

A Restorative and Relational Return to School.

Adding a restorative frame in response to 3 articles: 'A Recovery Curriculum: Loss and Life for our children and schools post pandemic.' By Carpenter & Carpenter. 'Five ways to harness emotional contagion when schools reopen' By Meredith. 'Five ways to help children heal when schools reopen'. By Meredith

Relationships matter on a basic human level, something we have all experienced through lockdown restrictions. We are social beings who naturally seek to connect and feel the need to be part of social groups and communities. Relationships also matter in the process of effective teaching and learning. The safer and happier a person is, the more receptive they are to taking risks and developing new ideas. Therefore, none of us are strangers to the importance of explicitly focusing on the building, maintaining and repairing of relationships within our school community.

However, this belief and valuing of relationships takes on an increasingly vital role when considering the potential for schools to foster the healing and repair of harm caused by our recent life experiences. Building, maintaining and repairing our relationships needs to be a pivotal, fundamental influence when developing plans for our return to school from lockdown.

The best 'treatment' for the harm and trauma that the lockdown requirements have caused is the school community' (Meredith) and whilst we are all minded at the loss of curriculum time, if we are to return to a time when our children are ready to learn, we must first recognise the 'daily lived experience' that Covid 19 has brought to us all, and plan to provide the space for recovery that our community needs.

All our community; staff, parents and children, will benefit from being reconnected and engaged in the warm hearted relational culture that our school settings offer. However, for this to be fully realised, we need to take some explicit steps to ensure that the power to heal that our community holds, is harnessed and benefits all; which means recognising and meeting needs within our staff groups, and families, alongside those of our children.

Working restoratively, the skills and knowledge that you have in this area has never been more relevant. We have all been involved in a shared period of harm and the restorative themes, script and values have never been more significant within your community.

To support you in this endeavour I have pulled together these suggestions by adding a restorative lens to these 3 articles; 'A Recovery Curriculum'. Carpenter & Carpenter <https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/> 'Five ways to harness emotional contagion when school reopen'. Meredith <https://marymered.wordpress.com/2020/04/25/five-ways-to-harness-emotional-contagion-when-schools-reopen-a-reflection-inspired-by-chapter-7-of-boy-who-was-raised-as-a-dog/> 'Five ways to help children heal when schools reopen'. Meredith <https://marymered.wordpress.com/2020/04/14/five-ways-to-help-children-heal-when-schools-reopen/>

1. Start with the adults in school. Prioritise Staff Well-Being & actively manage your 'Emotional Contagion'

Returning from lockdown will bring its own unique range of questions, fears, considerations and worries for all in your staff team. As the adults around our children on their return to school, during a time when it will be challenging to safely emotionally navigate, we need to be able to co-regulate rather than co-escalate to be able to help our children feel safe.

As leaders/teachers of children, an awareness of our emotional influence has always been key, but takes centre stage when considering how we can best prepare for our return to school with our children. Emotional Contagion is the phenomenon that individuals tend to express & feel emotions that are similar to those of others around them. (Meredith) This is the basis of empathy, how we are affected by the feelings of those around us. It can be useful to consider what actions we can take to meet the needs of our adults in school so that we are better able to provide an emotionally safe contained space for our children and parents when they return.

However, being aware of our emotional influence doesn't mean we stifle our worries and anxiety that we have experienced, so that we don't upset the children. This would be unhealthy. It means we mindfully create a safe space for our staff teams to share their experiences over lockdown and their feelings over the return to school; allowing for the difficult, uncomfortable stuff to be heard, listen to unique perspectives & then agree how/what needs to happen so that as a team you feel supported and able to co-regulate and meet the needs of the children on their return.

Possible actions

- **A Staff Well-Being Staff meeting.** Offer space to check in & share your experiences as a staff team. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs can support an open discussion amongst staff of their experiences during lockdown and their thoughts & feelings on returning. You could use the restorative script here to structure feedback. What's happened? What have been your thoughts & feelings? How have you been affected? What needs to happen now? This could then lead into creating a needs poster.

A Restorative and Relational Return to School.

Adding a restorative frame in response to 3 articles: 'A Recovery Curriculum: Loss and Life for our children and schools post pandemic.' By Carpenter & Carpenter. 'Five ways to harness emotional contagion when schools reopen' By Meredith. 'Five ways to help children heal when schools reopen'. By Meredith

- **Staff Needs poster:** Create a "What do we need from ourselves and each other to be our best on the return from lockdown?" Together identify what you need from each other to be your best for the children on their return. Record these needs on a poster, display this in the staff room and return to it on a weekly basis to check what's going well, what requires more attention and what needs to be added.
- **Well-Being Partners:** Organise well-being check in partnerships across your school team with set groups/partners agreeing to check-in with each other each day, built into a feedback loop amongst the whole team.
- **Well-Being Leadership links:** 'Leaders are emotional contagion super-carriers'. (Meredith) Make sure that leadership are included in well-being check ins. Maybe arrange check-in across schools between headteachers/SLT groups or organise within your cluster group.
- **Ongoing Staff Well-being focus:** Actively protect staff meeting time to share experiences, identify needs and discuss ways to boost our emotional resilience during the return from lockdown.
- **Our first physical catch up:** Considering planning your first physical catch up as a staff team to be before you all meet up when the children return. Re-establishing social connections and links as a staff team, without the children there, will allow 100% focus goes on the building and maintaining of these key relationships before the challenge of meeting the needs of your families and children on that first day back.

2. Explicitly use your community values

Our values are the foundation of our relationship building and act as an anchor to 'how we want to be' when we are in our school community. As such they offer us some useful grounding during these times of disorder and trauma. They could be useful as a structure to support your return, guiding your strategic plans, as assembly focus, circle time discussions and letters/information out to families.

3. Seek Unique Perspectives, work WITH and use that Purposeful Pause.

Whilst there will be a need to use some general assumptions to help make some of the many decisions involved in the daily running and setting up of school life post-lockdown, it is important to remember that each individual in your community will have their own unique perspective of lockdown and the return to school.

The Social Discipline Window can be helpful in structuring our reflective responses. Helping us to take the purposeful pause and to plan our WISE mind decision making. Also reconnecting with the WITH mindset skills can help us recognise our areas of strength alongside the areas we need to explicitly plan to use more.

When faced with responses and behaviours that offer challenge remember the need to 'seek to understand before being understood'. The variety of life is infinite but a unifying similarity are our feelings and emotional responses connected to keeping ourselves and our loved ones safe. There have been some threads of vulnerability within some of the Covid 19 data, including ethnicity, old age, chronic health conditions or living in poverty, which may be behind staff, family or children's responses that create tension and conflict on return. Hold onto the need to be curious, and question before making judgements and taking decisions.

4. Re-establish routines and boundaries through your needs posters

The routines and habitual behaviours that are central to being in your setting will be part of the therapeutic response that your community needs. The return to boundaries around behaviours and timeliness will offer some security.

However, re-joining will be frightening after a period of being isolated, for our own safety, from each other. Creating a new class/staff needs poster will be really beneficial, in allowing for these realities to be shared, normalised and the needs identified and recorded to allow all to know what they all need from each other to be their best.

As previously identified, it's worth considering the importance of creating a needs poster first with the staff, to allow yourselves as the adults within the community, the 'leaders' of the children, to be united in your agreed way of being. It will be important for all adults in school to feel safe in their practices if we are to then be able to help our children to feel safe enough to relax and begin to reconnect with their school relationships and their learning. This could include some agreed scripts for staff to use around some identified common questions from children or families.

A Restorative and Relational Return to School.

Adding a restorative frame in response to 3 articles: 'A Recovery Curriculum: Loss and Life for our children and schools post pandemic.' By Carpenter & Carpenter. 'Five ways to harness emotional contagion when schools reopen' By Meredith. 'Five ways to help children heal when schools reopen'. By Meredith

5. Hold a formal act of remembrance as a community

As Meredith highlights, whilst there needs to be great care not to re-traumatise, there is strong argument for bringing the community together for organised reflection, to create a safe space to talk about bereavement, allowing the community to reveal their common experiences of loss and to feel the compassion that this sharing creates.

The appropriateness of this will be setting specific but examples of shared remembrance could be;

- A celebration assembly of our resilience and resourcefulness- focusing on things achieved over our time away from school
- An act of remembrance – which could involve a clap for carers, or a condolence book or a minute silence in an assembly

6. Use your Value lines & scaling skills

Remember the usefulness of scaling & value lines in offering a way for us to individually and communally share how we are feeling and can help us to measure our individual and collective sense of well-being.

These could be used in several ways as an outlet for your community to start to talk and process the experiences they have had during lockdown and can help to measure and update on the development of your community well-being..

- **Staff & Class 'Daily check in' Value Lines:** Use the scale numbers as ways to share how you are feeling. This doesn't always have to be verbal. Creating a visual value line in the staff room or classroom & using images/photos/chosen characters, for staff/children to place on the line to check in how they are feeling can be a less intrusive way to share feelings.
- **What do you think or feel about this?:** Value lines can be used as a structure to share how we feel about recent events and can provide a safe way for all to share their thoughts & feelings without having to speak out in front of others. This can be effective in large groups, small groups or 1:1. Using an appropriately sized scale for your group (a large one across the classroom wall for a whole class activity or an a4 copy if working 1:1) you share your statement and ask people to represent their response by standing near the number or placing their mark on the number that represents their thought/feeling. (0=strongly disagree, 10= strongly agree with the statement.)

Possible useful statement to explore with staff and children using value lines;

I missed seeing my class and teachers.	I enjoyed learning at home.	I feel safe coming back to school.	I feel comfortable wearing a mask.	I have had lots of different feelings during lockdown.	I am worried about having missed lessons in school.
I missed the routine of school.	I am sad that we haven't sat our tests.	I am sleeping well.	I have been online a lot during lockdown.	I find it hard to remember to socially distance.	I am worried about the health of people in my home.

You can find downloadable [value lines](#) on our website.

7. Restorative Circles

Your restorative circle practice will offer a safe space to build and maintain those relationships that have been disrupted by lockdown for all in your community. These ideas and topics for discussion have as much value to be used with staff groups as they do with the children when they are back in the classroom.

I have pulled together a range of starting points which have some chronology but can be taken singularly.

- Initially plan to **have fun together**. Remember the benefits of using check ins, check outs, mixers & energisers as ways to reconnect and re-establish trust in the circle being a safe place to share thoughts and feelings.
- Begin to **explore recent experiences** through focus questions/activities such as;
 - Things I have enjoyed during lockdown
 - Things I have missed during lockdown
 - Things that helped me to cope during lockdown

A Restorative and Relational Return to School.

Adding a restorative frame in response to 3 articles: 'A Recovery Curriculum: Loss and Life for our children and schools post pandemic.' By Carpenter & Carpenter. 'Five ways to harness emotional contagion when schools reopen' By Meredith. 'Five ways to help children heal when schools reopen'. By Meredith

- What has been important to you during lockdown?
- c) Use the circle to then **begin to create your new space together.**
 - How can we help ourselves feel safe in school?
 - What do we need as a class/staff team to begin to thrive again?
- d) Explicitly **explore our identities as learners**
 - How did you continue to be a learner at home?
 - What have you learnt at home? Create the space to recognise that there has been learning that has taken place outside of school during lockdown. Find ways to connect with the children & their parents to find out what has been shared.
 - In what ways did you learn at home? Give space for children to share the different ways that they learnt at home- the different environments they learnt in and what do they need to help resettle back into learning in the classroom environment?
 - 'Are we all behind with our learning now?' – there will be a sense within the community amongst staff, parents & children that there has been lost learning time. This maybe needs to be addressed initially as a staff team – what will be the school's narrative around this issue. How are you going to reassure that any gaps will be addressed and heal the sense of loss?

8. A tiered approach 'Every interaction is an intervention' Dr Karen Treisman

All our children will benefit from our focus on re-establishing and reinvigorating our social capital and it is useful for all staff to consider their relational interest and daily kind words and smiles are hugely influential in meeting the needs of their community. However, as we resettle and reconnect we will also identify those who are in greater need and will require more specifically planned interventions.

It can be useful to consider a tiered approach to help develop an awareness of need across your community, including staff, family and children's needs.

Most needs will be met with the universal relational offer as described in this article.

Some would benefit from additional doses of relational warmth, alongside targeted input around shared areas of need, such as coping with loss, boosting emotional resilience or managing anxiety, which can be delivered by your staff team or outside agencies.

Whilst a smaller group of your more vulnerable community members will need longer term personalised additional doses of relational input, alongside more detailed planned guidance and support from outside agencies for a longer period of time.

In the short term consider establishing a daily check-in system as a whole staff where this information is shared and a planned approach is made to meet the need of those who require these additional doses; whether that's an extra input from all or arrangements for a specific staff member to connect with those in additional need.

The restorative skills that are key to maintaining relationships; active listening, emotional literacy, empathy, being non-judgemental and using conflict management skills are going to be key in helping you pull together and heal as a team to then allow your energies to focus on enabling the wider school community to heal.

These ideas are here as a selection of possible responses, some will naturally connect with your setting more than others. Please get in touch if you would like further advice, to discuss ideas through for you to deliver yourselves or if you would like to arrange for me facilitate training or staff meeting sessions.

What has been in the forefront of my mind as I have written this is Maya Angelou's quote '**I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.**'

For our communities to be the safe, healing space that we know it can be, we are going to need to consider the human factors first

'Human first, teacher/assistant/leader/administrator/site manager/cook second',

'Human first, pupil second',

'Human first, parent second', before we can begin to return to the teaching and academic learning drive.

