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Coping with unexpected endings and loss

This document is aimed at teaching staff to share with parents and carers.



Life is full of change when you are a child or a young person.

Children move from home to nursery; nursery to primary school; primary to secondary school; secondary to 6th form or college; college to University or the world of work . At each stage there is some risk involved; the loss of friendships and relationships with trusted adults, the loss of a familiar routine and an environment you understood. Possibly the loss of status, from being the oldest in one school to being the youngest in another.

Change isn't all negative. These 'endings' come with the promise of new beginnings which can be both daunting and exciting. They also bring with them uncertainty and high emotions – joy, sadness, anxiety. Schools and colleges have expertly managed these changes for years.

However, due to the coronavirus pandemic there are events that children and young people value and which perhaps contribute to their status and their self-esteem but may not now take place. These might include being involved in a school play, playing for a school football team or even taking exams.

What is different about the situation that children find themselves in now is that the processes that schools and colleges put into place to help ease transitions and support children and young people are no longer available. Secondly, rites of passage; the rituals that children themselves develop – such as signing shirts when they leave school, end of school plays, the school proms, leavers' parties and assemblies – to mark endings and new beginnings are also denied them.

So how can we help your children and young people deal with the losses they are having to endure throughout this lockdown?

1 Don't always look on the bright side of life

We are social creatures. Being separated from the rest of our 'pack' is a difficult thing and so we feel loss deeply. Feeling grief is our response to the losses we are all having to endure and helps us adapt and learn to live with a new situation. Children need to hear that 'one day this will be over and we will continue with our lives'.

If the key stages in life, like school transitions, don't take place as expected, don't pretend they don't matter - they do. Acknowledge the losses. Avoid saying 'at least you can message your friends' or 'at least you can go next year' - the 'at least' doesn't show empathy. Let your children feel sorry for themselves or feel angry. Agree that this is all extremely unfair on them, don't get them to look on the bright side.

2 Recognise their loss

We know that children tend to worry about different things at different ages and that their anxiety is influenced by what's going on in the world around them. Not taking part in rituals and not saying goodbye to friends is a significant loss. Every child is different, but it's important for parents to read the signs. Do they want to stay closer than usual? Do they ask lots of questions and seek reassurance? Do they get tearful, or angry?

Recognising that your child may be feeling sad or anxious is the first step to helping them.

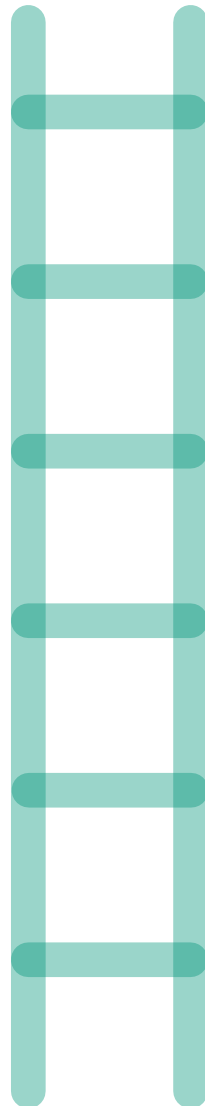


3 It's OK not to be OK

Children and young people will have missed out on events that you are expected to remember forever, like their last day at school with friends. They will miss seeing people, celebrating birthdays, being able to give someone a hug and - when things feel difficult - having a real shoulder to cry on. The disappointment and uncertainty created by this kind of loss is very real, and it is OK not to be OK with it. It's also OK to talk about it and recognise that you are not alone.

4 Prioritise relationships, safety and security

If parents are home working, they can't do their job as they would normally have done. Simply carrying on working while your children 'home school' is not going to work for anyone. With the restrictions of lockdown, many children and young people will massively benefit from having more time with their families. Some parents may have more time to read with them. Some young people in foster care may value clearer boundaries. Of course, where there is already a high level of conflict in a family, tensions may also increase.

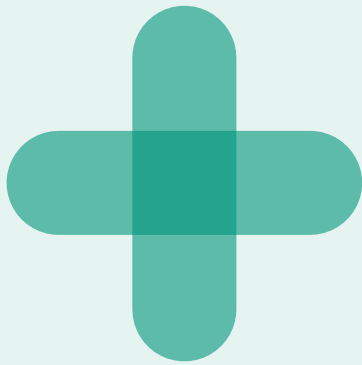


Routines are extremely helpful for everyone. A day without structure is a day which is more likely to drift into conflict, and parents need to keep children physically and mentally healthy. This is more important than ever as the risks to both are high right now. Sometimes parents will have to live with the fact that children are doing less schoolwork. Does it matter if their bedrooms are messier than usual? It's annoying, but give yourself permission to let things go a bit.

Agree and keep to a daily routine so that everyone knows what's happening next. It's predictable, and predictable = safe and secure.

5 See the opportunity in loss

Children and young people may feel a great sense of loss, but there are gains too. Try not to use the gains to hide the losses, but have them side by side and there's a good chance this experience will help children and young people to grow, not leave them broken.



The reality is we are forced together. Parents can develop new ways to keep communicating with each other, and that includes all the bad stuff - not just the achievements. It's the survival of the whole team that will lead to the feeling that you're winning. On this stormy sea, if you can weather the storm together, the chances of coming out stronger are very high and there's a good chance this experience will help you to grow.

6 Hold each other in mind

We are all trying to get better at being together while apart. This can help to shrink the losses that initially felt overwhelming, turning them into challenges to grab and do something with. Talking to the people you know and love is especially important right now. Stay in touch with them. These are the people who can hold you in mind, even when you find it difficult to recognise yourself and the world around you. Mixing up the way you hang out at home, and online, can help to get more of what you need to stay well and positive. An online quiz might be fun with a group of friends, while talking about how you feel might be easier with just one or two people.

