

Maintaining Positive Relationships & Building Connections during Covid-19:

A Guide for Schools



With the current situation, our relationship and our sense of belonging is more important than ever. We are a tribal species and we learn and perform best when we feel connected and part of something bigger than ourselves. Similarly, children learn best when they feel connected to those around them. It is only when children feel safe that they can take risks and explore.

Positive relationships are key for our happiness and wellbeing. For children and adults alike, having good relationships allows us to feel protected and connected to those around us, even if we are separated physically as many of us are at present.

Whilst we do not yet know how long this will continue, it may be that social distancing needs to be maintained for a while. We may also notice other people behaving differently (now and moving forwards), and this may impact upon us even without us even noticing. Ongoing measures will affect how we continue face-to-face interactions with pupils, with parents and between staff members. It is worth thinking about how distancing affects you, and how it may affect others particularly children, as it is so different from our normal daily interactions.

How can we make it an open topic of conversation for people if they are struggling?

We are aware that maintaining relationships is more challenging within the Covid-19 pandemic, and this may continue; this document aims to provide you with some ideas about how to do this when we are physically separated. Many of these are examples from our schools: as always we love to see what you're up to so please share with us, and with each other.

We have sought to include a range of ideas including those that don't require large amounts of technology as we appreciate that not all households will have access to multiple devices and large amounts of data.

Why Belonging is Important for Pupils & Parents

We know that relationships and feeling safe impacts on children and young people's ability to learn. For many pupils, school represents safety, security and predictability, so without this they may be finding it challenging. We spend a lot of time building relationships with pupils that go beyond the academic; that daily drip of 'botheredness' which shows that you are a trusted adult and that you care. That still matters whilst you are separated from pupils and many of them will miss you. This is even more important where home life is chaotic.

Six weeks is a long time, particularly to young children and they will value seeing their teachers, TAs and other school staff. Many secondary school teachers may not realise how much they matter to their pupils, and that even teenagers and college students would often value an individual interaction.

Many schools/settings find it difficult to connect with all parents, and some are now using this as an opportunity to form relationships with those parents that they have previously not been able to. Many parents/carers may be finding the current situation challenging, not just those of vulnerable children.

How can you connect with ALL parents? Some schools we have spoken to are aiming for class teachers/TAs to make contact with every parent/pupil in their class over two weeks.

Would this be valuable for your setting in terms of building relationships?

If you think back to last week's checklist on behaviour, these phone calls are also an opportunity to find out what parents and pupils are struggling with, worrying about or finding useful: this could help with

Examples

- ⇒ Phone calls - particularly those pupils who you are aware have less access to technology and/or data
- ⇒ Virtual school trips
- ⇒ Videos with messages from staff to pupils. Check out these for inspiration
- ⇒ **St Herbert's:** <https://vimeo.com/411501884>
- **St Edward's:** <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=r8wIShkJxvY>
- **Out of borough school:** <https://vimeo.com/412655924>
- ⇒ Class teachers sending short video messages or reading books to class
- ⇒ Virtual assemblies
- ⇒ Daily challenges / beat your teacher: think about Youth Sports Trust 60 second challenges. Sports Development are doing these also: @VolSportOldham



Why Belonging is also Important for Staff

If at the moment you feel you are struggling with the lack of face to face connections, that's ok! It is a perfectly normal response to a global pandemic.

Whilst many of us are busy with virtual connections, we might not realise how much we've been missing until we're back to normal. It might be the case that at the moment we feel slightly disconnected, but we don't know why! One explanation for this may be due to the lack of the 'little things': incidental conversations are a vital part of our normal days and provide 'little lifts'. These can be things such as a chat at the photocopier, a colleague bringing a brew, a hug from a friend, a smile from a student etc. This isn't a normal situation and we are not used to social distancing and a lack of physical contact, so it's perfectly understandable why we might be feeling a little lost right now.

For many working in education, the connections you make on a day to day basis are a vital factor of why you do what you do. Many enter the teaching profession to make a difference, whether that be with your students, the parents or your colleagues. For most of us, we work at an identity level, meaning we aren't just school staff 8-4pm – our profession is a large part of who we are. That's why many of us may wake up at night thinking about work – it's because we care! Currently, our identity has been threatened slightly. We aren't going about our day-to-day life such as getting up, going to school, seeing colleagues, teaching our children face to face etc., our reality has changed. You may find that confiding to people at home is difficult, particularly whilst you are trying to make sense of this yourself. Talking with can help – particularly as it's likely they will be experiencing similar realities!

It's really important that we acknowledge the situation that we are in and find alternative ways to maintain connections and build on our relationships. This is not just important with children, it is equally as important with our colleagues as we are part of an education tribe as well as a classroom tribe, and we will rely on this tribe as we move forward into preparing for a return to school full-time.

Examples

- ⇒ Set up regular optional meetings for staff who want to work alongside each other, or an ongoing platform where staff can dip in and out. Many of us are missing the constant lull of conversation and having colleagues to bounce ideas off
- ⇒ Staff WhatsApp groups maybe with challenges. We need non-work-focussed communication. Why not see how many songs your team can come up with linked to Covid-19; or a stream of 'Music that Reminds me of...'
- ⇒ Virtual book clubs
- ⇒ Weekly quizzes - maybe with departments or Key Stage teams



Laughter

Laughter can play a role in strengthening positive relationships. This might sound difficult in the current climate, but laughter can still play a crucial role in our wellbeing, even if it only lifts our mood for a few minutes. This can help with our overall mood as you can't be stressed and laughing at the same time, so it may provide a welcome interruption.

Laughing strengthens relationships by building rapport with those we share laughter with, and it's contagious – sometimes we just can't help joining in when we see others laughing. Finding humour in schools and in the home helps us feel connected.

Check out this video to see contagious laughter: <https://youtu.be/wU4DgHHwVCc> notice how you feel before and afterwards

Laughter is social and builds connection.

How can you create ways to increase laughter and humour within your setting and for children at home? How can you increase laughter for staff?

Examples

- ⇒ Bad joke of the day included in work set—Could this be written bad a different pupil each day?
- ⇒ Michael Rosen - Comedy performance poetry on YouTube. Check out Strict as an example: <https://youtu.be/z1cfVQyrQ3Q>

What might work with your pupils or with your staff?



Big Up the Good Things

Staying with or revisiting a happy experience reminds our brains to take in the good. Our brains are sculpted in a way that positive experiences don't naturally have as much influence when they occur as experiences that are less positive. This means that we need to actively take time to encourage our brains to focus on taking in the good experiences.

This can be done by revisiting happy experiences and also trying to focus on anything that is positive for a bit longer than we usually would. It's very easy to skip over these events, especially when we feel like they're not really happening at the moment but staying with them can boost our wellbeing and mood. With memories the effect can be as powerful as if we were experiencing them for the first time.

Examples

- ⇒ Sharing old photos from sports days, trips etc - this can be useful for adults as well
- ⇒ Sharing current photos or even text reminders of past events – these could even be included in academic tasks, ie: write about your favourite memory in your current class

What might work with your pupils or with your staff?



When you
focus on
the GOOD,
the good
gets BETTER.
- ABRAHAM HICKS



Other Examples

We've collected lots of examples from Oldham schools and beyond this week. These are just some of the ideas but we hope they act as inspiration for what is possible. Please check out the list over the page for guidance on thinking about what might work or be needed in your setting.



Examples

- ⇒ Send a seed home and pupils grow the plant and bring it back on their return
- ⇒ Online Rhyme Time/Story Sessions
- ⇒ Giving small rewards (which can be sent out or collected by parents) for 'Star of the Week' etc.
- ⇒ Talking topic cards - Using this strange time to strengthen relationships. Ask questions you wouldn't usually: maybe pretend to be a journalist and interview your parents or a classmate over the phone
- ⇒ Praise postcards / Reward certificates - not always focussed on academic
- ⇒ Invite guest speakers onto learning platforms such as MS Teams: think about careers/progression for example
- ⇒ Ask all children to draw a picture of themselves with arms outstretched and turn them into a banner on school gates highlighting community still there
- ⇒ Teach you teacher: Use this opportunity to teach your teacher something that you wish you could! Maybe counting to ten in a different language, spelling your name using sign language, Fortnite, Minecraft etc.
- ⇒ Setting short (10 minute) tasks to be shared between pupils and parents. These could be fun or active rather than based on academic to help them connect in a positive way, as well as sharing back to class and teacher. Remember not all home situations are the same, some parents will be working full time, while others may have additional caring responsibilities at the moment.

What kind of relationships do you want to support / develop?

Know Why you're Doing What you Do

Think about what connections are needed for individual children, groups or classes – a few high-quality, well thought through connections may be more effective than lots of one-size-fits-all solutions.

Think about:

- **What connections are still in place/are already being effectively supported?**
- **What kinds of connections do you think your students may need to develop/increase?**
 - ◇ **Parent-Pupil Relationships:** For some pupils being at home together doesn't mean that relationships are positive. These relationships may need suggestions of shared tasks they can do together, or even permission to look after this relationship even if that means sacrificing some home learning.
 - ◇ **Teacher-Pupil Relationships:** Are teachers able to effectively connect with individual pupils and their class as a whole?
 - ◇ **Pupil Peer Relationships:** Can pupils connect with each other, both in a purposeful context (such as paired learning activities or shared 'fun' tasks) and in a social context?
 - ◆ Paired tasks to be completed over the phone
 - ◆ Write a letter to another pupil/teacher and they write back (Roundthorn/Greenfield St Mary's)
 - ◆ Circle Time style activities or discussions on class work streams or as activities set: My favourite thing is.... What is your friend's favourite?
 - ◇ **School Community Relationships:** Think about including PTA, parents, religious organisations key partners etc. This may be particularly important for pupils observing Ramadan as this is a time where community social connections may be particularly missed.
- **Consider how these connections can be supported or created in both digital, and low-tech ways to support all members of the school community.**

Transitions

We know transition is one of the worries for parents, staff and pupils alike, and that many of our schools are beginning to think about what they may do.

The Local Authority is undertaking a large piece of work around this for various age groups (including Year 6 > 7, Year 11 > Post 16, Early Years > School) and further guidance will follow from them.

We will revisit this topic alongside this guidance and support schools/settings with any individual plans.

Sharing & Networking

If you'd like to share what you're doing please use the hashtag #WellbeingOldham on Twitter and tagging in your advisor: @NatWellbeingWSA @ATWellbeingWSA @ChrissyOrson and the Oldham Opportunity Area: @OldhamOA

Please also consider ways to share your work with other schools

There are a number of ways to network with colleagues in Oldham. The usual channels such as First Class remain operational; there is an online primary good practice group taking place on Tues 5th May at 3pm (email Chrissy.orson@oldham.gov.uk for more information), the Secondary & Post-16 network meeting will take place on Thurs 14th May at 3.30pm(email Natalie.williams@oldham.gov.uk), and there is a Primary PSHE Lead meeting on Weds 6th May at 2pm (email Samantha Hickling Samantha.Hickling@alexandrapark.oldham.sch.uk for more information)

You can also explore the wider education community by searching #EduTwitter on

