

Support for children and families during school closure

A psychological perspective

It is important to recognise the impact that the school closures will have on families. The prospect of entertaining and educating children for an unknown period of time, will probably seem overwhelming and daunting to most of us. This is a normal response to have and one that will shift as we begin to adapt to our new situation. The good news is that humans are built to adapt. We are good at it and it happens automatically.

However, there are strategies that you can put in place to help the current situation. Obviously, every family is different and will have different needs, but evidence shows us that certain approaches in times of difficulty can support us to do better.

Routine

It is important to understand how important routine is to children and families and putting one in place from the start will act to preserve mental health and promote family relationships. Creating a daily routine can allow time, space, challenge and a feeling of achievement. This can be created by thinking about different categories that might appeal to family members e.g. being active, academic time, project time, new skill to learn, connecting with people, cooking/baking, chores, getting outside, family time, quiet time, alone time, creative time, gardening, jobs to be done around the house, relaxation time, screen time etc and then making lists of specific activities under each category. Each evening, a family routine for the day can be devised using these lists and this will also support parents who are trying to work from home with children. To support this, there are hundreds of ideas online and lots of fabulous people offering online museum tours, PE lessons, doodle sessions etc. You can also help each other through social media and WhatsApp groups by sharing any great tips or ideas. Younger children will have a natural need to move more than adults, so planning something high energy near the start of your daily routine, should see the day feeling a bit easier overall.

It is also helpful to plan for doing things with different family members at different times and this will give people a break from each other and support positive relationships. Some alone time will also be key! Keeping the routine varied is a protective factor for everyone. Getting outside for walks every day will be hugely supportive as we live in a green city, with lots of fabulous walks. Nature will remain around us, unchanging, which will be hugely reassuring at a time of significant change. A routine will also support good eating and sleep routines, promoting our overall health. Finally, summarising what has been done each day by each person and writing it down, will give a sense of achievement and purpose, which are great supporters of mental wellbeing.

Connection and Belonging

With schools closing for face to face teaching, children will have reduced contact with wider family and peers. This can begin to feel isolating over time. Therefore, it can be helpful to be proactive. Set up face to face online chats/groups with loved ones and friends and schedule some time for talk and connect each day. Try to talk about things other than the Coronavirus and work to cheer each other up.

Try to keep your child feeling connected to school. In addition to home learning, they can check-in with staff and record what they have been doing at home. In addition, you might consider talking about fond memories, looking at updates on the school website and twitter page and making things for friends and staff etc.

In this unprecedented time, this is a time to connect with our local communities. Trying to be a helper and having contact with other helpers, with a common goal, supports our children to become responsible and compassionate citizens and will also develop their own sense of self and worth.

News/social media

Try to take a break from the news and social media. The amount of information on Coronavirus is overwhelming (2.2 billion reports in three months!) and will trigger anxiety for most people. Giving yourself a limited amount of time each day (if possible), to check for factual updates and then distracting yourself with something more fun and enjoyable, will be supportive of mental health, long term. This will also impact on how you present to your children and in turn, will act as a protective factor for them. With older children, it might be necessary to put parameters around their access to social media and the news. School is a six-hour distraction each day and without that, some young people can become increasingly absorbed in their phones and screens. They may need adults to put in restrictions for them.

Kindness and compassion

At times when people are anxious and uncertain, it is important that we try to increase our levels of kindness and compassion towards others (including our own family members). Everyone is having their own experience, and everyone is doing their best to manage what is going on for them and their families. By building schools and communities of caring and helping people, we will override some of the fear and worry that we are feeling and get through this together, with better outcomes for all.

While everyone is at home for a long period, relationships can become strained and taking the pressure off yourself and others can be supportive. If things are not going to plan, take a break and do something relaxing. Allow children to do the same and be kind to yourself if everything falls apart for a bit. It will happen to us all.

Change and loss

The impact of the Coronavirus and the subsequent changes required of societal behaviours and school closures represents significant change and loss for people (jobs, events, seeing friends, routines, hobbies, etc). This may result in a grief response in adults and children. This is normal and common. The grief process is cyclical, rather than linear and people will naturally move in and out of their grief as they adapt to and process different parts of a loss or change.

There are ways that you can manage this to best support yourself and your family. By acknowledging your pain and being kind to yourself around the emotional responses that you have, you will not suppress how you are feeling and feel more empowered. Take care of yourself physically and emotionally. Give yourself time – a grief response cannot be rushed through. Talk to people who care about you. Hug your family. Remember that this will get easier with time. You can also provide these supports for your child, if they are experiencing a grief response to not physically going to school. This may be especially true if the traditions and rituals of the end of term (and for older ones the end of their school careers) cannot take place. They may appear as more emotional or dysregulated, for no apparent reason and this may be their way of expressing their grief. The strategies mentioned throughout this document will also be supportive in providing times of happiness and distraction and helping to support good mental health.

Positive Mindset

We always say, 'if only I had more time'. We do now. This is the time to try and do things a bit differently. We can slow down a bit, have family meals, take up mindfulness, read more. It is important for adults to try and find the positives in what is a very difficult situation and try to 'grow' these. If we can get something positive out of the situation, we feel like we have achieved, and we feel better. This will translate to our children as they will pick up on our emotional states. Our mindsets will also influence the way that we support our children, while modelling how to approach difficult situations and subsequently develop their own resilience.

Sarah Lawson
Chartered Educational Psychologist