



EARLY  
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FOUNDATION

# STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING ON RETURNING TO SCHOOL

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This booklet is available to download from:  
[www.EIF.org.uk/resource/supporting-childrens-social-and-emotional-wellbeing-as-they-return-to-school](http://www.EIF.org.uk/resource/supporting-childrens-social-and-emotional-wellbeing-as-they-return-to-school)

# Introduction

Coronavirus has disrupted significant aspects of children's lives, threatening their sense of structure, predictability and security. Many children will return to school having experienced some level of stress, anxiety, or isolation. They may have contended with not seeing friends or family, worries about catching the virus, a parent having lost a job, caring for a sick relative, or the loss of a loved one. Some children will have been exposed to abuse, neglect or family violence.

We know that children's social and emotional needs are at the forefront of teachers' minds as they prepare to welcome children back. A focus on emotional wellbeing and relationships will be critical to children's ability to re-engage and learn, and important for their longer-term outcomes.

In 2019, we published guidance for primary schools on supporting children's social and emotional skills. This guidance includes advice on the simple activities, routines and strategies that teachers can use to support children to develop particular social and emotional skills.

This short booklet provides you with a list of practical activities and strategies that could be helpful as children return to school. These activities and strategies are in line with Department for Education Relationships Education Guidance (or Curriculum), which recommends a focus on supporting children's emotional wellbeing and relationship building through the delivery of high-quality, evidence-based teaching.

Download the full guidance report at:  
[www.EIF.org.uk/SEL-guidance](http://www.EIF.org.uk/SEL-guidance)

# Emotional development

**During this time, children may be experiencing a range of emotions – they may feel worried, sad, lonely, or frightened for example. It can be difficult for children to know what they are feeling and why they are feeling that way. This is a good time to focus on children’s emotional development, supporting them to recognise what they are feeling, articulate it and manage strong emotions.**

# Tips for supporting children's emotional development

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- **Encourage children to talk about their emotions.**
  - » For children who have difficulty talking about their emotions, help them to label the feeling and encourage them to talk about it: eg *"It looks like you might be feeling worried, can you tell me why?"*
  - » The simple act of naming the emotion can help children understand it more clearly.
- **There is no such thing as a bad emotion.**
  - » All emotions are normal and natural, though they can be experienced as either comfortable or uncomfortable. Explain to children that it is normal to feel sad, worried, or angry, and that talking about our emotions can help.
  - » A key message to relay is that it is perfectly okay to talk about our feelings but it is not always okay to act on our feelings (i.e. control your behaviour not your feelings).
- **Share your own feelings.**
  - » Don't be afraid to share your own feelings with children during the day, using a wide range of emotion words. Sharing your feelings helps children learn to identify their own emotions more accurately.

# Examples of activities & strategies to support children's emotional development

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## Emotional knowledge

There are several ways of increasing children's emotional vocabulary.

### Feelings display

Create a feelings display in the classroom: for example, a Feelings Tree, with the leaves being the feelings words, a Feelings Wheel or an Emoji Board.

Use the feelings display to explore how the children are feeling during the day. For example, children can place their name or photo on a relevant emotion within a feelings display to indicate how they are feeling when they arrive in the morning, or at the start of the afternoon.

### Feelings diary

Older children might like to record how they are feeling over the course of the week. By keeping a record of their emotions, children can better understand and process how they are feeling. As part of this exercise, children can identify one thing that made them feel happy during the day.

# Emotional expression

Emotional expression enables children to tell others how they are feeling.

## Using 'I' messages

A simple strategy is to encourage the use of 'I' messages to articulate how you feel and why: eg *"I feel X because..."*

- Encourage children to use 'I' messages to describe how they are feeling and why they are feeling this way: eg *"I feel lonely because ..."*
- Provide supportive prompts to children who have difficulty talking about their emotions: eg *"It looks like you might be feeling worried, is that right?"*
- Model 'I' messages yourself. It is useful for the children to hear the teacher using 'I' messages throughout the day to describe how they feel.

# Managing difficult emotions (emotional regulation)

Strengthening their skills to manage difficult emotions such as worry, anger, or sadness can help children to cope with the stresses brought about by Covid-19 in a more positive way.

## Self-calming & relaxation strategies

- **Deep belly breathing:** Sit in an upright position. Place your hands on your belly and take a deep breath in through your nose for four counts. Then exhale through your mouth for four counts. Feel your belly rise and fall. Repeat for a few minutes.
- **Bubble breathing:** Imagine you are outside blowing bubbles, hold your tub of bubbles, dip your bubble stick in, take a deep breath and blow as many bubbles as you can.
- **Play peaceful, relaxing music:** Encourage children to focus on their breathing while they listen.
- **Practise muscle relaxation:** Sit in an upright position or lie on the floor. Squeeze the muscles in the top of your legs, hold for three seconds, and let them go limp. Repeat for different parts of the body: imagine you're holding an orange and squeezing all the juice out with your hands. Stretch your arms out in front of you as if you are trying to catch something. Move your shoulders up to your ears. Pull in your tummy muscles. Wrinkle up your face. Relax your whole body as if you're a rag doll.
- **Do some yoga:** Research has shown that yoga can help to improve children's emotional regulation, mood and resilience. There are a range of videos on YouTube that you can use to practise yoga with children.



## Positive self-talk

When children experience a strong emotion such as worry, often there is an underlying thought (self-talk) accompanying this emotion which intensifies how they are feeling. When self-talk is negative, children can become anxious more easily.

**Teach children to use positive self-talk (helpful thoughts) to calm their emotions.** Brainstorm positive self-talk statements that children can use when faced with difficult scenarios.

Examples of positive self-talk (helpful thoughts) include:

- ***"I can calm down"***
- ***"I can do this"***
- ***"Take a deep breath..."***

## Recognising body cues

Help children to become aware of the early physiological signs of strong emotions, and encourage them to talk about how they are feeling: eg ***"I can see that you are all worried, can I help?"***

Examples of physiological signs include:

- heart beating
- sweaty palms
- knees or hands shaking
- tone of voice
- facial expression
- rapid breathing.

If a child has difficulty expressing themselves, try to put into words what they might be feeling and why, and check with them if this is the case.

## Ways to feel better

Create a 'Ways to feel better' poster for the classroom. Brainstorm with children things that they can do to help them feel better when they are feeling worried, sad, or lonely for example. Children can represent these ideas pictorially and display their poster in the classroom.

Refer to these strategies at different moments during the day if children have difficulty managing how they are feeling.

Examples of positive self-talk (helpful thoughts) include:

- take five deep breaths
- yoga exercises or stretches
- belly breathing
- read your favourite book
- listen to your favourite music
- write down or draw how you are feeling
- ask someone for help.

## 5 Day Mood Booster Challenge

A similar activity for older children is to create a 5 Day Mood Booster Challenge: children brainstorm a range of simple, mood-boosting activities that they would like to complete over the course of a week. These activities could be done at home or at school.

Examples of activities include:

- write a card to someone
- make a cake
- take a day off from screens
- make a list of 10 things you like about yourself
- send someone a message of appreciation
- finish the sentence *“The best thing in my life right now is...”*
- ask someone at home *“What can I do to help you?”* and then do it
- perform a random act of kindness.

# Relationship skills

**Lockdown measures have resulted in reduced opportunities for children to engage with their peers and other adults outside of the home. When children return to school, a renewed focus on supporting them to interact positive with their peers and to navigate social situations may be needed.**

# Tips for supporting children's relationship skills

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- **Support good communication skills.**
  - » Set aside time during the day for talking and listening to each other. Circle time is a useful activity for this.
- **Model good communication skills.**
  - » Maintain eye contact with children. Give children a chance to finish speaking before responding.
  - » Tune in to children's body language and what that might be telling you: eg *"Michael, you're very quiet today, is everything ok?"*
- **Work together to solve the problem.**
  - » When discussing conflict / social problem situations, try to avoid solving the problem for the child. Instead discuss with the children involved what they could do differently.
- **Provide lots of praise.**
  - » This is important to remember any time you observe children demonstrating good communication skills, relationship skills and problem-solving skills.

# Examples of activities & strategies to support children's relationship skills

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Specific relationship skills you might like to work on in the context of Covid-19 and children returning to school include relationship-building skills, good communication skills and use of problem-solving skills in relation to conflict situations.

## Relationship-building skills

- **Class norms:** Draft a class contract together with the children which sets out what children would like their class to look like and feel like when they return. Encourage children to think about the behaviours and expectations that they feel are important, such as listening when others are speaking, taking turns, and respecting the opinions of others. Older children can work in small groups to draft their own contract and share it with the class.
- **Circle time:** Circle time is a useful opportunity to discuss relationship-building. Circle time games and ice-breakers can be used to develop children's friendship skills: for example, give a compliment to the person sitting beside you.
- **Teachable moments:** You can use real-life classroom situations to support relationship building, for example, in supporting children to think about what they are saying or doing to another child. Find opportunities where children demonstrate good relationship skills and praise this behaviour, such as when they are sharing, when they actively include someone in an activity, or when they listen to another child's point of view.
- **Group work:** This can be used to practise relationship skills in a new context. Assign children in pairs or small groups to a task, reminding them about good communication and listening skills.

## Communication skills

- Engage in some playful activities where the teacher demonstrates poor communication skills, such as arms folded, interrupting someone who is speaking, shrugging shoulders, or not looking at the other person. Encourage children to **discuss what you could do better** to show that you are actively listening or communicating clearly.
- **Make a class poster** of good communication and listening skills. Refer to the poster during class activities. Praise the use of good communication and listening skills.

## Conflict resolution & problem solving skills

Children may require support in addressing conflict or problem situations that arise with their peers. You can support children to solve problems and make constructive choices.

To do this, help children to:

- **Identify the problem:** Help children to articulate the problem and describe how it is making them feel.
- **Brainstorm possible solutions:** Support children in coming up with a range of solutions to the problem. It might be helpful to create some solution cards that you can discuss – options could include, for example, 'Ask someone for help', 'Shout', 'Say sorry', or 'Walk away'.
- **Identify the pros and cons** of each solution.
- **Pick a solution:** Encourage children to pick a solution that is safe, fair and leads to comfortable feelings.
- **Test it out:** Encourage children to try out their solution and see what happens. If it doesn't work out, they can try another solution.

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

EIF is a research charity, focused on promoting and enabling an evidence-based approach to early intervention. Our work focuses on the developmental issues that can arise during a child's life, from birth to the age of 18, including their physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social and emotional development.

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