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GUIDANCE

Supporting care-experienced children and young people during the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath

This advice is intended for foster and kinship carers, adoptive parents, and professionals who work with care-experienced children in schools, residential care homes and other settings across the United Kingdom. Terminology is slightly different in the different nations of the UK, and where possible we have tried to reflect this. We have used the term ‘care-experienced’ for all looked after and adopted children and those in kinship or residential care.

This guidance has a focus on thinking about care-experienced children and young people particularly in relation to education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made us all think about how we work together to support the most vulnerable children in our society. Care-experienced children and young people are some of the most vulnerable and are therefore very much at the forefront of our minds. This period of social isolation, partial school closure, and reduction in social care and therapeutic services has highlighted the vital role schools play in maintaining the health and wellbeing of children as well as providing them with an education. Some schools are closed to students, and only a handful of children are attending, and there is an additional burden on foster and kinship carers, adoptive parents and professionals who support care-experienced children in a range of settings.

This paper outlines some of the key challenges care-experienced children, young people and those close to them may want to think about at this time, and then provides advice and resources that may help.

WHY MIGHT CARE-EXPERIENCED CHILDREN STRUGGLE DURING COVID-19?

1. FEELING UNSAFE

Many care-experienced children and young people will have experienced threat to survival before. The majority have been neglected or abused, while some – particularly unaccompanied young people – may have been forced to flee from war, persecution, exploitation or natural disasters. These experiences can leave children and young

people particularly vulnerable to future stressful experiences and challenges. In order to survive dangerous environments, these children and young people may have learned to remain hyper-alert to any sign of danger, and quick to resort to defence strategies when they perceive any threat. Some may be easily triggered into fight or flight mode, while others may shutdown and withdraw, or focus excessively on the needs of the adults around them.

Additionally, as a result of their earliest experiences with caregivers, care-experienced children and young people may also struggle to seek or accept comfort when they need help in managing overwhelming emotional and physical stress responses. Whilst many may have developed more secure attachments through sensitive and attuned care-giving experiences in some of their relationships, children and young people with attachment difficulties often fall back on their earliest insecure attachment behaviours at times of loss and stress. Fear is all-consuming, and children need to feel safe before they are able to engage in social relationships, manage their behaviour or engage in learning.

Families and school staff may therefore be seeing an increase in distress and emotional dysregulation coupled with more challenging ways of seeking care. Familiar behaviours may return or intensify, and new behaviours may emerge. Distress is likely to impact on readiness to learn or to face any new challenge.

On the other hand, some young people seem more settled and less anxious at this time. This may be because external pressures such as learning in school and the complexities of friendships are minimised at the moment. They may be experiencing increased security in their placements, strengthening their relationships with carers. For some not having face to face family time is less anxiety provoking. For these children the challenge will be supporting them to transition when these stressors are reintroduced to them, and finding ways to celebrate and hold on to new closeness and security.

Our advice is to maintain an open and curious stance. By seeing all behaviour as communication and thinking about how children and young people may express themselves when they are struggling, you can support each child and young person in the ways most helpful for them. This information from Beacon House about the [Window of Tolerance](#) may help you think about the different responses you may see.

FIND OUT MORE

Dr Dan Hughes, is a Psychologist who specialises in working with fostered and adopted children who have experienced trauma. [He talks about the additional challenges of Covid-19 for adopted and looked after children.](#) His focus is on parenting fostered and adopted children at this time, but his thoughts and advice are also relevant to teachers and other professionals working with these young people.

Dr Heken Kircaldie is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist, and she has provided some helpful insight into [why some young people who have experienced trauma do not seem to care about staying safe.](#)

Gwent Attachment Service has produced this [useful general resource on attachment, trauma and shame.](#)

2. FAMILY WORRIES AND ISSUES AROUND BIRTH FAMILY TIME

Care-experienced children and young people have already experienced separation from their birth families and may now be facing additional losses due to measures imposed to contain the virus – time with birth families may be limited to video calls or stopped altogether. The experience of family time may be significantly different – for any face-to-face family time social distancing must be observed, and professionals may be wearing personal protective equipment.

Care-experienced children and young people may be used to a high level of contact from a range of professionals. Contact with other professionals such as therapy sessions or seeing social workers may also be stopped or changed to be via virtual means.

Dr Claire Holdaway, Consultant Clinical Psychologist in The ATTACH Team, a specialist therapeutic team in Oxfordshire County Council Children's Services, has put together some helpful [guidance](#) on helping children cope when family time is curtailed or happening in different ways.

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory has also prepared [advice on managing birth family contact for foster carers](#).

Grandparents Plus have put together information from their advice service about [what to do with birth family contact](#) as a result of Covid-19.

3. UPHEAVAL IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND WORK

Care-experienced children and young people have often attended many different schools in their lives – they often struggle to feel a sense of belonging, to invest in relationships with school staff, or in friendships with peers. This time of school closure may be especially hard for these children and young people – those in school will be having a very different experience from their usual busy and sociable school days, they may be supported by different adults and even be attending a different school altogether. They may feel stigmatised by being told to attend when other children and young people are not expected to go to school. Those at home may fear that they will never return to a school they had learned to like or where they had started to feel they belong. Others will still be developing that sense of belonging and may feel that yet another school place has proved to be short-lived.

Many care-experienced children may struggle to imagine that staff will care enough to hold them in mind, and this may connect them to earlier painful feelings of loss and rejection. Maintaining your relationship with these children is essential at this time.

Supporting learning at home is also a challenge for foster and kinship carers, adoptive parents and staff in residential homes. It is hard to know how much work should be completed, how much support to provide, and how to help your young person feel ready to learn in the first place. At times these dilemmas may lead to disagreements that could impact the relationship you have with your young person. Motivation, structure and routine may all be a challenge at this time. Making sure children and young people are using the internet, social media and gaming platforms safely and healthily may also be a concern.

4. DIFFICULTIES WITH TRANSITIONS

Those care-experienced children and young people leaving school or moving from primary to secondary school, or on to college or employment, may find the lack of an ending especially difficult, possibly triggering feelings of sadness, loss, rejection, panic and helplessness from other endings in their lives that have not gone well or have been very sudden. The Society's [advice](#) for young people managing these transitions should be followed carefully for care-experienced children and young people, with particular care taken with the ending of important relationships.

Vulnerable learners will also have experienced a transition from school to being at home full-time. This could put extra stress on family life, increasing a child or young person's sense that they do not belong. Carers can also become overwhelmed by the needs of the children and young people they are looking after, especially if their distress levels rise and are hard to contain or result in behaviour such as self-harming. These factors combined can put the stability of the placement at risk.

Other families are reporting an increased sense of closeness with children and young people and are concerned about the loss of these closer relationships when schools reopen – the additional time may have fostered security. There is comprehensive advice about supporting children and young people to return to school in the Society's guidance on transition. In addition to this it will be important to have open conversations about these feelings of loss and sadness when the time comes to return to school.

The return to school is now being actively planned and discussed, with a range of concerns about when this will be and what it will look like.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. PRACTICE SELF-CARE: CARERS, PARENTS, TEACHERS AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS

These are strange and challenging times in which teachers are being asked to work in complex and unprecedented ways, providing learning for pupils at home and for pupils in school. We acknowledge the significant additional stress all school staff are under at this time and the risks they take with their own health to come to work. Additional pressure is also being placed on carers, parents and professionals who may be worried about their own and others' health, mental health, work, finances, food and other practical considerations as well as supporting the emotional wellbeing of young people in their care and their learning at home.

This pandemic is being experienced by all of us – carers, teachers, social workers and other professionals may have their own previous experiences of trauma which may shape how they respond to what is happening at the moment. For people who find physical contact emotionally supportive this time of distancing may feel very difficult and increase the sense of disconnection and isolation.

The first step to supporting vulnerable children and young people is to look after your own wellbeing. In these times when social relationships may feel very different both in and out of school, it may be particularly helpful to model calm for young people in order to help them stay regulated. This may be especially important in areas of the country that move to a hub model, with children and young people coming to school buildings with which they are unfamiliar and maybe supported by adults with whom they are less familiar.

I can't emphasise enough how important it is for us, those of us who are parents, teachers and therapists, who are in positions of influence in our communities... that during the current situation we regulate ourselves. If we take care of ourselves, we're going to be able to help the people around us stay calmer, and everybody's going to be physically, socially and emotionally healthier.

Dr Bruce Perry, March 2020

Take a moment for yourself with free Headspace;

Take some sofa time with Louise Bomber;

Focus on what you can control with this Beacon House resource;

The BPS has put together some resources to promote resilience for teaching staff at this time.

FIND OUT MORE

Dr Bruce Perry on the importance of staying regulated to support dysregulated children.

In this 15-minute video from the Neurosequential Network Dr Bruce Perry, a psychiatrist who specialises in childhood trauma, talks about how the brain constantly monitors the environment for social signals that confirm belonging and safety or detect threat, he stresses how important it is for adults to stay regulated in order to help the young people in their care.

This is one of a series of short films created by the Neurosequential Network that are specifically related to relational support during this pandemic. The full sequence can be accessed [here](#).

2. SUPPORT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN FEELING SAFE

Use the three Rs – regulate, relate and reason – in order to help ‘to turn unpredictability and uncontrollability into something which is a little bit more digestible’ (Dr Bruce Perry).

First, help children to regulate. Routines and rituals can give children and young people structure and predictability at an uncertain time. Maintain or adapt existing routines as far as possible and make new ones to fit with new circumstances. Include rhythmic, repetitive activities in daily routines such as walking, running, dancing, singing and breathing exercises. These can help children to move from anxious or dysregulated states.

Next, relate. Dr Dan Hughes advocates an attitude of playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy, known as PACE, to promote safety and trust. Start with acceptance and empathy for the child’s emotional experience – this is your emotional A&E. Stay open and curious about the experiences of young people at this time. When we are all stressed and anxious it can be harder to listen carefully to the experience of others and not make assumptions about how they are feeling or what they need. They might not be able to tell you how they’re feeling, so work it out together.

Then, reason. When – and only when – children are regulated and connected through your relationship, they may be able to reflect and make sense of their emotions and behaviour, and the stories behind them.

FIND OUT MORE

Beyond Psychology have produced some wonderful [films for children, parents, carers and professionals](#) using puppets to learn about emotions and using therapeutic play.

Dr Karen Treisman's website, Safe Hands, Thinking Minds, has a wealth of [resources](#) to help manage stress and anxiety at this time.

The Glasgow Educational Psychology Service has informed this article on [looking after you and yours in lockdown](#).

Become, the charity for children in care and young care leavers, provides advice and support for care-experienced children and young people to access themselves via this [link](#).

The ATTACH Team in Oxfordshire has a short [leaflet](#) for families about this Dan Hughes' PACE approach.

3. STAY CONNECTED

Supporting care-experienced children and young people during this period must be rooted in maintaining your connection with them. Some care-experienced children and young people will be attending school at this time, others will remain at home, depending on their individual circumstances. Schools in some parts of the country are offering a range of learning tasks, in other areas schools are offering activities that support the curriculum in less structured ways. In either case it is important to continue to strengthen your connection to looked after and adopted children.

Being physically distant from your pupils does not mean being socially disconnected from them.

For those **children who are staying at home** you can maintain your connection and strengthen your relationship by:

- Contacting care-experienced children regularly – ask them about their day, what they are doing, and how they are feeling. Ask about what is going well and what they are enjoying. Try to arrange a small team of people to provide these messages of connection on a rota as members of staff may need time off work with illness or need to self-isolate for a period. Where possible give children and young people a choice in how to communicate. Video contact, which offers fewer non-verbal cues, and can feel less confidential if the computer is in a public place in the home, and can be difficult for some young people. Staff may also find a lot of video contact over the day tiring and schools should think about how staff support each other in this.
- Staying in touch via email messages to the child's foster carer or parent that can be passed on or shared. Messages of belonging for primary-aged children could use something like the following text:

- If you were in school today we would be... I would be enjoying helping you to learn about... and we would be discovering... I am looking forward to when we are both back in school and learning together.
- What would you like to do when you are back in school? What could I help you learn more about? What have you enjoyed learning at home that you could share with me?
- Encourage young people to make contact with each other via virtual means. This could include collaborative learning projects students can complete together, or simply be encouragement to stay connected to friends in different ways.

For those **children who are in school** you can continue to build your relationship through conversation, warm body language, eye contact and all the other ways in which you maintain a human connection even when you are remaining at a safe distance (two meters) from each other. Do notice that this feels strange to you and may feel strange to the child. Acknowledge that this is unusual.

*We usually sit right next to each other to work don't we, but now I have to sit over here.
That feels really strange and I don't really like it, but it is what we need to do right now.
I am looking forward to getting back to normal when this is all over.*

You may also want to use the many social stories and other resources about Covid-19 to make sure that the child understands why staying some distance from people you do not live with is important.

If you are **working with a child who does not know you**, help the relationship-building process by swapping All About Me information: you can prepare a one-page information sheet about yourself and swap it with an All About Me the child has prepared about themselves, with their foster carer or parent if necessary. Plan some **chat time** each day if you are in school together to build your relationship informally.

4. MAKE THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES

For some children and young people managing these strange times may be so challenging that managing learning as well is too much. In some households or residential settings it may be impossible to give each child the help and support they need to stay motivated, focused and engaged with learning due to work commitments, physical or mental health difficulties and other challenges. Many families may be struggling with technology, and some with language barriers. As the BPS guidance on school closures notes, a full school timetable will not be possible. It is essential that carers, parents, teachers and other professionals are kind to themselves about what is achievable at this time.

However, as we start a gradual return to school in which the most vulnerable learners and those with complex needs may return first, there may be an opportunity to engage in some intensive and targeted work with looked after and previously looked after pupils who, as a group, consistently underachieve in education. The possibility of making valuable gains in education over this period should be part of the narrative for these young people, we as adults must remain aspirational for

these learners even in these circumstances and have the chance to intensify our efforts to close this attainment gap.

This could therefore be a good time to:

- Revisit the outcomes in each child's education, health and care plan/statement of SEN or individual education plan and refresh planning in relation to these so that resources are available for work at home and at school, on- and off-line.
- Focus on key areas such as literacy and maths and refresh planning for individual children in these areas.
- Research and implement effective online literacy and maths programmes that assess and monitor progress.
- Set clear short-term goals in relation to specific needs over the next two-to-three months with specific and resourced planning for learning in the current circumstances.
- Evaluate progress regularly, with the young person and their carers or parent, so that their effort is recognised and their progress celebrated.

5. SUPPORT TRANSITIONS

Each care-experienced child will have had their own experience of this crisis and the disruption it has caused to their life. Some will have had more positive experiences than others; some will have accessed education, others may not have had much capacity or opportunity to do so. The transition being faced by each individual should be considered in relation to the indicators of vulnerability for each child, consulting the child or young person themselves and those close to them. Using the principles of Person-Centred Planning will help to personalise this process.

[Advice in Wales on Person Centred Planning.](#)

The Scottish Government has [comprehensive advice](#) for supporting young people with additional needs between 14 and 25 who are making the transition for adulthood.

[Ideas from Beacon House to support transitions.](#)

[Bruce Perry on supporting transitions.](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There is a great wealth of resources available during this time. Interventions that work well for all vulnerable learners are also helpful for care-experienced children and young people so the general advice from the BPS for schools and families is a good place to start for care-experienced children and young people:

[Resources for families and professionals from the BPS in response to Covid-19.](#)

The Anna Freud Centre has produced [mental health advice for families, young people, schools and colleges](#) that is helpful for looked after and adopted children too.

The Glasgow Educational Psychology Service has produced some brilliant short films. [This one is about how to talk to children and young people about Covid-19](#) and more will be added to their Twitter feed.

The Residential and Edge of Care team in Oxfordshire has produced really helpful short weekly briefings:

- www.oscb.org.uk/the-healthy-minds-platter/
- www.oscb.org.uk/reoc-theme-of-the-week-dealing-with-conflicts-at-home/
- www.oscb.org.uk/reoc-clinical-team-theme-of-the-week-de-escalation/
- [‘What is Covid-19?’ for Children](#) from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.
- [BPS Advice on Talking to Children about Covid-19.](#)
- For those whose first language isn’t English, Mindheart has produced a [‘Covi-book’](#) which has Covid-19 stories for children and young people in many different languages.
- For parents who struggle with reading, Mencap have some really good easy read [guides](#), as does Learning Disability Wales’ [Covid--19 resources page](#).
- [The Kindness Wave](#) offers love and comfort to children and young people who are finding this time really difficult to manage.

Specific COVID-19 resources for children in care and care-experienced children

- www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk/covid-anxiety-stress-resources-links/
- <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/covid-19-support-resources/>

For foster parents:

- The Fostering Network: [COVID19 Support for Foster Carers.](#)
- Fostertalk: [Covid-19 Support.](#)
- Fosterline helpline: 0800 040 7675; email: enquiries@fosterline.info

For kinship carers:

- Grandparents Plus: [Covid-19 Information for kinship families.](#)
- Family Rights Group: [Advice for family and friends carers \(known as kinship carers\) during the Covid-19 Crisis.](#)
- Grandparents Plus helpline: 0300 123 7015, email: advice@grandparentsplus.co.uk

For adoptive parents:

Contact your local adoption service for advice and support in your area. The following national organisations are offering resources, advice and support:

- [AdoptionUK support for adoptive families through Covid19.](#)
- AdoptionUK helpline: 0300 666 0006; email: helpline@adoptionuk.org.uk
- AdoptionUK are also offering parent webinars for members.
- PAC-UK advice line (London): 020 7284 5879.

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