

Top Tips and advice to help with  
back to school preparation, with  
consideration for the impact of  
Covid-19 on children and families

# Helpful Tips

for parents & carers

Includes advice and easy to  
follow strategies to help with  
**communication, routine, sleep**  
and **worry**



Cheshire and Wirral  
Partnership  
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Helping people to **be the best they can be**



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## Messages from our Young People & Our Team



**Top Tips, our “Great 8 Guide” to help you and your children feel better prepared for the return to school in September 2020**



**We offer more detail about these tips on the next page**

# Top Tips

## 1. YOUR OWN SELF CARE – you first

As parents and carers we are best able to support our children when WE feel as well as we can. Take some time to think about your own self-care, what would help you to feel better able to cope with this transition phase, would it be improved sleep, seeing family and friends or some time to relax by yourself? As well as feeling better in yourself, this really helps to promote good self-care to our children as they can learn how to soothe themselves by watching us.



## 2. TALKING & LISTENING – being available

If you have started with Top Tip #1 then you might have been talking to family and friends as part of your own self-care, it is completely normal for us to have our own worries and emotions as adults, parents and carers and it is important for us to have outlets for this away from our children. If we can do this, we will feel better able to listen to and support them.

We can find it easier to talk when we are more relaxed, so if you wanted to start a conversation with your child about returning to school, consider talking alongside doing something like colouring, baking, playing football, walking or gaming. You could talk about what happens in a typical school day and what their favourite parts of the day or week used to be.

To give you the best chance of really listening to your child choose a time when you know you can give them your full attention, and if you can't be fully available, try telling them that you really want to hear what they have to say and that you will be available "in 10 minutes" or "after tea".

Communication with school is important too, this is new to everyone, including your child's teachers, so as we learn together try to keep communication open and help each other to support your child.

## 3. HONESTY – we don't know what we don't know

It's best to be honest about things being different rather than say we are going back to the way things were, as if we are going back to school like any other September. Share what you do know to help to prepare your child for what to expect. It is OK to let our children in on the fact that we don't know everything.

If your child asks questions that you can't answer, you can tell them that you will try to find out, and what you will do to find out (speak to their school); this shows them you are being honest and it sets them a good example of what to do when you don't know – ask!

#### 4. POSITIVITY – a little goes a long way

It's amazing how far a little positivity can go and a little excitement from the simple things like a new school bag or lunch box; if getting new isn't possible maybe your child can decorate their existing bag or lunch box with stickers or pens.

Help them to see some more of the good things about going back to school; as well as learning they will be able to see more of their friends, for example.



#### 5. LOOKING FORWARD – more good things may come

Talk together about other things to look forward to, school is one place where we are starting to see our 'new normal' and there are other things that are likely to come after schools open, such as sports clubs and things your child or family used to enjoy doing.

#### 6. ROUTINE – getting the day back on track a week or two before September

A good daily routine of regular wake, meal, exercise and sleep is really important to help children feel safe and secure and able to cope (goes for us adults too).

Just like during the usual summer holidays, our routine often changes while we are on a break from life's demands and it can be a bit of a challenge to bring those routines back. This time though, most of our children have experienced this break from their regular routines for a much longer period, so re-introducing good and regular patterns at least a week or two before the return to school is likely going to be helpful for your child.

Electronic devices have felt like a lifeline for many of us and our children during the past few months, they have been very useful to many people to help stay connected to others and as a source of entertainment; consider reducing the amount of screen time if needed over the remainder of the summer to help transition, try to substitute with more family based activities if you can.

Making sure there is plenty of time for the morning routine so that having breakfast and getting ready isn't rushed, can really help everyone to feel less stressed and able to cope better with their day ahead. Organising as much as possible the night before will help, such as putting the packed school bag by the door and preparing a lunchbox, involving your child in the preparation will help them to feel involved and promote independence.





## 7. REWARDS – they’ve earned it (we all have)



Let your child hear from you that you know it feels like a big change for them, and use this conversation as a chance to be positive about their efforts. Praise them and plan a treat to look forward to for the end of the first day, and maybe the end of the first week.

This can be anything from one to one time with a parent/ carer, to choosing the family TV or evening meal / dessert. These are also great ways to help your child experience some element of control in these changing circumstances, within supportive boundaries this can help to build their confidence in themselves too.

Be aware that you might find it hard as well and so plan a treat for yourself, remember again the thoughts about self-care right back at Tip #1



## 8. BE CONSISTENT – “this is the beginning of a process not an event”

Your child could show a variety of responses to their first day, it would be normal to expect them to be tired, excited, irritable, hungry, not hungry. This is understandable and this process is likely to take more than just the first day for them to adjust to.

Some children will want to tell you lots about their day and others don’t want to talk about it - both are normal. Try to avoid asking lots and lots of questions and if your child doesn’t want to talk you could try a subtle approach, one idea is:

- At family meal time, ask everyone to share one thing they liked about their day, or something funny, or something new, you need to share too!

Consistency from you is going to help your child to adjust and cope easier, so keep up with the great start you have made on the top tips here, routine, sleep, exercise, a healthy diet and communication are going to continue to help.

**If you would like more information about worry, further advice and strategies follow**

**Children starting back to school in September could have a wide range of thoughts and worries...**



I look different now (hair, teeth, weight)

Will I be in trouble if I get too close?

My friends might not like me anymore

The masks look strange

What if something happens to my family while I'm here?

I haven't done enough school work

It's noisy

I feel scared

So many people!

I have school lunch now

It's not safe indoors

What if I forget the rules?



If your child has still been attending school through lockdown, they might have some of the thoughts above, or they might have different ones, such as...



It is normal for our brains to raise questions like this, in fact it's how we protect ourselves from danger, but if worrying thoughts are getting in the way of moving forward we can get stuck. One of our usual responses when we are scared and stuck is to avoid a situation; this helps us feel better for a short time, but avoidance makes the worry bigger and it can then become a problem in itself.

There follows some strategies to help you and your child manage worry.

# Managing Worry



## Create a Worry Time

Creating a worry time for your child helps to break the habit of worry being something that they do throughout the day, which gets in the way of things and is unpleasant for them. Creating a specific worry time, also naturally creates worry-free time. When your child learns to put their worry off to the worry time, they will start to see that they can manage it and feel more in control.

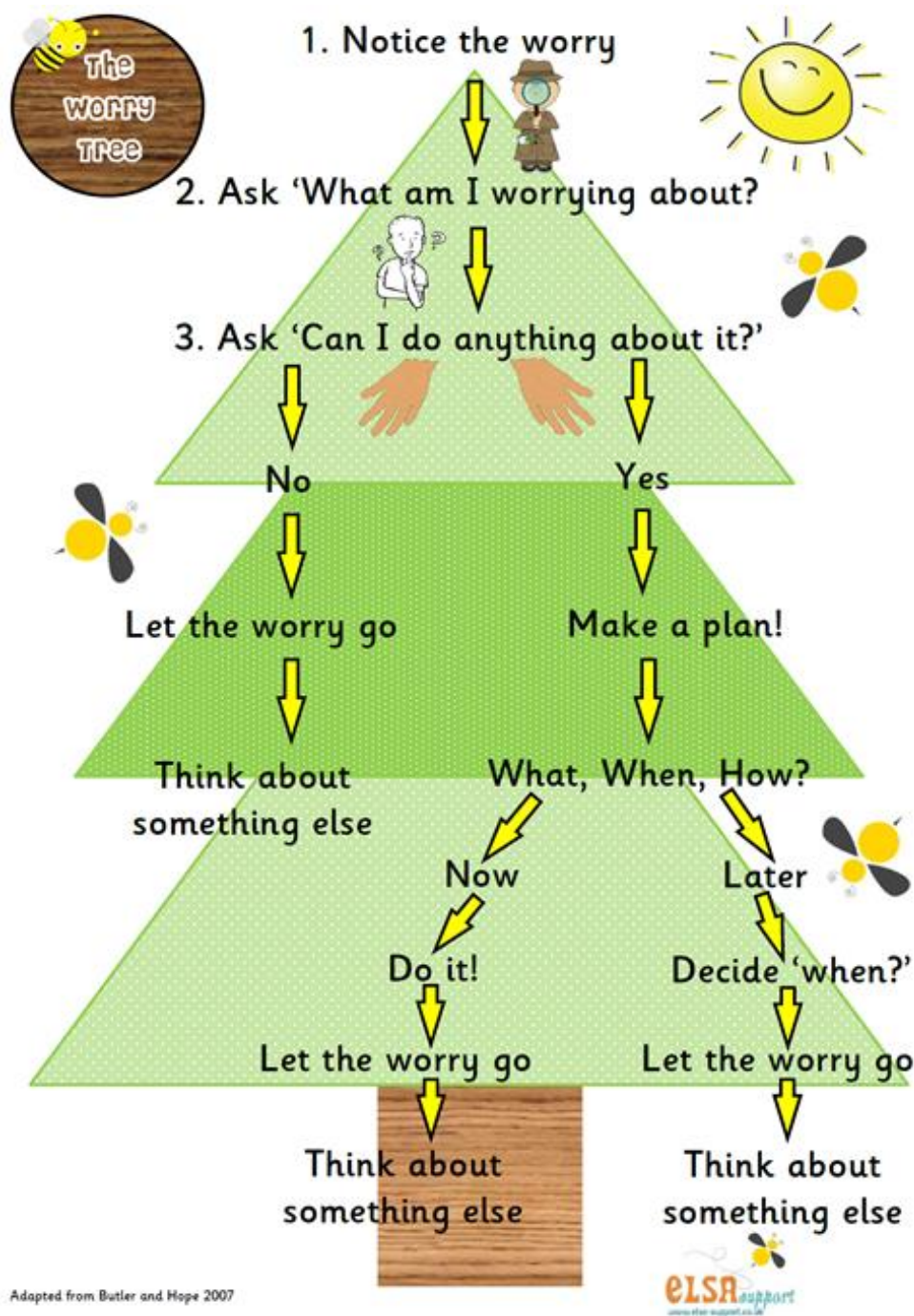
### Tips:

- Decide on the time, place and amount of time allocated, this needs to be based on what would be achievable most days (for example, every day, after tea, for 20 minutes)
- Choose a place other than your child's bedroom
- Do they want to spend their worry time with someone, if so, who?
- Help your child to practise delaying their worry to this time, so if they are asking lots of questions about a future event, tell them you can talk about it at worry time together
- They might want to write it / draw it as it comes into their mind so they have it for worry time (this could go into a box which you could decorate together, or a worry monster for example)
- Use distractions if needed, see “some other things to try” on page 12

When worry time arrives they can worry as much they want to! You can help them to solve the problem or let the worry go, more advice follows for this on the next page.

- If a worry has gone away just from not paying too much attention to it, help your child to notice this
- For worries that are still around, you could try the following Worry Tree example

# The Worry Tree



## Some other things to try...

5,4,3,2,1:

Think about 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell, and take 1 slow, deep breath

### Movement

Stretch, stamp your feet, jump, dance, run on the spot, rub your arms and legs, clap your hands, go for a walk

### Mental Games

\*Count backwards

\*Think of 10 different animals

\*Think of 10 blue or red things

\*Say the alphabet slowly or backwards

### Yoga & Mindfulness

Many free resources online to guide you and your child, such as Cosmic Kids

(which your child may have practiced in school)

### Have a Grounding Object

This could be a stone, a key ring, a photo, maybe something with personal meaning which is comforting to touch

**\*Grounding objects can also be used as “transitional objects” for back to school if needed, but best to discuss with your child’s teacher**

## Helping your child to be kind to themselves with Positive Self Talk

You might notice in your Worry Time that your child's inner voice is being unhelpful or unkind, you could help them to find more helpful things to say to themselves. Here are a couple of examples:



Unhelpful Self-Talk	More Helpful Self Talk
It's going to be really hard to catch up	My teacher will want to help me
It will feel scary	It will feel OK





# Breathing Techniques

**You could try these simple breathing techniques out with your child to help distract from worries, especially if they are feeling overwhelmed, it can help to calm their heart rate**



## Balloons

Imagine as you are breathing that there is a balloon in your tummy

When you breathe in the balloon is filling with air

When you breathe out the balloon goes down

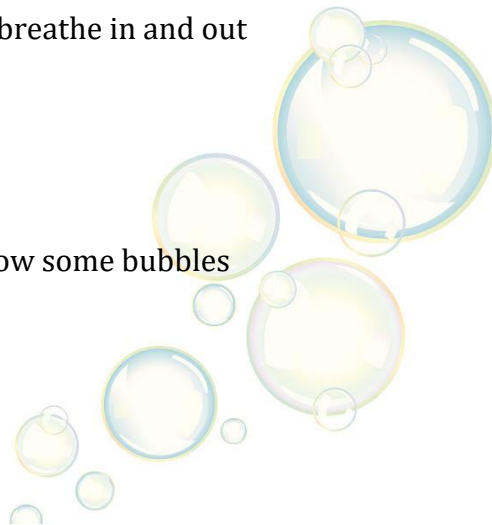
**Candles** - Imagine that a candle is flickering as you breathe in and out

## Bubbles

Breathe in and imagine taking in a breath ready to blow some bubbles

Breathe out slowly to blow your imaginary bubbles

Or you could blow some real bubbles



Choose 2 colours, one that you like that makes you happy or calm, and one that you don't like as much

When breathing in, imagine the happy or calm colour spreading through your body

When breathing out, imagine the unhappy or tense colour leaving your body

\*Also see Young Minds advice in Helpful Resources on page 23

**It is a good idea to practise techniques when we feel OK, they are then easier to remember when we need them to help us**

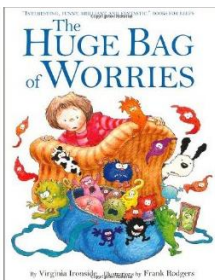
# Communication & Feelings

You know your child best and will be able to notice when they are trying to show you how they are feeling, often they can do this through their behaviour as a way of them trying to communicate. This can range from physical behaviour, such as fighting with siblings, damaging their own or other belongings or crying, to more subtle behaviour such as being more quiet, withdrawing from things and conversation or saying unkind things.

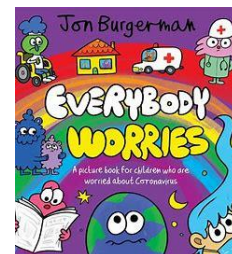
As we said in our top tips, there are ways to make conversation feel easier like talking alongside a shared activity, and avoiding an inquisition!

If you have noticed your child is trying to communicate their feelings through their behaviour and talking seems difficult, you could consider these ideas:

- Ask them what will help / what do they want to happen
- Be fully available to listen / see what your child is trying to tell you
- Try using feelings cards to support your child to recognise their emotions and communicate them to you more easily, free downloads can be found online ([www.twinkl.co.uk](http://www.twinkl.co.uk)) or you could make your own using emoji signs



- Share a story together that has some transferrable meaning for your child's experience – such as The Huge Bag of Worries, by Virginia Ironside
- Or Everybody Worries by Jon Burgerman (available free to download at Oxford Owl: <https://home.oxfordowl.co.uk>)



- When they are talking, follow their lead and show you are interested
- Repeat back small parts of what they tell you, this will help them to see you are listening and they will build confidence to share more with you
- Praise them for talking about their feelings or worries, this will encourage them to talk more in future

Starting back at school is a process...

It is not a start or an end point but a transitional journey for us all.

Speak openly about how they may expect their feelings to change for the better across their first week/term.

# Sleep

Sleep is really important for physical and mental health, and for helping us to feel more able to cope. A good sleep routine also promotes feelings of security. How often does someone have a really great day, after a poor night's sleep?

So what is the right amount of sleep?

Your child might naturally be an early or late riser and you will already know what is more their norm, and although we are all different the following guide to how much sleep they need for their age would still be generally appropriate

- *3 to 5 years of age*                      *need 11 – 13 hours*
- *5 to 12 years of age*                  *need 10 – 11 hours*
- *12 – 18 years of age*                *need 8 – 9.5 hours*

## Not sleeping through the night?

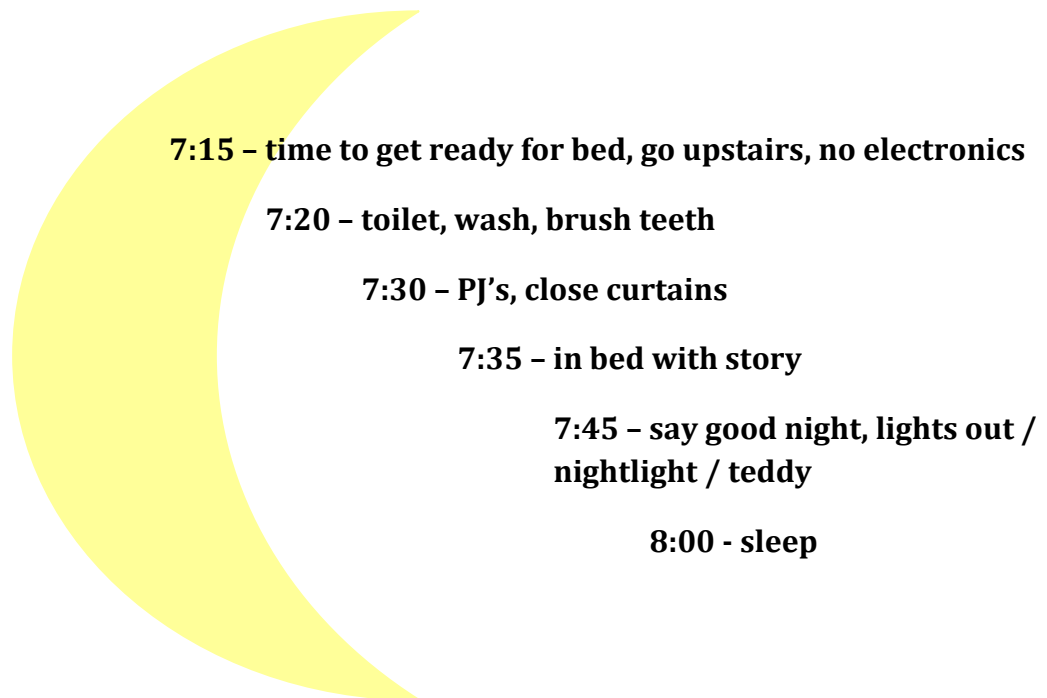
We all wake during the night and this is normal, we just might not always be aware. If we are able to get ourselves to sleep in the first place, it is usually easy for us to get back to sleep without noticing we were even awake. So it makes sense that children need to learn to get to sleep by themselves, so they can also get themselves back to sleep during the night when they wake.

## Bedtime Routine

Establish calm and soothing bedtime rituals in a routine that begins as bedtime approaches. Keep this consistent and doing the same every night to help set up cues for your child's brain to recognise sleep is coming. When they have good 'sleep hygiene', as it is known, it should take around 15 minutes for your child to get to sleep. This might be longer if your child has Autism Spectrum Condition or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, as it may take a longer winding down period.

So, if your child is primary school age, and needs around 10 – 11 hours sleep, think about when you want to start your morning routine to work out their recommended bed time.

For example, you want to start the morning routine at 7am, you would be aiming for them to be asleep between 8pm and 9pm. To achieve this you would need to start the bedtime routine between 7.15 and 8pm and it might look something like this:



You can find more information and advice about good sleep hygiene and tackling problems with sleep at:

CWP's My Mind Website ([www.mymind.org.uk](http://www.mymind.org.uk))

The Sleep Council ([www.sleepcouncil.org.uk](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk))




# Preparing for Back to School

## Step by Step

Some children will benefit from taking smaller steps to prepare them, you might already know that your child has found settling into a new school year difficult previously so adjusting this time around is likely to mean extra thought is needed. Or you might feel that despite trying some of the other advice in this booklet, such as worry time; your child is still showing you that they are having more difficulty, perhaps through still asking lots of questions or some other behaviour.


To plan some smaller, more achievable steps towards the top goal of going to school, there is a completed example below to help you, but it is best to involve your child with this process, this gives them some control, and of course you would want them to agree the reward so that it is something they are going to look forward to and enjoy!



Difficulty	Step	Goal	Reward
Hardest	7	Go to school	Extra special treat (be specific)
	6	Pack school bag	Extra play time
	5	Speak to / see school teacher	One to one time with parent / carer (baking, games)
	4	Do trial school run (walk, cycle, drive)	Choose family TV / Movie
	3	Try on school uniform	Choose dinner / pudding
	2	Speak to friend/s from school	Extra time on favourite activity
Easiest	1	Look at photos of school / school website	Stay up 10 minutes later / extra bedtime story



If you want to make your own you can have fun together and get really creative, think about what your child likes, if they like space rockets they could be zooming off in a rocket towards their goal, or you could have levels like a video game instead of stairs!



Difficulty	Step	Goal (agreed by child)	Reward (agreed by child)
Hardest	10		
	9		
	8		
	7		
	6		
	5		
	4		
	3		
	2		
Easiest	1		

# Separation Anxiety

After such a long period of time together, your child (and possibly yourself) may experience some symptoms of separation anxiety, this is a normal reaction, but supporting your child to feel more comfortable when apart from you is going to help prevent it becoming more difficult for your child, and your family.


This might be something you already recognised before Covid-19, or it might be, understandably, due to the change in circumstances. Either way, if you think your child is going to find separating from you and the home more difficult than others, then consider following some steps like in the example below to build their confidence.

Remember these points are really important:

- \* make a list together of positive and negative reasons to have a go at this (aim for more positives!)
- \* ensure your child agrees with the planned steps and rewards
- \* move on to the next step when your child is feeling comfortable, you might need to repeat steps or add in some smaller ones

This is just an example to guide you, you can also consider whether your child needs a more phased return to school, (especially if you already recognised difficulties with separation or with adjusting to change); you can speak to your child's school to agree an appropriate plan with them.

*\*If appropriate for your family it would be useful to add "time away from home with another relative", between steps 4 & 5*



Difficulty	Step	Goal (agreed by child)	Reward (agreed by child)
Hardest	7	Full time school hours	
	6	Increase time spent at school	
	5	Spend X time at school	
	4	Increase time that main caregiver leaves the home	
	3	Spend X minutes in own home while main caregiver leaves the home **stay with a trusted adult**	
	2	Increase time in home but away from main caregiver	
Easiest	1	Spend X minutes in a different room at home (away from main caregiver)	

## Praise and Rewards

✓ Do	✗ Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Involve your child in choosing rewards that feel good for them</li> <li>✓ Ensure anyone else involved in your child's care understands and supports the same messages</li> <li>✓ Give genuine and specific praise (<i>not just "well done" BUT "well done for..."</i>)</li> <li>✓ Praise every success, no matter how small it seems, any progress is good</li> <li>✓ Give the praise or reward as soon as the step / goal met</li> <li>✓ Enjoy seeing the progress and the bravery your child is experiencing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Promise rewards you can't give</li> <li>✗ Take away or reduce a reward as a punishment for some other unwanted behaviour – once it has been earned it has to be given</li> <li>✗ Use the reward as a bargaining tool for something else (<i>"you can't have it unless you eat your tea / tidy your room"</i>)</li> <li>✗ Follow up positive praise with a negative (<i>"well done, you could have done that in the first place / why can't you do that every time"</i>)</li> <li>✗ Use standard star charts – the gaps where stars are not given are a negative message, we want to motivate by celebrating success</li> </ul>

# When things aren't getting better

## Consider first:

Was your child experiencing any difficulty before Covid-19 and school closure?

Talk with your child (think about using the tips in Communication & Feelings)– can they identify any problems (environment, school work, friendship or bullying problems)?

If you have been using a ladder technique with some success – you could try going back a step or building in some smaller steps

CWaC Child and Educational Psychology Services (June 2020), remind us that the return to school is going to be a “process” not an “event”, and so it will take time for everyone. If after several weeks things are not improving or seem to be getting worse, firstly speak to your child’s school. What do they notice and what support and advice can they offer?

Your child’s school should be a place that helps to build the feelings of security through this challenging time, and your child is likely to trust in support from people where they have existing and positive relationships.

## There are other services you can contact for support if needed:

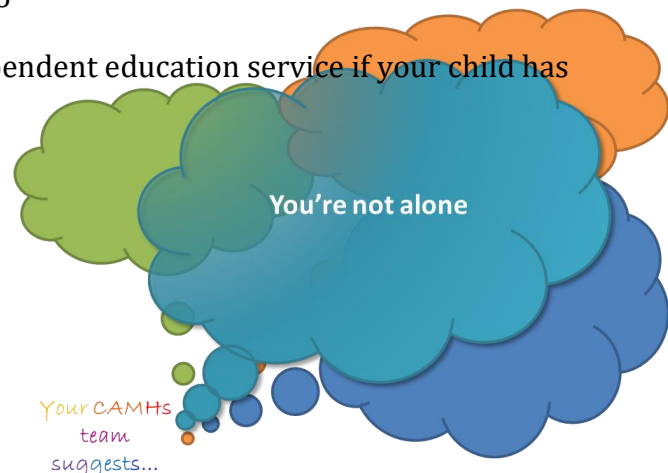
**Children & Young People’s Wellbeing Hub** - for professionals, parents & carers concerned about the mental health of a child or young person who has a GP in the Vale Royal & South Cheshire areas: call **01606 555120** between 13:00 and 17:00 Mon-Fri (Excluding Bank Holidays)

**CWP Mental Health Crisis Line** – 24/7 support for Children, Young People and Adults, Freephone **0800 145 6145** (*if in an immediate life-threatening emergency you should still always call 999 or visit A&E*)

**Starting Well** – [www.startingwell.org.uk](http://www.startingwell.org.uk)

**Child & Educational Psychology Service** - 0151 337 6836

**Information, Advice and Support Service (IASS)** – independent education service if your child has special educational or emotional needs – 0300 123 7001



# Helpful Resources

**Resources & Services you may find useful, some are additional to those referred to in the booklet:**

**ADHD Foundation** – The Neurodiversity Charity, [www.adhdfoundation.org.uk](http://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk)

**Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families** – Mental Health Charity with online resources - [www.annafreud.org](http://www.annafreud.org)

**Anxiety UK** – National Charity offering online resources and support – [www.anxietyuk.org](http://www.anxietyuk.org), Helpline 03444 775 774 (Mon – Fri 9.30 – 7.30, Sat & Sun 10am – 2pm)

**Child & Educational Psychology Service** - 0151 337 6836 (or via your child's school link)

**Children & Young People's Wellbeing Hub** - for professionals, parents & carers concerned about the mental health of a child or young person who has a GP in the Vale Royal & South Cheshire areas: call 01606 555120 between 13:00 and 17:00 Mon-Fri (Excluding Bank Holidays)

**Cosmic Kids Yoga** – Yoga and Mindfulness for Kids – [www.cosmickids.com](http://www.cosmickids.com)

**CWP Mental Health Crisis Line** – 24/7 support for Children, Young People and Adults, Freephone 0800 145 6145 (*if in an immediate life-threatening emergency you should still always call 999 or visit A&E*)

**My Mind** - [www.mymind.org.uk](http://www.mymind.org.uk) – Online resources dedicated to Children and Young People's Mental Health

**National Autistic Society** – online resources and support at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk), Helpline 0808 800 4104

**Open the door** – Support and advice about unhealthy relationships and domestic abuse – [www.openthedoorcheshire.org.uk](http://www.openthedoorcheshire.org.uk)

**Oxford Owl** - Online library with free ebooks – [www.home.oxfordowl.co.uk](http://www.home.oxfordowl.co.uk)

**Starting Well** – [www.startingwell.org.uk](http://www.startingwell.org.uk)

**The Happiness Trap**: FACE covid: How to respond effectively to the Corona crisis (May 2020) by Dr Russ Harris, [www.thehappinesstrap.com](http://www.thehappinesstrap.com)

**The Sleep Council** - [www.sleepcouncil.org.uk](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk)

**Twinkl** – [www.twinkl.co.uk](http://www.twinkl.co.uk), home learning resources including emotion based work

**Young minds** – [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk), online resources and support, parents helpline 0808 802 5544, there is also a young person's crisis text line available 24/7 – support can be accessed by texting YM to 85258

You may find this article helpful:

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-your-child-is-anxious-about-going-back-to-school/#breathing-techniques-and-grounding-exercises>



## References

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*'Coronavirus, school closure, changes and loss... : 'I can't cope!'* (June 2020) Cheshire West and Cheshire, Child and Educational Psychology Services.

*'Exposure Therapy for Anxiety'*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (2019) The Guildford Press, New York, Abramowitz. J, Deacon. B, & Whiteside. S

*Get Self Help* – [www.getselfhelp.co.uk](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk) (accessed July 2020)

*My Mind* – [www.mymind.org.uk](http://www.mymind.org.uk) (accessed July 2020)

*'Returning to school after the Coronavirus lockdown'* (June 2020) Cheshire West and Cheshire, Child and Educational Psychology Services.

*'Returning to school after the Coronavirus lockdown'*, Mental Health Foundation  
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/returning-school-after-lockdown> (accessed July 2020)

*'The Worry Tree'* (from Butler & Hope 2007), [www.elsa-support.co.uk/the-worry-tree/](http://www.elsa-support.co.uk/the-worry-tree/) (accessed July 2020)

*Young Minds* – [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk) (accessed July 2020)

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