

## **Advice for parents and carers – Primary School Age**

### **Recommended resources and strategies for supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children at home during COVID-19.**

#### **Opening Statement**

It is completely natural that children and young people will be showing a range of responses as we go through this pandemic. With the uncertainty of how long this may last and the ongoing health risks requiring social distancing, children (as well as ourselves) may be feeling overwhelmed, confused, angry, frustrated and worried.

We want to reassure you that this is normal and completely understandable as we are all experiencing heightened levels of stress. The feeling that events are beyond our control are very real and this advice has been created to provide some support to you as parents and carers, for ways in which you can respond to children's needs at home.

#### **Typical Reactions**

You may have noticed changes in your children, and these may include (but are not exclusive to):

- Being clingier and having difficulties separating from you;
- Disrupted sleep, having nightmares, changes to sleeping routines;
- Increased toileting accidents / wetting the bed;
- Changes to eating habits;
- Becoming more emotionally reactive more easily e.g. angry, upset, worried/ afraid;
- Increased impatience and intolerance, disinterest and lack of sense of enjoyment;
- Struggling to cope with changes and a tendency to 'push boundaries' or refuse to follow instructions or engage in learning or other activities.

These are common signs that a child might be unsettled by the changes that are happening in their lives. For many children, these things will settle as their stress subsides. You may wish to read on however for strategies that could be used in the interim to help manage the frequency and / or intensity of their reactions.



## Firstly, what is a 'Stress' response?

Significant changes to children's lives can be a cause of stress. Thinking about recent events, as a minimum, children have experienced:

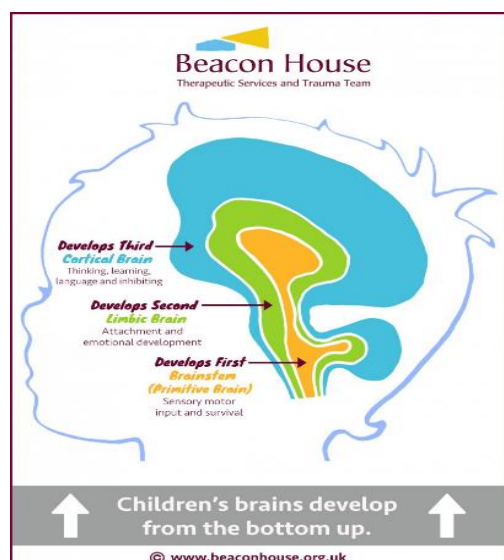
- 'Closure' of school
- Distance from wider family and friends network
- Limited access to the outside world: places and activities, clubs and hobbies
- More time at home with immediate family
- Changes of routine
- Demands to complete more schoolwork at home
- *Or, if parents are key workers, continuing to access school but with fewer children, different members of staff, different routines and potentially less contact with parents / carers.*

Stress is the body's temporary, natural response to a perceived threat. It is automatic and unconscious. It leads to an alarm being set-off, triggering hormones to be released and subsequent changes within our body, e.g. increased rapid breathing and heart rate, bursts of energy and muscles primed to respond to the stress. Systems that may be unnecessary at these times e.g. digestion, are temporarily switched off.



Stress challenges our capacity to cope and when it is unresolved, lasting for longer periods of time, it can become chronic. A 'stress response' automatically triggers our unconscious 'survival' modes, **Fight, Flight and Freeze**.

During stressful events we are likely to experience a disconnection between our 'logical', 'problem-solving' 'upstairs' brain to our more 'emotive', 'instinctual' 'downstairs' brain, therefore we must consider the best way to respond to an individual.



**Upstairs** = Cortical Brain



**Downstairs** = Limbic Brain and Brainstem

## Recommended strategies and approaches for supporting emotional wellbeing and mental health of children at home.

There is a need to:

- Create safety
- Validate feelings
- Establish routines
- Facilitate connections
- Support emotional regulation
- Provide encouragement and reassurance

### What you can do...

**“Connect and redirect”** - Children need adults to connect with them emotionally first, before trying to use logic, reasoning and problem solving to resolve a situation. The approach we encourage is: Regulate, Relate, Reason (*Dr Bruce Perry, Psychiatrist*).

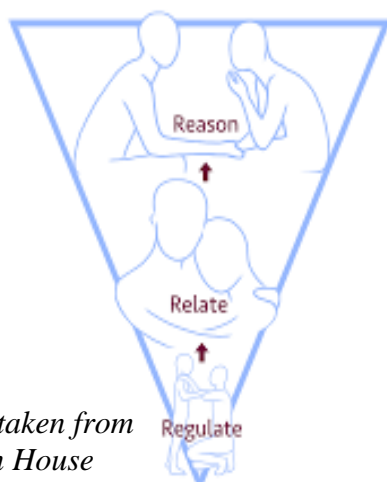


Image taken from  
Beacon House

3) Problem- Solving **with** the child, using thinking strategies and choices.



2) Building connection and securing the 'relationship', resolving any potential conflict.



1) Working towards establishing greater sensory and emotional regulation.

**Ask questions** - about their thoughts/ feelings. Be creative, use pictures, drawings and stories, as well as conversation to explore clues for how they are feeling.

How are you feeling?

How can I help?



**Give choices** (where you can) - For example, choosing between where they want to complete their schoolwork either at the table or on the floor; choosing between 2 TV shows that you would be happy them choosing in their break; choosing which direction to walk / ride in on your daily exercise etc.

Feeling out of control leaves children feeling unsettled, ask them to help plan an activity / be responsible for organising an activity, deciding what they do at particular times of the day.

**“Name it to Tame it”** - Adults need to label emotions that they can see and make guesses about how a child might be feeling. It’s okay if we get the feeling wrong, children will often correct us!

#### HOW DO THEY FEEL?



“I’m wondering if you’re feeling angry?”

“It looks like you’re feeling really worried?”

“I can see you’re happy from that big smile on your face and you’re bouncing up and down”

“Could it be that you’re feeling sad?”

It may be helpful to tell a story / provide commentary and narration about what’s ‘upset’ / ‘worried’ them. This can help children to make sense of their experience and increase their feeling of (personal) control.

**“Match and Catch” emotions** - It’s important that we are able to ‘show’ that we understand how others might be feeling by adjusting our responses. By conveying that we understand, we can help to reduce the intensity of the emotions that they feel in that moment as they feel validated and understood.



**Separating behaviour and emotions** – Our emotional responses are valid, whatever they may be and however frustrating they may seem to others. The way in which we show how we’re feeling (behaviour) and use strategies to cope may be less suitable in certain situations. It is important that children’s emotional expression is encouraged but that we teach appropriate forms of expression and communication alongside this.

Remember Behaviour is Communication!

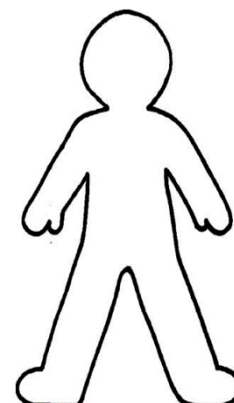
Emotions



Some Behaviours

**Emotion Origins** – Supporting a child to become more aware of the emotions and feelings they have is developing Emotional Literacy. We can support their greater understanding of triggers, and physiological sensations as well as suitable coping strategies.

Try drawing an outline of a body and encouraging your child to label where it is, they ‘feel’ angry or worried, and draw / label these on the body e.g. hot head, butterflies / knots in stomach, fast feet, big teeth / fangs, boxing gloves, jelly legs etc.



**Exploring emotions** – Using stories and other characters can help to explore feelings and emotional responses. For example, your child may have a favourite cuddly animal that you could ask questions to, their opinion or ask the child to think about the inanimate object, for example:



“What would dinosaur do if he was upset?”

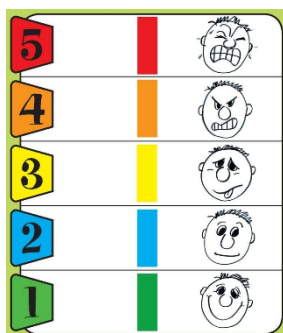
“Can dinosaur tell me what he might need to help him?”

“I think dinosaur might be feeling tired and angry that he has to go to bed early. What could we say to him to help him feel better?”

**Communicating Emotions** – Children may need alternative ways to express and communicate their feelings. Non-verbal techniques can be helpful (e.g. feelings wheels).

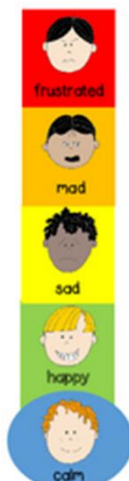


**Scaling** – The use of a simple scale can help a child to express how they are feeling to others when the words are too hard to say; whilst also increasing their understanding of different emotions, expectations and coping strategies. The scale could be pictorial, number-based or written. You could theme it and use different characters, emoji's or a preferred interest e.g. animals. You could simply use fridge magnet numbers, words or make hand-drawn images (see below for ideas).



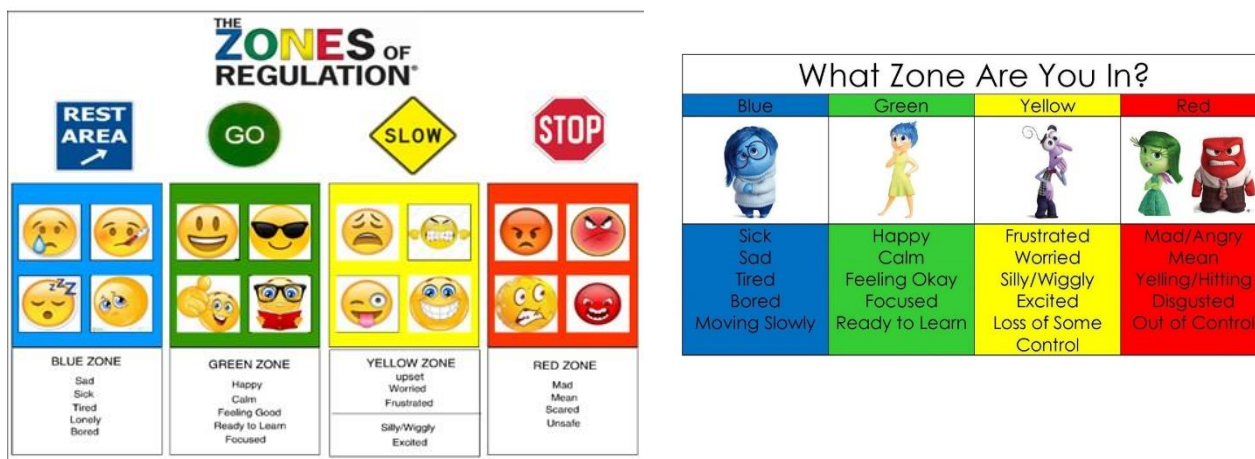
It's important that adults model how to use the scale and also encourage thought to be given about ways to help / cope when a 3, 4, or 5 is reached. This should be developed when a child is at a 1 ideally. Where possible, use the words that the child suggests as this will make it easier to understand, more personal and meaningful.

|   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| 5 | I AM GOING TO EXPLODE!!! |
| 4 | I AM GETTING ANGRY       |
| 3 | I AM A LITTLE NERVOUS    |
| 2 | FEELING OK               |
| 1 | CALM AND RELAXED         |



| Feelings Chart |                         |  |
|----------------|-------------------------|--|
|                | How I feel              | What I can do  |
| 5              | I need some help!       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask to go visit Mrs. Holland</li> <li>Ask to take a break/use therapy</li> <li>Hold on to Luke Skywalker [if he is here]</li> <li>Take 4 or 5 deep breaths</li> </ul>                               |
| 4              | I'm really upset.       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask to go visit Mrs. Holland</li> <li>Ask to take a break/use therapy</li> <li>Hold on to Luke Skywalker [if he is here]</li> <li>Take 4 or 5 deep breaths</li> </ul>                               |
| 3              | I've got a problem.     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Let a teacher know that you have a problem and need some help</li> <li>Play with your squishy thing</li> <li>Hold on to Luke Skywalker [if he is here]</li> <li>Take 4 or 5 deep breaths</li> </ul> |
| 2              | Things are pretty good. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play with my squishy thing</li> <li>Think of my favorite things</li> <li>Say "I'm going to be O.K." to yourself</li> <li>Take 3 or 4 deep breaths</li> </ul>  |
| 1              | Feeling Great!          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enjoy the feeling!</li> <li>Have fun</li> </ul>   |

**'Zoning'** – Similar to scaling is the idea of having 'zones' of emotions. The Zones of Regulation suggests 4 zones in which an individual might move between throughout the day. You could create different activities that are suitable for each zone and ways of coping if reaching any of the zones other than green. It might also be useful to explore different zones within the home that could be accessed when moving between the zones e.g. a quieter, safer area may be needed when in the red zone.



**Regulation Activities – Self-regulation** means that you can regulate your emotions on your own. Often younger children, and those experiencing heightened levels of distress, will require others to help them manage their emotions, this is **mutual or co-regulation**.

There are many types of regulation activities, including sensory regulation, breathing exercises, physical exercise / movement. These will be explored below, and you may need to suggest these to your child.

**Physical Activities** - Move it! When a child has lost touch with their ability to safely emotionally regulate, help them regain emotional 'balance' by engaging with physical movement. Physical activities which use the large core muscles result in a greater amount of sensory stimulation and regulation. These might include:

- Trampolining, skipping, jumping
- Running and walking
- Cycling or using a scooter
- Swings (forward and back, side to side and rotary)
- Rough and tumble play
- Wheelbarrow walking
- Animal walks (e.g. bear walk [on all 4s], crab walking [sideways], frog jumping).
- Deep pressure squishing or sandwiching with pillows, or over exercise balls
- Wearing heavy rucksack for movement (e.g. to carry heavy drink bottle when scooting)
- Playing with weighted items (e.g. wheat bag on la while sitting or using a heavy blanket for sleep).

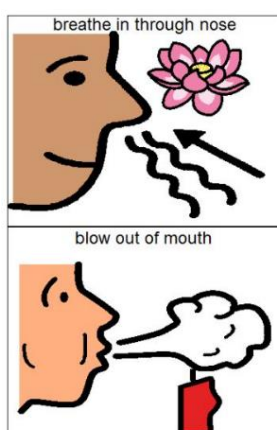


### **Sensory Regulation** – consider all of the senses!

- Auditory: listening to music, making music, using headphones, white noise.
- Olfactory (smells): baking, bubble baths
- Tactile: play with playdoh, slime, kinetic sand, shaving cream, seeds, rice or any other tactile product. Use sand, water, gardening and baking, messy art and junk modelling, as well as considering preferred items of clothing, access to soft blankets etc.
- Oral: cooking, using chew toys.
- Visuals: using torches to look at books in dens / dark spaces. Using dot-to-dots or mazes to narrow visual attention.



**Breathing Techniques** – Breathing techniques can help to reduce the amount of stress hormones released, helping us to feel immediately calmer. There are lots of different breathing exercises and mindfulness activities that you could explore, some include:



### *Belly breathing*

Automatically slows the heart rate, helping to relax & calm

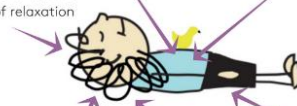
The most efficient and relaxed way of getting enough air into your lungs.


Supports the life skill of relaxation

Can boost energy levels with a few minutes of relaxation throughout the day

Emulates breathing during the regenerating processes (sleep, digesting food or resting)

Increased awareness of the breath & its effect on the body





- Breathe in
- Breathe out with your mouth closed, while you HUM like a bee
- Repeat this breathing sequence for a few minutes

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**Grounding** – When in a highly alert and distressed mood it can be helpful for someone to help us “ground” ourselves in the ‘here and now’. A helpful technique is using our senses to notice our immediate environment, e.g. listing 5 things we can see, 4 things we can hear, 3 things we can feel, 2 things we can smell, 1 thing we can taste.

**Problem Solving** - Once emotional dysregulation has subsided, then is the time to calmly, if your child is ready, begin to explore what to do differently e.g. problem solving. It is essential that this is done WITH the child not for them so that they have ownership of decisions and thinking about alternatives. Useful questions include:

“What could we do differently next time you’re feeling...”

“Is there another way you could let me know you’re feeling... / not okay?”

“I wonder what you’d like me to do next time”

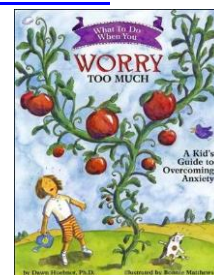
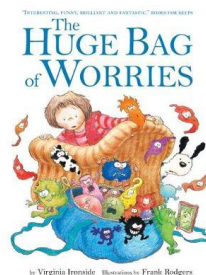
“Is there anything that you need to help you feel better?”

“How can I help?”

“What are the things that you can control right now” / “what are the things that we can be certain about?”

**Wellbeing links, apps, programmes and books aimed at supporting primary aged children:**

- Free to access book on understanding and normalising worries: <https://home.oxfordowl.co.uk/books/jon-burgerman-everybody-worries-free-ebook/>
- <https://youngminds.org.uk/>
- <https://gozen.com/allprograms/> (programmes to manage stress and build resilience)
- <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga>
- <https://www.mindfulschools.org/free-online-mindfulness-class-for-kids/>
- What to do when you worry too much by Dawn Huebner
- The Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside
- Worry Monsters



See also ‘Warwickshire Educational Psychology Service’ Guidance – **Keeping Emotionally Well During Difficult Times.**