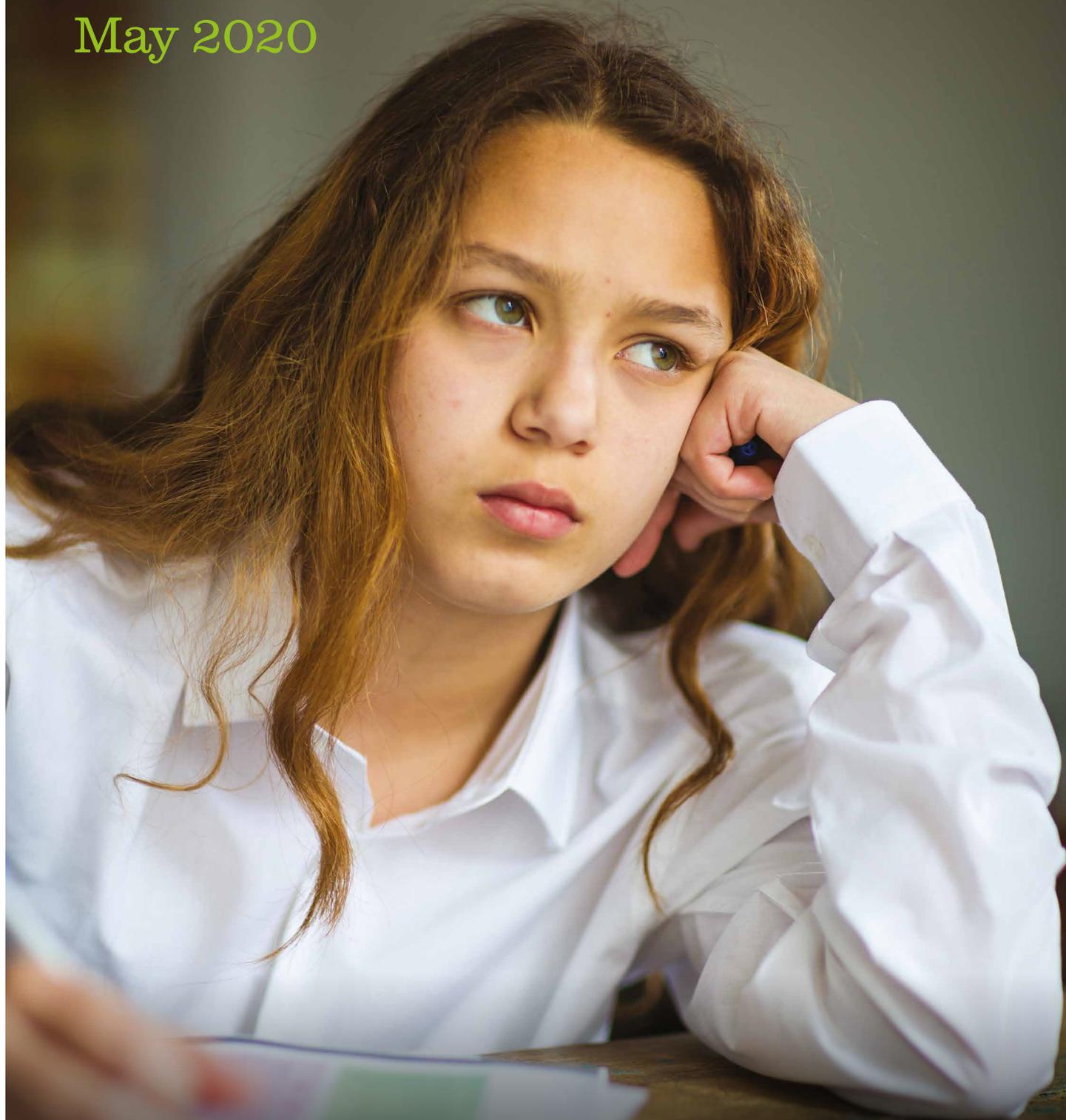


# **Time for a Clean Slate; Children's Mental Health at the Heart of Education**

May 2020



**Believe in  
children**



**Barnardo's**



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**At Barnardo's we believe the system around children and young people is going to be more critical than ever if we are to help the next generation not just adapt to a new post-crisis reality, but to thrive. The successful return of schools will be a cornerstone of the UK's efforts to rebuild after the pandemic. This briefing sets out how government, schools and charities like Barnardo's can support a once in a generation opportunity to put wellbeing at the heart of the learning environment when children return to school.**

We are the UK's largest national children's charity and work closely with schools to deliver mental health and wellbeing support. We surveyed more than 100 school staff<sup>1</sup> to find out what help they will need as children and young people return to school after Covid-19:

**88%**

thought the Covid-19 outbreak would have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils.

**82%**

said Covid-19 had impacted upon their and their school's ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.

**62%**

told us they needed more funding for mental health and wellbeing support.

**67%**

told us that changes in the curriculum structure and exams process would help them support children and young people's wellbeing.

**More than a quarter (26%)**

were not confident their school had the tools, skills or resources they needed to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing when they return to school.

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“A number of our families are living in poverty. Therefore they will have had to deal with very challenging circumstances such as lack of food and hygiene products. Living in close confinement will have put pressures on already strained relationships. Some families will have had to deal with illnesses and bereavement and will have struggled to come to terms with being unable to say goodbye to family members. I think we are going to struggle to get some children to leave the house and get them back into school when we are open again fully.”

(Assistant Headteacher,  
Secondary School)

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“All of the meaningful day-to-day services have been on hold. For the most vulnerable children it is often attachment and trust that need to be built with a child. The sudden detachment will take a long time to repair.”

(Headteacher/Deputy Headteacher,  
Primary School)

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1. We surveyed 112 members of staff in schools across primary (76%), secondary (11%) and special educational needs and disabilities (9%) provision. The survey was live for the first two weeks of May and was open to any member of staff working in schools. We received responses from a range of staff, including teachers (54%), Headteachers or Deputy Headteachers (26%), Teaching Assistants (9%) and school counsellors (3%).

# About Barnardo's

As the UK's largest national children's charity, Barnardo's supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services in 2018/19. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

In 2018/19, we supported over 40,000 children, young people, parents and carers through our mental health services, including 28,700 children supported through our school-based programmes, aimed at improving social and emotional learning.



# 1. Introduction

**The Covid-19 pandemic is a traumatic event, a 'collective loss of the world we know'<sup>2</sup>. This is no different for children and young people, who have experienced disruption to many aspects of their lives, not least the closure of schools; and the UN highlights them as a group especially impacted by mental distress from coronavirus<sup>3</sup>.**

We know that this pandemic will have the biggest impact upon those who were already most vulnerable in society, and will exacerbate existing inequalities. Others will be experiencing poor mental health, domestic violence or poverty for the first time. The increase in children, young people and families experiencing trauma, adversity and loss could lead to an increase in mental health needs; and there is a growing evidence that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma can have a long term impact on mental health and wellbeing without early intervention<sup>4</sup>.

The successful return of schools will be a cornerstone of the UK's efforts to rebuild after the pandemic. But in the aftermath of Covid, it cannot be simply about catching up academically, especially given what we know about the importance of mental health and wellbeing to children's ability to learn<sup>5</sup>. The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of the nation – especially on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged – means that ensuring schools are places where wellbeing and pastoral care are paramount is more important than ever.

However, schools cannot be expected to do this alone, and support from local partners and the Government will be key. We cannot simply return to the way things worked prior to this crisis, and bolt on additional requirements on a system that was already stretched. We believe the system around children and young people has a once in a generation opportunity to build back better, and put wellbeing at the heart of the learning environment when children return to school.

In this briefing we highlight what we have learnt from our own practitioners and partners in schools about the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. But we also heard about how schools seek to strengthen their support for their pupils' mental health and wellbeing; and the opportunities we have now to make changes to the wider education system so it prioritises wellbeing as well as academic progress. This will require the Government to support schools now, and in the months ahead, not only in ensuring the physical safety of pupils and school staff as they return, but also in enabling them to put mental health and wellbeing at the heart of their work with pupils.

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2. Cherry, K. (2020). Understanding grief in the age of the Covid-19 pandemic. Available at: <https://www.verywellmind.com/understanding-grief-in-the-age-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-4801931>

3. United Nations (2020). UN Leads call to protect most vulnerable from mental health crisis during and after COVID. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063882>

4. Spenrath et al. (2011) The science of brain and biological development: implications for mental health research, practice and policy. Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3222573/>

5. UCL Evidence Based Practice Unit (2019). Study links poor mental health to educational outcomes. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/brain-sciences/news/2019/feb/study-links-poor-mental-health-educational-outcomes>



## Terms and Definitions:

- **Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)** are defined as highly stressful events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. A wide range of experiences can be described as adverse, including maltreatment, violence or coercion, inhumane treatment, and household or family adversity including poverty, bereavement or prejudice<sup>6</sup>.
- **Trauma** can occur from a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's life or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens life or physical security of a loved one can also be traumatic<sup>7</sup>.
- **Loss** describes the feeling of grief after losing someone or something of value.
- **Schools** in this briefing refers to primary, secondary and special educational needs and disabilities provision as these settings made up the basis of our research; however, many of the themes in this briefing will be relevant and applicable to other educational settings.
- Throughout this briefing we refer to **Children and Young People** in recognition of the impact of Covid-19 on mental health, wellbeing and learning for children and young people at all ages and stages, and in acknowledging the importance of adolescence in terms of health and developmental needs. While 'children' typically includes anyone under the age of 18 years, the World Health Organisation defines 'young people' as aged 10-24 years<sup>8</sup>.

6. Brennan, R, Bush, M., Tricky, D. (2019) Adversity and Trauma-informed practice. Young Minds. Available at: <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3091/adversity-and-trauma-informed-practice-guide-for-professionals.pdf>

7. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>

8. World Health Organisation. Recognising Adolescence. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/adolescent/second-decade/section2/page1/recognizing-adolescence.html>

## 2. Impact of Covid-19 on Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing

**In March 2020, the UK Government announced a series of measures to contain the Covid-19 virus outbreak. As well as asking the public to stay home, the Government announced<sup>9</sup> the closure of schools, colleges and early years settings to all children except those of key workers and those deemed vulnerable under the Government's guidance<sup>10</sup>.**

The Covid-19 outbreak, as well as side effects of the measures to contain it, have exposed the country's children and young people to an unprecedented level of trauma, loss and adversity. School closures have meant a significant disruption to the daily lives of children and young people – lost routines, reduced social contact and many unable to access the things that support their wellbeing.

But it has also exacerbated existing inequalities, with those living in the most deprived communities affected most by exposure to the virus, but also the measures to contain it<sup>11</sup>. We know that some children, who were already extremely vulnerable and experiencing or at risk of experiencing complex trauma, will have been badly affected. For example, children and young people living in lockdown or socially isolating in challenging and unsafe home environments may have lost their 'safe space' at school. We know that for some children and young people, they will be exposed to poverty, domestic violence,

or child abuse for the first time. We also know that, without early intervention, this trauma and adversity can lead to long term mental health problems<sup>12</sup>.

At Barnardo's, we are very concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. In our survey of nearly 1,000 Barnardo's practitioners on the impact of Covid-19, **69% said they are supporting someone experiencing an increase in mental health issues due to Covid-19 – and nearly half of our practitioners are supporting a child or young person with increasing mental health needs.** This includes symptoms of anxiety, stress, sleep dysregulation, depression, reduced self-esteem, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) behaviours, paranoia and self-harm.

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**“The fact that the vast majority of pupils don't have the face to face contact and daily interaction with staff makes it a lot more challenging to pick up on early signs of need and has removed the channels of natural daily interaction.”**

(Secondary School Headteacher/Deputy Headteacher)

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9. UK Government (2020), Schools, colleges and early years settings to close. Gov.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-colleges-and-early-years-settings-to-close>

10. Vulnerable as set out in the Government's guidance includes: Children in Need as defined under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, children with an Education, Health and Care Plan or children who have been assessed as otherwise vulnerable by educational providers or local authorities.

11. Bibby, J. (2020). Will COVID-19 be a watershed moment for health inequalities? The Health Foundation. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/will-covid-19-be-a-watershed-moment-for-health-inequalities>

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12. Spennath et al. (2011) The science of brain and biological development: implications for mental health research, practice and policy. Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3222573/>

Barnardo's services work closely with schools to provide support to children and young people and we know that schools are also concerned about the increasing mental health needs of their pupils. **In our survey of over 100 school staff, 88% believed Covid-19 will impact on the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils. Yet 82% said that the current measures impacted upon their ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.** Schools have told us that a lack of daily contact with their pupils means they cannot pick up early signs of need; that some mental health and wellbeing interventions usually delivered in school cannot be delivered in the current circumstances; and that children and young people have less access to their usual support networks, including school support staff such as learning mentors or Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs). Schools told us how they are doing their best to provide mental health and wellbeing support remotely, through continuing Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) work, regular calls to families, and providing remote specialist support through their school counsellors or therapists.

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“Some parents have been concerned they will not be able to support their child to complete their work in the correct way and are worried about them falling behind when they return to school.”

(Barnardo's practitioner)

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“Children living in very high stress environments, e.g. parents with substance misuse, young carers, parents with mental health problems - there is no relief for our pupils and they don't have access to the support we offer on a daily basis.”

(Headteacher/Deputy Headteacher, Primary School)

### ***PATHS® Programme for Schools (UK Version)***

Barnardo's has supported the implementation of the ***PATHS® Programme for Schools (UK Version)*** in 57 schools since 2013. It is a whole school curriculum designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of children in primary school. The programme aims to improve emotional understanding, self-control, social problem-solving, peer relations, and self-esteem. During regular taught lessons, pupils engage in a range of activities aimed at improving their social and emotional competence and reducing

aggressive behaviours. Teachers also receive full training in the ***PATHS® Programme for Schools*** and Barnardo's Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and implementation and Coaching Support to help them embed mental health and wellbeing across the school. The programme is continuing to deliver remote services during Covid-19, including sharing materials online so that children can access them from home, with adult support. See @ **PATHSEdUK**

## Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)

Barnardo's was one of the first to pioneer **WRAP** for young people in the UK. WRAP is a 10-week peer support programme which aims to build resilience and promote self-care among young people. It is open to all children and young people aged 10-18 years, or up to 25 years for those with additional needs. It supports young people to develop their understanding of what they are like when they are well and what they can do to keep themselves well. Young people produce a wellness toolbox, and their own plan to cope

with difficult times and challenging feelings. While normal delivery of the programme has been disrupted, with lockdown in place our WRAP services are working in new ways to continue to support children. During lockdown, our WRAP service in Bradford has been running group sessions and support remotely – via video conference, phone and text – where young people find and talk about belongings that matter to them as a way of articulating anxieties and working on strategies to manage them.

A report by the Children's Commissioner highlights the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on the most vulnerable children, including: children whose parents suffer with poor mental health, young carers, children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), children at risk of suffering harm, children in care, children living in poverty, including digital poverty, and those living in overcrowded housing<sup>13</sup>. Youth colleagues at Barnardo's have also highlighted the needs of children and young people with an absent parent/s, including those with a parent in prison or in the military. We are also concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. Black people are 4.2 times more likely to die of the virus, due partly to existing health and social inequalities. Children from these communities will be more at risk of suffering bereavement, being young carers or having increased anxiety around catching the virus<sup>14</sup>. We also know that certain groups of children may be more likely to face bullying in the playground; for example, hate crimes against the Chinese community have tripled<sup>15</sup>.

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“SEND children will find it incredibly difficult to return to school. The fear of resocialisation for lots of families will be high, especially those families with SEND/mental health issues.”

(Barnardo's practitioner)

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“Not having the routine and safety of school for such a long time will inevitably impact their health and well being, especially those who come from very disadvantaged backgrounds. Not being able to see their friends and family will have impacted them too.”

(Teacher, Primary School)

13. Children's Commissioner (2020). We're all in this together? Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/cco-were-all-in-this-together.pdf>

14. Office for National Statistics (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by ethnic group, England and Wales 2 March 2020 to 10 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwales/2march2020to10april2020>

15. Lovett, S. (2020). Coronavirus: Hate crimes against Chinese people almost triple in UK during pandemic, police data shows. The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-uk-hate-crimes-chinese-people-china-a9499991.html>



Consideration of these different needs and vulnerabilities will be critical for schools. In her report, the Children's Commissioner highlights the unequal distribution of vulnerability across local areas and we know that schools will face varying levels of vulnerability in their pupil cohorts. Mortality rates were already higher in deprived areas, but Covid-19 has exacerbated this further, with deprived inner London boroughs such as Newham, Brent and Hackney, for example, experiencing the highest death rates from Covid-19<sup>16</sup>. While all schools will need to consider the impact of Covid -19 on mental health and wellbeing, those with the most diverse, vulnerable and disadvantaged pupil populations are likely to experience higher numbers of children returning having experienced complex trauma, adversity, loss and bereavement. Children and young people who are healing from trauma, loss and adversity can experience a range of reactions, including behavioural changes, emotional distress, grief, difficulties with attention, academic failure, nightmares or stress<sup>17</sup>.

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“I think children will be scared, worried, fearful. Their routines have been interrupted. Some of them live in ‘challenging’ circumstances and school is a safe place. They will need to reconnect with their friends. They may know someone who has died. They need to feel safe and it won't be the same.”

(Headteacher/Deputy Headteacher,  
Primary School)

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16. Office for National Statistics (2020). Deaths involving COVID-19 by local area and socioeconomic deprivation: deaths occurring between 1 March and 17 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingcovid19bylocalareasanddeprivation/deathsoccurringbetween1marchand17april>

17. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Creating, supporting and sustaining trauma-informed schools: a systems framework. Available at: [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/creating\\_supporting\\_sustaining\\_trauma\\_informed\\_schools\\_a\\_systems\\_framework.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/creating_supporting_sustaining_trauma_informed_schools_a_systems_framework.pdf)

# What schools are telling us:

88%

said the Covid-19 outbreak is likely to have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils.



82%

said Covid-19 had impacted upon their ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.



83%

anticipated changes in the way their school will operate when pupils return, specifically in relation to adapting to meet the needs of pupils returning from 'lockdown' measures.



52%

anticipated changes to the way in which their school will support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.



65%

were confident or somewhat confident that their school had the tools, skills and resources needed to support their pupils when they return to school.



26%

were not confident that their school had the tools, skills and resources needed to support their pupils when they return to school.



## To be more confident in supporting pupils with mental health and wellbeing after Covid-19, schools told us they need:

- Access to tools or resources that can be used with children to support their mental health and wellbeing (**71%**)
- Changes in the curriculum structure and exams process (**67%**)
- More support for school staff with their own mental health and wellbeing (**67%**)
- Increase in funding to support mental health and wellbeing initiatives (**62%**)
- Training and development for school staff in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing (**58%**)
- Access to specialist mental health services (outside of school) (**56%**)
- Access to social and emotional learning programmes (**52%**)
- Access to specialist staff in school, e.g. pastoral services (**50%**)

# 3. Returning to School – understanding and managing the impact of lockdown

**Schools are about much more than just academic teaching and attainment, especially for the most vulnerable children and young people. Schools can offer a safe, calm and nurturing environment for children and young people, especially for those who come from challenging home environments.**

Schools in England not only have a statutory duty to promote the welfare of their pupils<sup>18</sup>, but they also play an important role in promoting mental health and wellbeing<sup>19</sup>. Schools have been described as 'children's most important entry point into mental health care' and teachers are uniquely positioned to identify changes in behaviour and pick up on stress or trauma<sup>20</sup>. The school staff we spoke to agreed, telling us that the lack of daily contact with children and young people was making it particularly difficult to pick up on emerging issues of pupils, especially with the most vulnerable children and families. When asked how Covid-19 had impacted upon their ability to support children and young people with their mental health one secondary school technician told us, *"Because they have been unable to spot those cases that slip below the radar when pupils are out of sight.. I know of one parent and child struggling but [they] aren't good at asking for help, so it's not being asked for or noticed."*

In England there has been a welcome increase in attention on mental health and wellbeing in schools, as set out in the Government's Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: Green Paper in December 2017<sup>21</sup>. The introduction of compulsory relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education in schools<sup>22</sup> so that pupils are taught about mental health, and the inclusion of 'personal development' as a category for Ofsted school inspections<sup>23</sup> are also welcome steps in this journey. Schools told us about the different ways they were already supporting children and young people with their mental health and wellbeing through PSHE (98%), dedicated pastoral services (68%), staff training (61%), access to quiet spaces (71%) and dedicated support staff such as special educational needs coordinators (78%), teaching assistants (73%), school counsellors and educational psychologists (54%) and school nurses (43%).

18. UK Government (2019). Keeping Children Safe in Education. Gov.UK. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/835733/Keeping\\_children\\_safe\\_in\\_education\\_2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835733/Keeping_children_safe_in_education_2019.pdf)

19. UK Government (2018). Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools. Gov.UK. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/755135/Mental\\_health\\_and\\_behaviour\\_in\\_schools\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/755135/Mental_health_and_behaviour_in_schools_.pdf)

20. Alisic, Eva & Bus, Marissa & Dulack, Wendel & Pennings, Lenneke & Splinter, Jessica. (2012). Teachers' experiences supporting children after traumatic exposure. Journal of traumatic stress. 25. 98-101. 10.1002/jts.20709.

21. Department of Health and Department for Education (2017). Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: A Green Paper. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/664855/Transforming\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people\\_s\\_mental\\_health\\_provision.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664855/Transforming_children_and_young_people_s_mental_health_provision.pdf)

22. Department for Education (2019). Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education Statutory Guidance. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/805781/Relationships\\_Education\\_\\_Relationships\\_and\\_Sex\\_Education\\_\\_RSE\\_\\_and\\_Health\\_Education.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805781/Relationships_Education__Relationships_and_Sex_Education__RSE__and_Health_Education.pdf)

23. Ofsted (2019). Education Inspection Framework 2019: a report on the responses to the consultation. Gov.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/education-inspection-framework-2019-inspecting-the-substance-of-education/outcome/education-inspection-framework-2019-a-report-on-the-responses-to-the-consultation>

However, as children and young people return there will be unprecedented pressures on schools as a result of Covid-19 and prioritising mental health and wellbeing will be more important than ever. At the time of publication, we are yet to see clear Government guidance which provides advice and support to schools specifically on pupil and staff mental health and wellbeing as they return after Covid-19. But this is also a once in a generation opportunity to transform the wider education system around the child so that wellbeing is truly at the heart of the learning environment in schools.

We know that schools also want a system that puts wellbeing at the centre of what they do; the overwhelming message we heard from schools is that they will need time, flexibility and resources to ensure they can provide a safe and nurturing environment in which children and young people can learn and thrive. They need to be reassured that they can look after pupil and staff welfare as the phased return to school is rolled out, and they are asking for changes to the wider education system, so that they can prioritise pupil and staff wellbeing.



## I. Physical Safety

Children, families and school staff are understandably concerned about their immediate physical safety and the Government must ensure schools can open safely. Reducing anxiety and fear of catching the virus in schools will be fundamental to supporting the wellbeing of staff and pupils. From our conversations with practitioners, schools and young people, we know this is a serious source of anxiety. **73% of our practitioners said families were worried about becoming infected by Covid-19.** This concern for safety is reflected in the fact that only 5% of vulnerable children who are eligible to attend school are doing so – with many families keeping children at home<sup>24</sup>. Reassuring parents, carers and children will be critical in successfully opening schools. This will be especially the case for the most vulnerable children, young people and families, who might already have existing health conditions that make them vulnerable to the virus. Parents may also struggle with children of different ages returning at different times and the disruptive impact this could have on their day-to-day lives. Barnardo's two schools supporting children with SEND highlighted the particular challenges for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, many of whom rely on taxi or minibus transportation to get to school, which could make social distancing very challenging.

These fears are also very evident among teachers and school staff, as reflected in the Trade Union Congress' recent joint letter to the Government on concerns about safety<sup>25</sup>. Schools we work with have told us that they are concerned about the physical safety of pupils and staff, and how schools will be able to manage social distancing. They highlighted the increased risk of exposure to the virus of their own vulnerable family members, but also vulnerable family members of their pupils.

24. Department for Education (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) attendance in educational and early years settings in England. Summary of returns to 17 April 2020. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/883173/COVID-19\\_attendance\\_in\\_education\\_settings\\_170420.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/883173/COVID-19_attendance_in_education_settings_170420.pdf)

25. Trade Union Congress (2020). Education Union's statement on the reopening of schools. Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/education-unions-statement-safe-reopening-schools>

Schools told us they were anticipating significant changes to their day-to-day operation in order to minimise the risk for their pupils and staff<sup>26</sup>, including staggering start/finish times and breaks, smaller classes, more rigorous cleaning and hand washing facilities, greater distance between desks, managing narrow corridors, reducing or stopping group work or assemblies, and use of personal protective equipment (PPE). These changes, while necessary, are likely to be upsetting for children and young people, and might be particularly difficult for some groups such as those living with anxiety or special educational needs.

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**“They [the pupils] will be very worried to return to school and will not understand what is happening. They may not cope with the changes needed to ensure safety for all in school.”**

(School Counsellor/Educational Psychologist, Special School)

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**“Our pupils will be very scared about the thought of a virus especially when they hear deaths [are] involved and especially if they are asked to come back to school and mix with others.”**

(Assistant Headteacher, Special School)

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**“In a school of 600 children I cannot see how we would be able to keep them 2 metres apart. It does worry me and I'm sure it will worry parents of how we are going to prevent any more spread.”**

(Teaching Assistant, Primary School)

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26. Our survey was completed before the publication of Government guidance issued in May.

## II. Supporting pupils

We would encourage schools to speak to their own pupils about what would support them on their return to school. School populations are diverse and will be experiencing a wide range of different needs depending on the communities they serve. Schools must consider how they can meet the needs of their most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils - including urgently encouraging the take up of school places. This will mean talking to families about what reassurances they need in order to be able to support their children back into school.

We know from our conversations with schools that many are considering how they can support their pupils as they return, and are already seeking the views of their pupils. Schools told us about some of the additional ways they are planning on supporting their pupils:

- Planning a gradual, phased return, with a flexible curriculum.
- Risk assessing children on their return, and enabling the most vulnerable children to return first.
- More focus on mental health and wellbeing in lessons - with 71% of school staff telling us it would be helpful to have access to tools to support children and young people with their mental health.
- Dedicated time for children and young people to talk about their Covid experiences.
- More time for children and young people to play, be creative, and reconnect with their peers.
- More pastoral provision, including one-to-one support for pupils.
- Physical spaces for staff and pupils, e.g. quiet rooms and remembrance gardens.

Children and young people, including those Barnardo's support, have also highlighted the importance of schools having an open and honest dialogue with their pupils, a gradual return to school, and time and opportunities to reconnect with friends<sup>27</sup>.

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27. Two Barnardo's youth colleagues, Louise and Rebecca, spoke to a group of young people, including those Barnardo's support, aged 15-19 years' old to identify how they would like to see schools supporting children and young people when they return. They came up with 10 top tips for schools.

# Barnardo's Youth Colleagues' top tips for schools

Barnardo's youth colleagues, Louise and Rebecca, spoke to young people aged 15 - 19 about how schools can support children and young people on their return.

1

Be clear with children and young people about what will happen when they return to school and listen to their concerns.

2

Adopt a phased approach to returning to school, so that children and young people are not overwhelmed with a sudden change in their routine.

3

Talk to them about the impact the coronavirus outbreak has had and use the school's platforms and networks to raise awareness of the issues affecting them.

4

Tell them where they can access support services.

5

Facilitate social events for them, so they can rebuild their friendships and support each other.

6

For those who are transitioning to a new school or college give opportunities to have "closure"\*. For example, hold leaving events like proms, even if they have to be delayed.

7

Ensure that there is a place in school where they can access one-to-one support and raise their concerns.

8

Work with local partners to support them to access specialist mental health support when they need it.

9

Think about their whole family and consider the support the school can provide to families who may be struggling, financially or otherwise.

10

Know which pupils are vulnerable\*\* and keep in contact with them to ensure they can get the support they need.

\* I.e. Recognising the psychological importance of graduation ceremonies.

\*\*I.e. coping with multiple disadvantages and/or lacking adequate protection.

### III. A wellbeing curriculum

The curriculum cannot be simply about academic attainment at the expense of pupil and staff wellbeing. After Covid, it will be even more important than ever to adapt the curriculum to focus on wellbeing, but we also believe this is a once in a generation opportunity to review the existing curriculum and exam structures, as **67% of school staff told us that these changes would help them to support children and young people with their mental health and wellbeing.**

Schools are overwhelmingly telling us that they must not be expected to “catch pupils up” with the curriculum at the expense of pupil and staff welfare. We would echo this and call upon the Government to allow schools the flexibility to do this in the short to medium term. Schools told us they would be dedicating time to support children and young people's reintegration into the school environment; support children to re-socialise with their peers; and adapt the curriculum to enable more focus on PSHE, play, creative outlets and outdoors activities. It is essential that the Government encourages schools to take this approach. At Barnardo's special educational needs school, High Close, we have adopted a child-led curriculum so that children and young people can learn and adjust at their own pace. Some children and young people will be ready to start formal learning ahead of others, and schools must be able to cater to these individual needs.

There is also an important longer term opportunity to consider how the wider education system, including the curriculum, exams and inspection processes, impact upon pupil and staff mental health and wellbeing. With the current system weighing heavily on the side of academic performance, we are concerned that schools are finding it difficult to meet the needs of the most vulnerable pupils and to prioritise welfare and wellbeing. We know that the integration of care and education is key, especially for the most vulnerable children and young people in our society<sup>28</sup>.

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28. Black, E., Bettencourt, M., Cameron, C. Social Pedagogy in the Classroom. Available at: <http://www.sppa-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Social-Pedagogy-in-the-Classroom.pdf>

We would encourage the government to seize this opportunity to review the way in which the wider education system in England could better support pupil wellbeing. One way to do this is by taking a more holistic approach to education and England could learn from approaches adopted internationally, such as social pedagogy<sup>29</sup> concepts informing practice in Europe<sup>30</sup>.

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“Change or freedom in the curriculum to support our children's mental health and wellbeing rather than greater emphasis on narrowing the gap or catching up on teaching. Children cannot learn if they are not emotionally stable or ready to learn.”

(Headteacher/Deputy Headteacher, Primary School)

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“It will take time to build up to 25 hrs of learning – many pupils will need to rebuild relationships and trust. The curriculum will need to be adapted to concentrate on emotional wellbeing first rather than just progress academically.”

(Headteacher/Deputy Headteacher, Special School)

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29. Social pedagogy is essentially concerned with well-being, learning and growth. It is underpinned by the idea that each person has inherent potential, is valuable, resourceful and can make a meaningful contribution to their wider community if we find ways of including them. This requires that we also tackle or prevent social problems and inequality.

30. ThemPra Social Pedagogy. Available at: <http://www.thempra.org.uk/social-pedagogy/>

# Supporting Children and Young People with Transitions

**We know from our conversations with youth colleagues and also through feedback from schools and our own services that supporting children and young people who are at key transition points will be really important.**

Some children and young people will particularly struggle emotionally or mentally with the area of 'transition' whether that is in returning to school once school closures are lifted, moving between schools or year groups, or returning to activities in the community, post-lockdown.

From our work with children and young people during the Covid-19 crisis, we have seen:

- Some young people with depression or anxiety-related conditions who had been coping well and were on their journey to recovery relapsing due to current uncertainty.
- Children who have experienced trauma having particular difficulties linked to the emotional and mental impact of feeling out of control with the current crisis. Psychologically, the world may have again become less predictable and safe.
- Children and young people on the autism spectrum finding it difficult to adapt to different social rules and routines imposed by lockdown.
- Children, young people and families facing socio-economic disadvantage may also be particularly affected - including those living in poverty, single parent families, those without a wider support network and those open to social care.
- School closures possibly impacting on children's mental health by removing a potential protective factor.

Our Quarterly Practitioner Survey found that 76% of our staff are supporting families affected by school closures. The top concerns of families with regards to school closures were:

- Disruption to routines (25%)
- Disruption to children and young people's learning (18%)
- Reduced social interaction (12%)

Young people will be readjusting to new routines after a long period of time off school. Some young people, especially those transitioning between schools will find this challenging. Families will require support in managing the transition back to work and school. How the transition back to school is managed will be pivotal and will likely need to be different for different groups.

Barnardo's is working on new models that can support children and young people in this context. One example is the development of a Transition Worker role, which will adopt a whole-systems approach and engage all key agencies to help schools prepare for and cope with change. It will help children build resilience, self-confidence and self-esteem. The worker will support school-aged children and young people by using a multi-agency and partnership approach to provide a universal service supporting children and partner agencies. They will prepare resources and materials around key transition topics suitable for different ages, stages and abilities; provide specialist consultation to professionals; and deliver presentations and training to staff across all agencies.

## IV. Staff wellbeing

Staff wellbeing in schools is vital to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of pupils. This will be all the more important after Covid-19, which will have impacted upon staff as well as pupils. As highlighted above, reducing anxieties and fears around physical safety will be critical to mental health and wellbeing. However, we are particularly concerned that school staff wellbeing was already on the decline prior to Covid-19, with one in 20 teachers reporting a long-lasting mental health problem<sup>31</sup>. In our survey, **67% of school staff told us that increasing support for staff mental health and wellbeing would help them to support pupils.**

We are concerned that the wider education system does not always facilitate a mentally healthy school environment, with Ofsted finding that their own inspections are a source of stress for teachers<sup>32</sup>. School staff also told us that making changes to the curriculum would reduce pressures on schools, and enable improved mental health and wellbeing for staff and pupils. Other measures that schools told us would help support staff wellbeing include:

- School staff returning to schools before pupils so that they can plan and readjust – similar to inset days.
- 58% of school staff asked for training and development in mental health and wellbeing
- Ensuring school staff have had time to rest – especially where schools have remained open for large numbers of vulnerable pupils, e.g. residential SEND schools.
- Providing quiet spaces in schools for staff as well as pupils.

## V. Funding

**62% of school staff who completed our survey said they would need more funding to support mental health and wellbeing in their schools.** Schools told us how they were considering additional support to meet increased needs among staff and pupils including buying in additional training, resources and interventions. But we also know that schools cannot face this task alone. Schools already work closely with Local Authorities Children's Services to protect and support the most vulnerable children and young people.

Yet, significant cuts to local authority funding have impaired the ability of councils to deliver high quality children's services, to keep children safe, and ensure they have the opportunity to flourish<sup>33</sup>. We know that this has resulted in missed opportunities to intervene early to support children and young people and this will only be exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. It will be all the more important now that the Government commits to ensuring local areas have the resources they need to support children after Covid-19.

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31. Nuffield Foundation (2020). More teachers reporting mental health problems than ever. Available at: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/more-teachers-reporting-mental-health-problems-than-ever>

32. Ofsted (2019). Summary and Recommendations: teacher well-being research report. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-well-being-at-work-in-schools-and-further-education-providers/summary-and-recommendations-teacher-well-being-research-report>

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33. Barnardo's (2020). Charities warn of devastating impact of coronavirus after years of 'crisis-driven firefighting' by councils. Available at: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/charities-warn-devastating-impact-coronavirus-after-years-crisis-driven-firefighting-councils>

## 4. Our Recommendations

**We believe that the prioritisation of wellbeing has to be modelled from the very top, so that the actions of the Government, Department for Education and Ofsted enable schools to be able to provide a nurturing environment for children and young people.**

This can be achieved by the Government, Department for Education and Ofsted working towards a trauma-informed approach to policy making. We would urge the Government to seize this opportunity to facilitate a sea change in education - one that prioritises child welfare and wellbeing, so that it is on a par with academic achievement. We know that mental health and wellbeing is critical to learning and therefore facilitating a nurturing environment will only improve pupil outcomes. This will require a joint effort between the Department of Health, Department for Education, and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

### **To the Government and Department for Education:**

#### **Before children go back to school**

- The Government must address the very real and understandable fears of children, families and school staff about their physical safety before opening schools because this will impact mental health and wellbeing. We would recommend the Government launch a national campaign aimed at children, young people and parents to help reassure them and get them back to school, but also to work with schools to identify what they need to keep pupils and staff safe.
- We would encourage schools to urgently work with local partners to support children and young people during this period. For example, schools could open unused areas of their buildings for local charities to provide early interventions to support children and young people with their mental health and wellbeing.

- The Government must ensure that children and young people who do not attend school have access to remote learning and support so they are not put at a disadvantage.
- The Government must urgently publish guidance for schools on how they should be preparing for the mental health and wellbeing needs of pupils and staff as they return, with a particular focus on the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and communities, who will have been most impacted by Covid-19.

#### **After children return to school**

- The Department for Education should afford schools flexibility with the curriculum as they return to meet the educational and psychological needs of their pupils. Schools must be allowed a 'readjustment period' - lasting at least a term - where they can adopt a child-led curriculum that prioritises staff and pupil wellbeing.
- The Government should consider proposals, made by the Chair of the Education Select Committee, Robert Halfon, for a catch up pupil premium for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils; however, this premium should not just be about 'catching up' academically but schools should be able to use it flexibly to support the most vulnerable pupils in a holistic way, including for support with mental health and wellbeing.
- The Government must publish contingency plans which advise and support schools in the event of future school closures due to Covid-19 or any other unforeseen circumstances. The plans should set out how schools can continue to provide a digital curriculum, but also pastoral support, to pupils which is accessible to all children and young people, including those with special educational needs and disabilities.

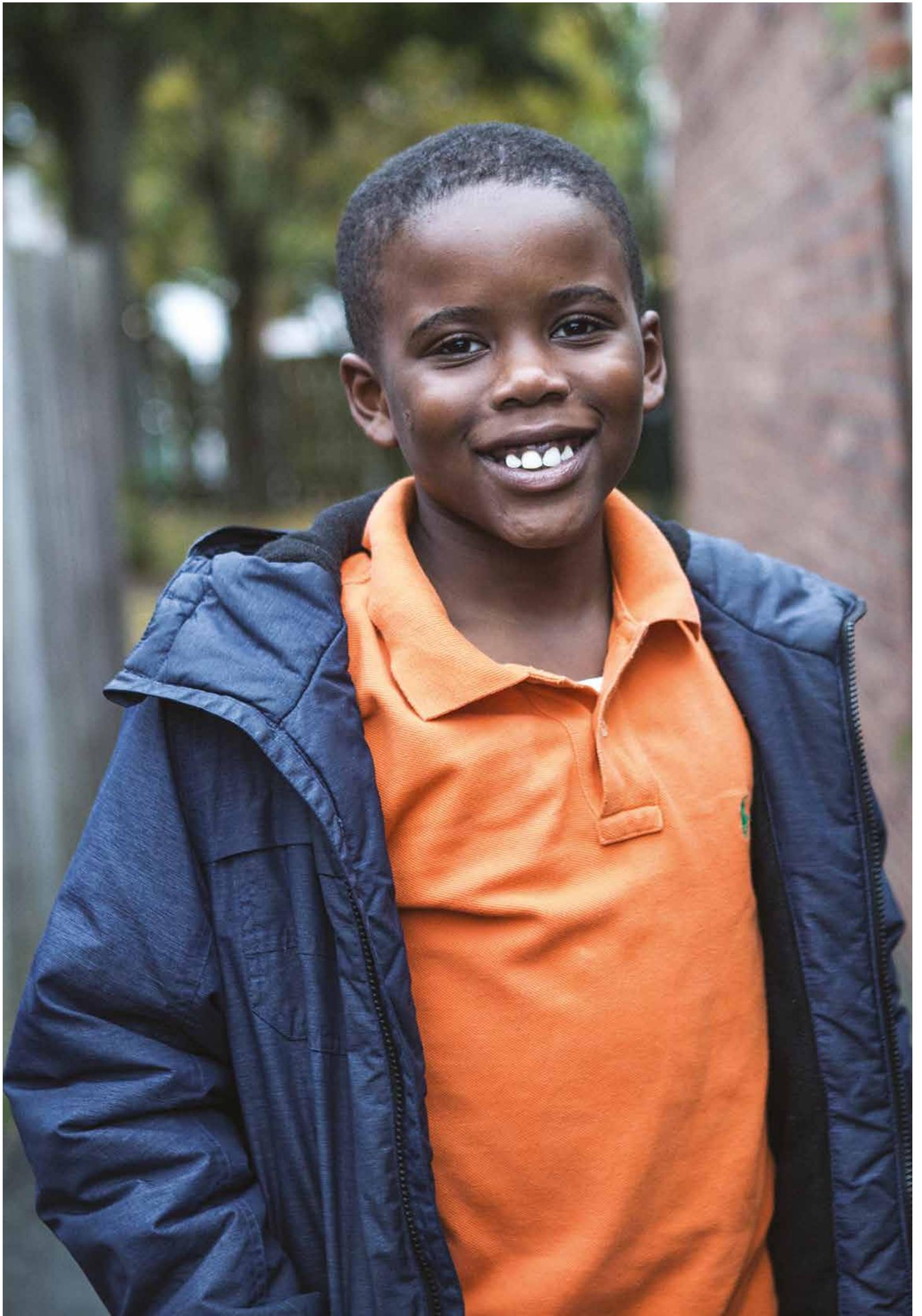
- We welcome the new compulsory Relationships, Sex and Health education which is being implemented from September 2020, and includes mental health and wellbeing. In light of Covid-19, the Government must prioritise its implementation in schools, and strengthen the role of PSHE in the broader curriculum.
- The Government should ensure that all children and young people benefit as soon as possible from the aims of the Transforming Mental Health Green Paper - not just those living in the trailblazer pilot areas. The Government must communicate with and support all schools in England to adopt a 'whole school approach' to mental health and wellbeing.
- We would urge the Government to set out how it will identify and address the needs of the most vulnerable children and young people, and what steps it will take to mitigate the likely increase in mental health needs as a result of Covid-19. The Government should work towards a trauma-informed approach to all policy development. Listening and responding to the views of children and young people should be a central feature of their approach.
- We would urge the Department for Education to build upon the aims of the Transforming Mental Health Green Paper, and consider the role of the wider education system on wellbeing, including the role of Ofsted. It should set out how the Department for Education and Ofsted will work towards adopting trauma-informed policy and practice themselves, as well as supporting schools to become more trauma-informed, in recognition of the traumatic nature of Covid-19. This might include piloting clinical supervision in schools or providing training in trauma and adversity to school staff.

### **To schools:**

- Schools must work in partnership with local authority children's services and local charities to continue to identify and support vulnerable children and families who are not attending school. They should also prioritise the return of vulnerable children as well as identifying and meeting their needs.
- Schools, supported by the Department for Education, should make preparations for future school closures and develop contingency plans that set out how they will continue to meet the needs of their pupils in these circumstances, including comprehensive arrangements for providing learning and wellbeing support remotely.
- Schools should maintain an open and ongoing dialogue with pupils and their families about what they need as they return and ensure they have opportunities to access one-to-one support with an adult they trust when they return to school.

### **To Teachers:**

- Talk to your pupils about what they will need when they return to school.
- Consider what you need to support your own mental health and wellbeing.
- Speak to your school about how it is preparing for children returning to school, and particularly about their plans for prioritising staff and pupil welfare and wellbeing.
- Find out what resources are available to support you and your school as children return.
- Speak to your school and local safeguarding partners if you are worried about vulnerable pupils and families.
- Ask your school to develop contingency plans in case of future school closures.



**[barnardos.org.uk](http://barnardos.org.uk)**

**Barnardo House** Tanners Lane, Barkingside,  
Ilford, Essex IG6 1QG. 020 8550 8822.

**Northern Ireland** 542–544 Upper Newtownards  
Road, Belfast BT4 3HE. 028 9067 2366.

**Scotland** 111 Oxfords Road North, Edinburgh  
EH14 1ED. 0131 446 7000.

**Cymru/Wales** Trident Court, East Moors Road,  
Cardiff CF24 5TD. 029 2049 3387.