Deirdre Boyle, Chartered Educational Psychologist

Aidan Corr, Educational Psychologist

Marian Naughton, Chartered Educational Psychologist

Rita Wall, Chartered Educational Psychologist



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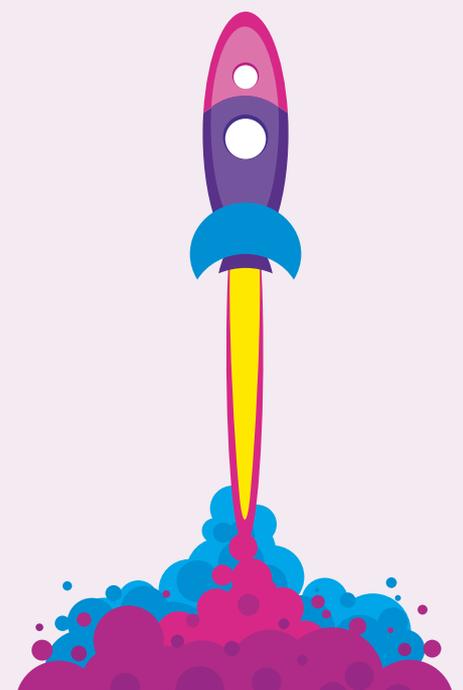
These have been strange times for all of us - but we are all in this together and, together, we can be resilient, creative, and resourceful. With a confident and positive attitude, and mutual support, we will get through this, and perhaps come out of it even stronger than we are now.

We will all have our own personal stories of COVID-19 and the Restrictions, and we will all have had our own individual ways of coping with the pandemic. We, or our loved ones, may have been ill or we may have even lost somebody special to the virus. Some of us will have found the restrictions manageable and might have even enjoyed certain aspects of them. Others may have found the restrictions very challenging for various reasons. Some of us, children and adults, will need more support, reassurance, and special provision than others.

We are now talking about returning to school. But it is not really *returning* to school, not as we knew it before. There will be some very real differences and new challenges. Teachers and other members of school staff will be key players in helping children to relaunch their school lives as members of the school community and as active learners in this 'new' school environment.

In preparation for this relaunch, it might be useful to consider the purpose of school and formal education, not to mention formal state examinations. According to Plato, the purpose of school was to produce good citizens. He suggested that good, kind guardians could help students to grow into good citizens. Much more recently, Reiss & White (2013) said that, in general terms, the aims of a school are the same as the aims of any home with children. They are two-fold and 'simplicity itself' – *to equip children to lead a life that is personally flourishing, and to help others to do so too.*

In getting ready for relaunch, teachers and staff at school will need to be sure that they are feeling confident themselves, even if a little anxious. With teachers and other school staff feeling confident, prepared, and supported by all the relevant agencies, we are already on our way. We can also rely on some old familiarities to provide a launching pad – familiar buildings, yards, and classrooms; familiar friends and classmates; and, familiar and trusted teachers and school staff. Children will also be, by now, very familiar with the concepts of handwashing, coughing etiquette, social distancing, and other stay-well strategies. We are ready for relaunch.



The Countdown To Relaunch



In this short document, we hope to provide you with some useful tips and advice about going back to school.

The Countdown To Relaunch



10. Prepare

It will be important to set aside time, prior to September, to create a plan of action which is likely to be multifaceted in nature. School leadership and existing student support teams are essential in this regard. It might also be advisable to establish a special 'Relaunch Team' to lead planning activities. Schools are not alone in this endeavour. Ecological Systems Theories (see *Resource Document One* in the appendices) reminds us of the various spheres of a child's environment and their various and interdependent impacts on the child's development. Plans can be informed by consulting with parents and the wider community as regards their experiences during the restrictions and their concerns over the return to school. Schools can also collaborate with and draw upon the expertise of relevant agencies such as the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).



9. Ensure physical safety

Schools are reopening in a context which has no record in living memory, that of the threat of a potentially very serious virus spreading within the school community. Schools will be obliged to adhere to Government guidelines designed to ensure the physical safety of the school community. New policies, systems, and procedures should be communicated clearly to staff and parents, so everybody is aware of what they must do. This will help ease the transition and should make everyone feel that they are working together to make the school environment safe. The new procedures can be taught to students through the communication of clear rules and the establishment of robust routines. Ideally, communication about new systems and procedures should be done in advance of the return to school by creating explanatory leaflets for staff and families or posting illustrative videos on the school website.



8. Support staff wellbeing

It is likely that many staff members will have faced challenges during the restrictions. It is essential that staff wellbeing is prioritised at a strategic and systems level and that measures be put in place to foster physical and mental wellbeing among staff, with the aim of having a staff body that is revived, relaxed and re-energised for the relaunch. Social connectedness is a core factor in promoting wellbeing. First steps in this direction could be to facilitate staff in reconnecting with each other and giving time to rebuilding relationships within the school community. Existing staff support structures may need to be augmented and new systems for monitoring the wellbeing of staff on an ongoing basis may warrant development. If staff members appear well and confident, and can model calm concern, students are more likely to remain calm and confident. (Please see *Resource Document Two* for further information on wellbeing).

The Countdown To Relaunch



7. Welcome back

The return to school in September 2020 is a significant milestone for our country in the context of this pandemic. Notwithstanding the measures which we must adopt on an ongoing basis to prevent the spread of the virus, for many the return to school represents a triumph over a virus which threatened our society, a relaunch of our lives and a return to some degree of normality. The relaunch should be celebrated with a welcome back to school that is warm and animated, tingling with excitement and imbued with hope while, at the same time, bedded in a new awareness. While adhering to public health guidelines, schools may, for example, plan an opening ceremony or a series of welcoming activities to mark this important moment and to energise and motivate students to re-engage with the school and learning.



6. Get ready to learn

The year 2020 saw significant disruption to students' formal schooling due to the Government's necessary restrictive measures. No doubt, there will be concerns about students' academic progress. It is advisable, however, to defer a return to formal academics until students appear ready to learn again. Students' transition back to school can be supported by seeing each student as a 'new starter'. There should be a settling-in period, to give students time to adjust again to the routine and demands of the school day. Some old rules and routines may have to be re-learned. Transitions can be eased by retaining some degree of familiarity. Where possible, students could be facilitated to return to, or at least spend some time in and with familiar settings, staff and peers.



5. Re-establish the school community

A sense of belonging and connectedness enhances engagement with school and learning. The physical distancing from school during the restrictions may have induced feelings of distance from the school community, impairing this sense of belonging and connectedness. It will take time and effort to re-establish the sense of community within the school. Time should be devoted to facilitating staff and students to reconnect and rebuild relationships. We also know that a sense of collective efficacy is important for any community recovering from a crisis. During the restrictions, the Government reminded us that we are 'in this together'. A continued sense of togetherness will aid recovery. A sense of self- and community- efficacy could be enhanced by engaging the entire school community, including, where possible and appropriate, students, in discussions addressing the challenges facing us as we continue to combat COVID-19.



4. Create calm and foster wellbeing

The COVID-19 crisis has led to increased anxiety throughout our society. The return to school in and of itself will go some way towards reducing this anxiety as schools begin to re-establish communities and return structure, routine and a sense of normality to the lives of many. Schools can further foster wellbeing and resilience among the student body by creating a calm, supportive environment and by focusing on social and emotional learning to provide students with the skills that they require to overcome current challenges.

The Countdown To Relaunch



3. Reflect on the pandemic and the restrictions

It will be important to give some time to reflect on the pandemic with a cross-curricular approach. It will be necessary to acknowledge the losses that were experienced by many during the pandemic. The individual grieving process will be aided by a sense of collective acknowledgement, reflection, and support. Schools may, for example, consider holding a ceremony to commemorate those who were sadly lost. Individual experiences during the restrictions are likely to have varied widely. Creating a secure environment in which staff and students can share their experiences may help them to process this extraordinary event. Reflection could also be channelled towards what may have been gained during the restrictions. This interruption to our lives could be used as an opportunity to pause and reflect upon our core values and goals. In an age-appropriate way, children and young people might be encouraged to reflect on what they have learned about facing challenges and about coping with and overcoming them. Students could be educated about viruses, epidemics and pandemics as part of the formal curriculum so that they can understand this very real aspect of our world.



2. Re-engage with the curriculum

We are not forgetting the curriculum! With the initial transition back to school managed well, the school community reunited and a calm, a supportive atmosphere established, it will be time to re-engage with the academic curriculum. Initial concern is likely to centre on the potential loss of learning which may have occurred during the period of school closure. Schools may find it helpful to consult with parents to ascertain the degree to which individual students engaged with learning during the restrictions. Informal formative assessment may be used to identify where students are in terms of the academic curriculum. Time devoted to revision prior to the introduction of new material is likely to be time well spent. Time spent on re-developing academic self-concept may also be worthwhile in redressing any potential loss in learner confidence among the student body. Schools could prepare for the possibility that a greater-than-normal number of children may require additional learning support on a temporary basis. Children should also be reassured that there will be time for 'catch-up'. Schools may also need to consider the possibility that methodologies which facilitate the use of online or blended learning may be required on an ongoing basis, depending on the development of the pandemic and public health advice.



1. Identify students who may require on-going support

It is likely that the majority of students are looking forward to returning to school and will transition back with few problems. There will, however, be a large minority of students who will need additional support to help them manage the transition and readjust to life at school. The nature of the support will vary according to their individual needs. Existing care and special education systems can be used to identify, monitor and support these students on an ongoing basis. Potentially vulnerable groups include:

- Children and young people who experienced bereavement during the pandemic;
- Children and young people who experienced significant personal or family stress during the pandemic due to events such as loss of family employment and other pressures on families caused by the restrictions;

The Countdown To Relaunch



- New starters who are transitioning to a new setting without having had the usual preparatory period and are missing the comfort of familiar faces and places;
- Children and young people who have health issues which make them particularly vulnerable to the virus or those who choose to continue homeschooling due to health concerns;
- Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have been unable to engage with learning during the school closure period to the same extent as their more advantaged peers;
- Children and young people with underlying mental health difficulties for whom the stress and anxiety of the pandemic may have been particularly challenging;
- Children and young people who experience social anxieties who may find the sudden increase in social demands upon return to school very challenging;
- Children and young people with special educational needs, including:
 - Those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) who may require particular support in readjusting to the structure, routine and demands of the school day;
 - Those with a Specific Learning Disability who may have found it particularly difficult to engage in learning during the period of school closure;
 - Students with communication difficulties who may need extra supports in comprehending new rules, telling their stories, and receiving support and reassurance.
- Children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are particularly vulnerable at times of transition. Figure 1, which follows, outlines specific advice around transition supports for children and young people with additional needs.



LIFT OFF

With our own personal and collective experiences of COVID-19 and the restrictions, and facing the challenge (or adventure) of a new school environment – we are now standing on the launching pad – made of our collective experience and skills, school support systems and networks in place, mutual understanding and support, a confident, hopeful belief in the future and our resilience fired up, we have lift-off!

*'Education is not preparation
for life, education is life.'*

John Dewey

1. Begin with the Familiar

- Start with what is familiar to the child
- This will help children to feel safe and secure
- Is there a person, object, environment, or activity that they associate with school?

2. Allow Transition Time

- Dedicate time for the transition and expect that some children may find this difficult
- Children will need time to adapt to the structure of school
- Consider how adaptations related to social distancing/hygiene etc. will affect students, school staff and parents. Use video and photos if possible to prepare for new or adapted environments (e.g. new layouts; use of facemasks)
- Communication with parents is paramount. This may be a good opportunity to strengthen the relationships between schools and families

3. Consider the Message behind Behaviours

- Be aware of changes in behaviour and what these mean; sense of threat heightened; may see child 'acting out', withdrawing, sleeping or eating issues or physical symptoms
- Some children may have found the experience of being at home very challenging
- Some children may have got on well during 'lockdown'. Why was this?
- May be more 'stimming' due to anxiety or need to self-regulate. This is a natural self-regulation activity. This could be picking, or verbal stimming, and may be a sign that the child is overwhelmed and is trying to regulate

4. Social Communication Needs

- Some children may have had very little communication opportunities and the return to school may be overwhelming
- The demands of sitting and listening might be very difficult and need to be considered
- Use visuals
- Make a 'sensory space' for children to be able to go to in case of overload
- Consider the social demands of school. How will the child respond to others and cope with being around others?

5. Sensory Needs

- Children may be particularly sensitive to sights, sounds and smells than before.
- Children may not have been able to access regulating activities (e.g. trips to certain places) whilst at home
- This may be an opportunity to examine school environment and create calmer and quieter environments.
- Gather information from parents about how the child's sensory system is working

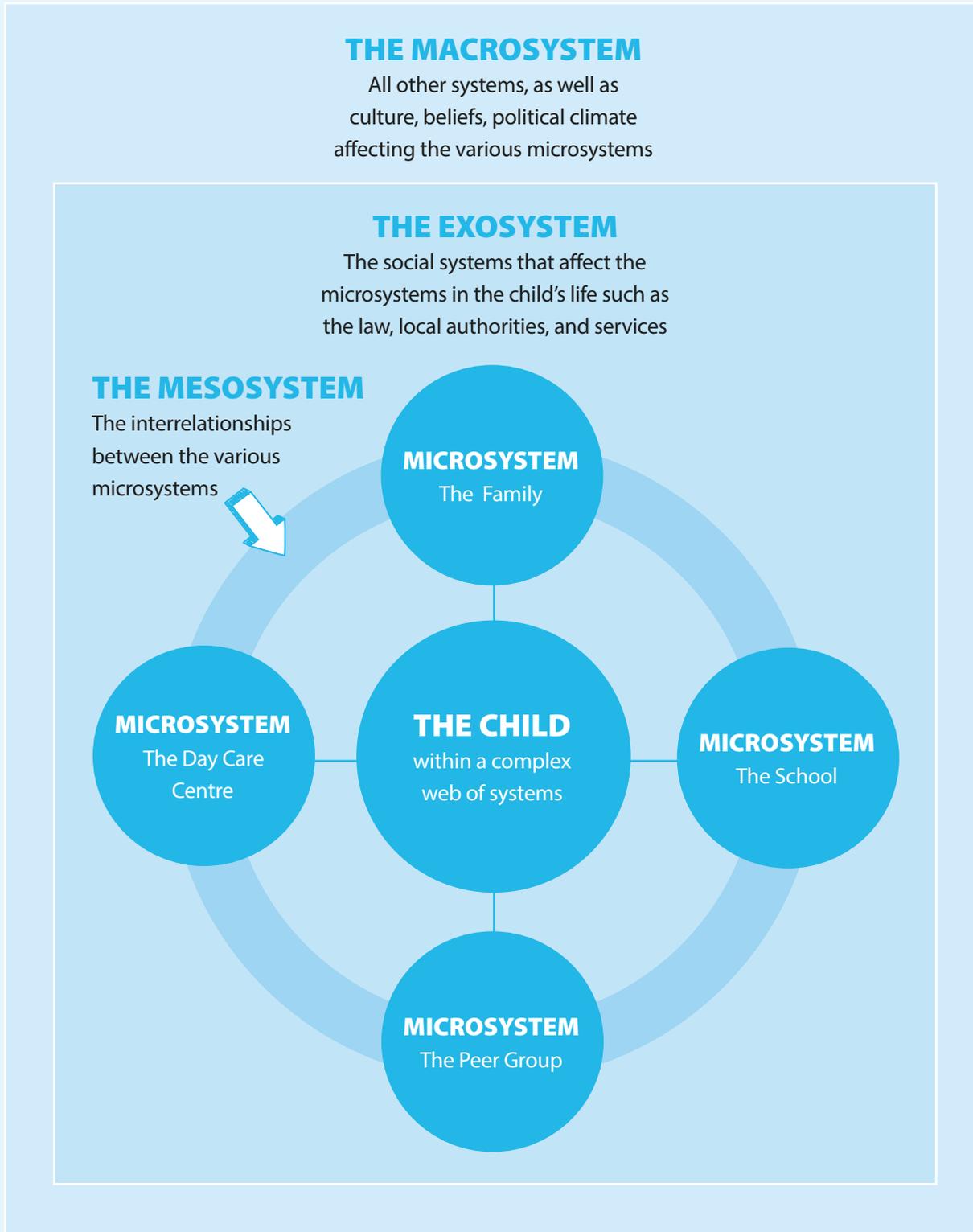
6. Practical Planning

- Waking up in time for school
- New routines (e.g. hygiene/one way systems)
- Visual schedules
- What will break times look like? Explain in advance using pictures/videos where possible
- Calendar for families – take one day at a time. Crossing off each day, even if we don't have a 'back to school' day yet
- Prepare students in advance for the return to school. Students need to know what they're walking in to

Figure 1: 6 tips for transitioning back to school for children and young people with additional needs. Adapted from McCann (2020).

Resource Document One

Ecological Systems Theories



In general terms, Ecological Systems attempt to show how a child's development occurs within a complex web of interrelated systems. These are usually based on Bronfenbrenner's Model (for example, see Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Resource Document Two

Tips for self-care for you and the children in your care



1. Eat well

Include lots of colourful fruit and vegetables in your diet and have a little protein with every meal (Dr Henry Emmons, 2020).

2. Movement

Engage in movement during the day. Walk, run, dance, play sports. (Dr Henry Emmons, 2020).

3. Sleep

You need about eight hours of sleep every night. Younger children need more. All living creatures sleep and sleep deprivation has some very serious consequences. There are several theories as to the function of sleep, among these, energy conservation, brain restoration, temperature regulation and improving immune function (Lavie et al, 2002). If you are experiencing ongoing sleep problems, check out reliable guidelines on good sleep hygiene.

4. Try to keep a positive and hopeful attitude

This is very important in developing and maintaining resilience. Notwithstanding, it is also important to acknowledge and accept your worries and sad feelings (Adams, 2020).

5. Practise feeling gratitude

Again, this is part of being positive, there is always some good in every situation – happy memories, the love and support of others around us, especially during challenging times, and the natural world around us. We also have some choice in how we respond to and think about a situation.

6. Stay connected

Stay connected with family, friends, and colleagues. Positive and mutually supportive relationships are important in developing and maintaining resilience and in recovery from trauma and critical incident (Adams, 2020 and Hobfoll et al, 2007 respectively).

7. And - remember to breathe!

Very often, we find ourselves holding our breath at times of worry or stress. This can, in fact, add to our sense of stress and panic. 'Proper Breathing' actually reduces feelings of anxiety and stress and improves overall wellbeing (André, 2019).



Resource Document Three

Resilience



Resilience is the ability to adapt, to cope and to ‘bounce back’ in the face of trauma, stress, or a critical incident. Stress could be caused by family problems; friendship/relationship problems; work problems; school problems; financial problems; illness; bereavement, etc.

We are born with resilience. This is our natural resilience – our life force. Adaptive resilience comes into play when we are required to learn, change and adapt in response to a challenging event or set of circumstances.

Our resilience can, unfortunately, be eroded or damaged by life circumstances and experience. The good news, however, is that it can also be developed, restored and repaired.



Key factors identified in developing and maintaining resilience are:

- A healthy lifestyle – good diet, adequate sleep, and adequate physical exercise;
- Good self-care. Practising self-care activities, such as rest; engaging in enjoyable activities; noticing and accepting our emotions; meditation; having ‘compassion’ for ourselves; and. being present;
- Connectedness – having good, positive, mutually supportive and fulfilling relationships;
- Self-efficacy – feeling that we can solve problems and knowing how to problem-solve. Knowing too when we need to call in support;
- A positive thinking style;
- Being hopeful. Even if we cannot fix things right now – believing that they will get better.

In his online seminars, Mark Adams (2020), Psychologist, describes Resilience Undermining Thoughts (RUTs) and Resilience Enhancing Thoughts (RETs). He gives the following examples.

Resilience Undermining Thoughts (RUTs)	Resilience Enhancing Thoughts (RETs)
This should not be happening. (‘resistance to reality’)	I don’t like that this is happening. But it is. Now, what can I do about it?
This is wholly bad. No good can come from this. (‘negative filter’)	There are some bad things, yes. But, what are some of the good or less bad aspects of this situation?
It’s the end of the world. (‘catastrophising’)	This will pass – or – I will adjust.
I just know the future is going to be bleak. (‘fortune telling’)	I don’t know what is going to happen in the future. What can I/we do now in the present moment?
In can’t think about it. (‘avoidance’)	If that happened, what would I/we do? How would I/we handle it?



Resource Document Four

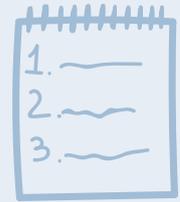
The Hobfoll et al Principles



Research conducted by S.E. Hobfoll and others in 2007, identified five key principles that are supportive in recovery following a disaster or serious incident. These principles, which are quite similar to some of the key factors identified in resilience studies, should be of value in devising back-to-school plans following the Coronavirus restrictions.

<p>1. A Sense of Safety</p>	<p>Feeling safe, for all of us, will be essential to a successful relaunch. If teachers feel safe and present a cautious confidence, then children are more likely to feel safe too. Children will also feel safe when they are involved in the conversation and the plan about being back at school, and when they know they can come to you with their worries.</p>
<p>2. A Sense of Calm</p>	<p>Again, if teachers appear calm, children are more likely to feel calm too. Children can learn best and can engage more meaningfully in a calm environment. If the calm is broken for any reason or by some unforeseen challenge, it can be restored by demonstration of a confident belief that a solution can be found and that teachers will do everything they can to sort things out. Creating a calm environment at school has been discussed earlier in this document.</p>
<p>3. A Sense of Self- and Collective- Efficacy</p>	<p>Self-efficacy is very important when we are dealing with worrying or stressful situations. Self-efficacy refers to a feeling or belief that we can act in ways to improve our situation; that we can change things and that we can have an impact on our environment. Working together on a plan, identifying strategies and having a protocol for when things go wrong gives us a sense of self- and collective- efficacy and should help to reduce anxiety for teachers and children. Even when we cannot ‘fix’ things absolutely, we can decide to respond in a strong, positive, and hopeful way. Engaging children in this conversation and allowing them to tell us what would help them if they are nervous, worried or upset, will also give them a sense of self-efficacy.</p>
<p>4. Social Connectedness</p>	<p>Close, mutually-supportive relationships are very important for us all, whether we are introverts or extroverts. Knowing that we have loved ones or friends who know us well and on whom we can call when we need support is linked with good overall wellbeing. On a wider social front, if it takes a village to raise a child, then now, more than ever, it is important for those of us taking care of children to organise a network of support around ourselves and the children in our care. Link in with parents and with colleagues with whom you can share concerns, partnership in problem-solving and mutual support. Know where to go for further help or support that might be needed for yourself and for the children in your care. There is a list of some useful contacts and networks at the end of this document.</p>
<p>5. Promoting Hope</p>	<p>Hope is a key element in building resilience. Hope gives us energy and drive; it allows us to be positive and cheerful, and to believe that things will go well and might even be better. Without hope, we can become depressed and lose our energy and drive. You will find a reference for <i>Hope Clouds</i> activities for teachers and children below in the <i>Useful Links and Resources</i> section of this document.</p>

Useful Contacts



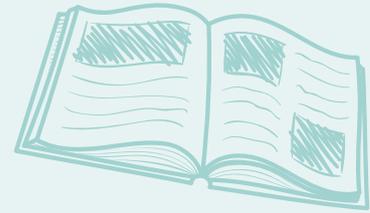
1. Psychological Society of Ireland – www.psychologicalsociety.ie
2. NEPS – <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/National-Educational-Psychological-Service-NEPS-/NEPS-Home-Page.html>
3. British Psychological Society – <https://www.bps.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>
4. National Association of School Psychological Services in the USA – <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/helping-children-cope-with-changes-resulting-from-covid-19>



Useful Links and Resources

1. Teacher Resilience during Coronavirus schools' closure <https://bit.ly/2V9xrmq>
2. Using Digital Stories to support children with autism spectrum disorder <https://autismtransitions.org/how-to-make-your-own-2/>
3. Using Social Stories to support children with autism spectrum disorder <https://www.starstream.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>
4. Social Stories (Carol Gray) www.carolgraysocialstories.com
5. Hope Clouds www.youngminds.org.uk/resources/school-resources/hope-clouds-activity/
6. Back to school ideas <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2020/04/16/coronavirus-schools-help-students-return-research-ideas/>
7. For information on re-establishing Personal Learner Id (Suzanne Parkinson's work) www.mylearnerid.com
8. Reference for Nurse Dotty book <https://nursedottybooks.com/dave-the-dog-is-worried-about-coronavirus-2/>
9. Plan Ahead to Support the Transition Back of Students, Families and Staff – Department of Psychology, School Mental Health Project, UCLA <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring20.pdf>
10. 'Children's Safety Series' of books, Marek Szepietowski, CEO and founder of Health and Safety Publications based in Mallow Co. Cork. On-line-safety resources for children www.samandsue.com

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The Psychological Society of Ireland
Grantham House, Grantham Street, Dublin 8, D08 W8HD, Ireland

Telephone: +353 1 472 0105
Website: www.psychologicalsociety.ie
Email: admin@psychologicalsociety.ie

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