

WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND TEACHERS

The safety and well-being of our teachers and children is at the forefront of all decision-making. This summer, Starcast Performing Arts Schools will be reopening, and this may be the first-time children are leaving their home since the beginning of lockdown. Teachers and families will have had different experiences of recent events and now we must come together to provide a stable and secure environment for the children at Starcast Performing Arts Schools

Our Approach

At Starcast Performing Arts Schools:

- We always act professionally, following the staff code of conduct and maintaining confidentiality.
- We seek support and advice from our leaders and do not make decisions alone – this is especially important when we are faced with well-being, medical, bereavement and safeguarding concerns.
- We do not attempt to be medical experts or therapists – we are led by government advice and seek support from Starcast Performing Arts Schools leadership when needed.
- We leave our worries and anxieties at the front door and provide a secure and stable setting for all children.

Experiences of Lockdown

Every child will have a different experience of the past few months. Some will have had a home life centred around them as parents/carers and had some quality family time. Others may have been aware of uncertainties around falling ill from Covid-19, worries about older relatives, financial uncertainties and work tensions. This may cause some children to be reluctant about leaving the 'cocoon' of the family home for the first time to come to Starcast Performing Arts Schools. For others the time at home might have been more turbulent, with family tensions amplified, multiple anxieties causing an increase in stress and no routines or structure to the day. Learning could feel increasingly remote and irrelevant.

The First Day

As stated above, Starcast Performing Arts Schools may well be the first-time children have been left outside of their home 'cocoon' for several months. Returning may bring up forgotten feelings about early days at nursery or reception when separating from their primary carer. Extra care may be needed to re-integrate into the usually familiar Starcast Performing Arts Schools session.

Everyone will have got used to their new routines and structures. Keeping their routine and timetable clear and transparent to the kids will be equally important.

They will have questions, which may indicate how the children have responded to the pandemic. Some of these feelings and worries may be irrational but unsettling, nonetheless.

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It is important to follow a consistent approach when questions are asked which is explained below (in the Communication Response section).

These questions can also be approached on the first day with some sort of social/circle time. Focusing the children's kinds of worries might be useful. Topping and tailing this with a positive thought will help. During this time, it is important to acknowledge how different the week will be compared to usual e.g. reduced numbers, increased safety measures, shorter days).

Reminding them that remembering to try their best and help each other will make things more enjoyable, while everyone is getting used to being together again and finding slightly new ways of doing things.

Communication Response

Some children will be arriving at Starcast Performing Arts Schools with anxieties and possible experiences of trauma and bereavement. We must provide these children with a consistent response from all members of staff that reassures and provides a sense of safety. Every response that we give to a child must be well-considered. The more prepared we are, the more helpful our responses will be.

1. Create a space for conversation

Demonstrate that you are available to talk but never force the conversation as this may feel intrusive.

2. Acknowledge, empathise and validate

We often want to reassure children and find solutions to make them feel better, but first, spend time listening. Be accepting of their worry, anger and sadness about how things are at present and help them to name the emotion they are feeling if necessary. Try to avoid early reassurance, "everything's fine" or telling them, "don't be sad". Recognise that these kinds of feelings are common, understandable and normal.

3. Contain anxieties

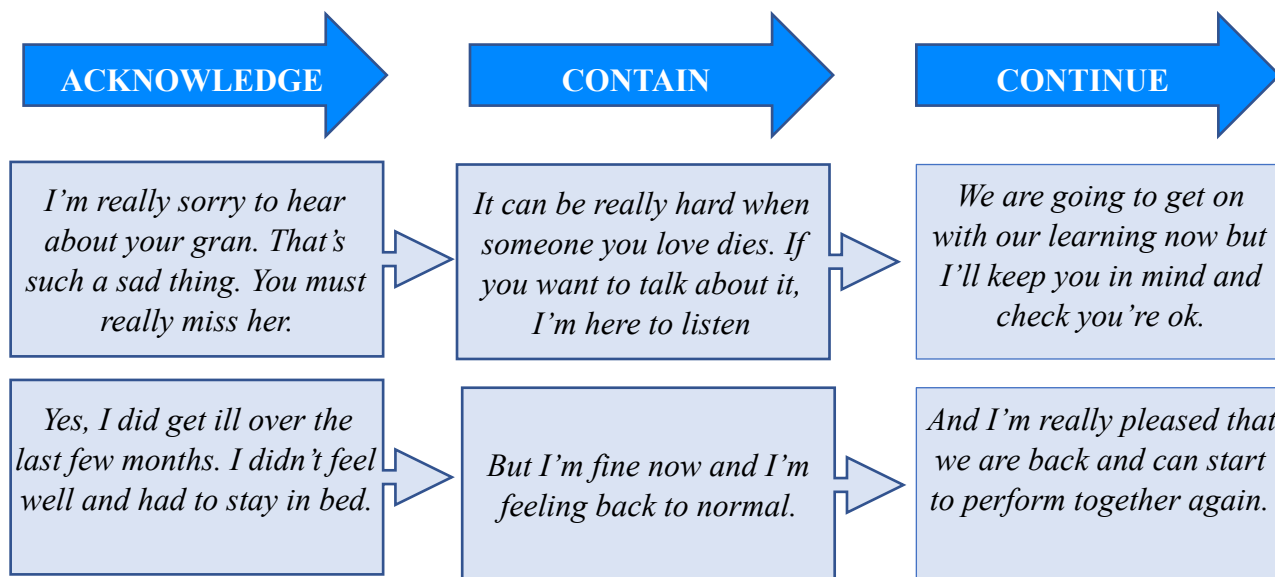
Children find it difficult to evaluate risk by themselves. We can help children to balance risk by holding difficult information for them and making sure that we do not exacerbate their worries. Don't let these conversations dominate any Starcast Performing Arts Schools session. We must make sure that our own experiences and anxieties do not come into play when speaking to children.

4. Continue and normalise

Keeping things as normal as possible will help children to feel safe and at ease in school. When we have difficult conversations with children, it is important to get back to 'work as normal' quickly and reassure them before going home.

The diagram below gives some suggestions for how conversations might go with children at Starcast Performing Arts Schools with the above guidance.

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Managing our own Feelings and Thoughts on Returning to Work

On returning to Starcast Performing Arts Schools, it is likely that we will be preoccupied with our own experiences of the lockdown, our real or potential losses and the anxieties stirred up by the current circumstances. It could be tempting to let these topics dominate our conversations with our colleagues. During the training there will be a facilitated discussion so that everyone has the opportunity, if they choose to use it, to name some of their feelings and thoughts about the lockdown, returning to Starcast Performing Arts Schools and the future.

While teaching at Starcast Performing Arts Schools, when we are going about our business, it will be important to use our capacity to compartmentalise so that we can put to the side some of our more pressing concerns and stay in the present moment. We'll need to focus on re-establishing our relationships with children and with our colleagues. A challenge we all face is processing and working through what the lockdown has meant for us and what we continue to live through. At the same time, we need to reconnect with our 'lost worlds' and familiarise ourselves with our 'new normal'. This will call upon both us as individuals and collective commitment to working collaboratively and thoughtfully to rebuild our everyday lives and make the most of the opportunity of doing things differently.