

# Some thoughts for parents from psychologists on the upcoming school transition...

## About us

Hi, we are Jo (Educational Psychologist) and Gwen (Clinical Psychologist). Educational and clinical psychology are doctoral-level professions which require many years of study as well as carrying out research on how (and why) humans develop and behave on both a general and individual level. We are both practitioner psychologists, which means that we try to apply psychological theory and evidence to people and situations to help us understand our world as well as bring about change if appropriate.

**Educational psychologists** like Jo tend to be employed by local authorities and work within the education sector. Educational psychologists also have a specific role in writing assessments for Statements (soon to be called Individual Development Plans) of Additional Learning Needs.

**Clinical psychologists** like Gwen tend to be employed by health settings, although often work into a range of other settings such as schools and social care. Clinical psychologists have a role in assessing and providing treatment for a range of emotional difficulties, as well as supporting professionals to understand people's need and how best to support them. My role involves supporting schools to promote children's wellbeing.



**Jo**  
(Educational Psychologist)



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## SOME TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S TRANSITION

As everyone knows, this pandemic is a unique event that affects everyone and the way we respond is governed by general rules of human behaviour as well as our unique characteristics and the particular situation we are in. We believe there are eight themes that are relevant to parenting in your situation - year six and transitioning to the next stage of education. We will explain these eight themes on the next two pages.

# 1

## ANXIETY IS NORMAL

and has a key role in human development. However, being over anxious means quality of life can be reduced. The brain also does not distinguish between a normal predator (i.e. a bear) and a substitute one (new big school!). It also does not distinguish between a good coping mechanism (taking time to calm ourselves, talking to others) and an unhelpful one (running away, getting aggressive). However, if you develop good habits the brain learns from practice.

# 2

## GET THE BASICS RIGHT

Stress and anxiety have a big impact on our bodies and there is lots of research to show that enough sleep, good food and exercise reduces stress and improves wellbeing. Helping your child (and yourself) to stick to a good sleep routine, eat well and get plenty of exercise is really important.

# 3

## MANAGE YOUR OWN WORRIES EFFECTIVELY

Your child going to a new school can be a worry, particularly at the moment with the added COVID-19 risk. Emotions are contagious and children pick up on adults anxiety very easily (particularly those closest to them), with parental anxiety being strongly linked to child anxiety. Take time to calm and think through your own concerns about the school move before you address your child's. This is a great opportunity to model how to manage worries well.

# 4

## CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

Research tells us that human beings are hard wired to want predictability and control, Stress is often linked to high level of uncertainty and not having that control. But research also tells us that human beings (homosapiens) became the dominant species because we were able to work together and interact (so develop rules and laws) and this is the secret of our success. With that in mind, it is important to concentrate on what you can make predictable and control within your own environment. For example, being able to read with your child, go for a walk etc) but understand that we can only succeed if we work together. Bear in mind this is a general approach and being aware of what psychologists call 'individual differences' is really important. For example, some people need more predictability and control than others.

For animations on talking to children and teens during this time and parental self-care search for:

**'Cardiff and Vale Resilience Project'** on Youtube



## 5 CONSIDER YOUR CHILD'S STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

Year six pupils are generally at the start of what psychologists call the 'formal' stage of development where they are able to reason and think in abstract terms but again this is only general and ability to reason can be reduced under stress. Some children can apply some reason to this current situation and think flexibly. Others will need support with calming the lower parts of the brain responsible for the physical and emotional experience of anxiety first – for example focusing on calming the body (e.g. through exercise, breathing activities) and emotions before being able to reason.

## 6 SMALL CHANGES/MOVES MATTER

Thinking of your home and school as a system and supporting the view that everyone in that system has their part to play, from the individual through to government departments, will help ease the transition back to school-based learning and a new school transition. Talk about what will be the same (as well as what might be different) for your child – for example your morning breakfast routine, peers who are going to the same school and keep what you can the same at home.

## 7 CONNECTION AND COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Research is already telling us that the people (adults and children) who have stayed connected and managed to communicate regularly (regardless of how this was achieved) have fared the best in terms of wellbeing. Ways to do this could be putting in a regular one to one time with your child/children, extra hugs and reassurance during this time of change or giving your child an object to remind them of you that they can tuck in their bag or pocket when they go to school.

## 8 CELEBRATE THE POSITIVE

Sharing with your child positive memories and hopes can be really helpful to support them to approach the transition well. Reminisce about good things from primary, help them to mark the ending (e.g. making a card/picture for their old teacher, friends who are going to a different school) and share hopes and opportunities you think there may be in secondary.

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Finally, be kind to yourself. None of us get it right all the time! Remind yourself you and your child are doing the best you can when you hit bumps in the road.

We wish you all the best with the upcoming school transition and the exciting new school journey your child has ahead.

Best wishes,

**Dr Joanna Hill (Educational Psychologist) & Dr Gwen O'Connor (Clinical Psychologist)**

This document is available in Welsh / Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg