

Principals of grant-aided primary schools with nursery units and nursery schools;

Leaders / Managers of pre-school education settings in the pre-school education programme

(Issued by email)

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Dear Principal / Leader / Manager

Return of pre-school children to face-to-face learning

1. This has been a challenging time for education. As pre-school practitioners prepare for the return to face-to-face learning, it is understandable that you may have some concerns and questions. This correspondence is designed to provide advice and reassurance as you support children to feel happy, safe and able to engage in learning on their return to the pre-school setting.

Supporting children back to the pre-school setting

2. You all now have experience of settling children back to the pre-school setting after a period of remote learning, and understand the importance of supporting their emotional health and wellbeing and helping them to feel engaged and motivated to learn. Stress and anxiety have a significant impact on brain development, and the emphasis therefore at present needs to be on supporting children to settle back to the pre-school environment, re-establish daily routines, build positive relationships and engage with active learning.

3. Initially, for our youngest pupils you may wish to focus on getting the children used to daily routines, interacting in a socially appropriate manner with others and building their ability to engage with activities and sustain concentration. Pre-school practitioners should take the time to re-establish daily routines, introduce new routines and communicate expectations positively, using nurturing approaches to support all children as they return to school.

4. Positive relationships are vital for child development, and particularly in the early years. Children may have experienced loss during the pandemic, including the loss of relationships with their peers. To ensure the children feel a sense of security, they will need planned opportunities to re-establish friendships, reconnect with staff, play with others and talk about their interests and experiences over the last number of weeks. Engaging together in enjoyable, age and stage appropriate activities, both indoors and outdoors, will be key.

Play-based learning

5. Active child-led learning through play is fundamental to children's social, emotional and educational development. We understand that children will have had very different home experiences during the period of remote learning, and some may not have had the same access to play-based learning experiences that they would have in normal circumstances while attending the pre-school setting. Interactive play, including group play, is the means through which young children flourish mentally, physically and emotionally thereby promoting positive dispositions and attitudes to their current and future learning
6. Staff will be planning for the return of children and for a continuation of learning and development across the six areas of learning within the [Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education](#). Pre-school practitioners will use their knowledge and professional expertise to adapt their usual plans and practice to best meet the needs of their children and suit their own unique context. After this period of disruption, practitioners may however wish to focus on personal, social and emotional development, gross motor skill, language and communication skills and those areas of the curriculum which provide creative and imaginative opportunities for children to express themselves through art or music, in addition to talking about their feelings.
7. At the current time, it is also important that children have regular access to physical movement and energetic outdoor play within the pre-school curriculum on their return to the pre-school environment. This has a positive impact on their physical growth and development, emotional health and wellbeing, offers important opportunities for active learning and increases children's exposure to fun and varied activities across the curriculum.

8. Continued engagement with parents will be important at this time as children make the transition from remote learning to face-to-face learning. We would encourage good communication with parents and the sharing of information, key messages and resources to help them to continue to support their children's learning at home.

Risk mitigation measures

9. Young children cannot reasonably be expected to remain apart from each other throughout the day. I would refer you to the [DE new school day pre-school guidance](#) which advises that there is no need for social distancing between children within a pre-school bubble, and in most cases, a bubble can be a full pre-school class.
10. Pre-school settings should continue to follow the range of infection control mitigations within this guidance as before. A review, and if necessary, an update of the Covid-19 risk assessment to reflect the safe return of the children and the staff should to be carried out and shared with the management committee / governors.

Recovery Conversations

11. Pre-school settings may wish to consider the way they address the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in the pre-school environment. Every child will have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic uniquely. The pre-school setting should be a place where they feel welcome and secure, but it is recognised that some children may settle back in more slowly and require more support than others.
12. Children may want to talk about their experiences of lockdown and Covid-19. For young children, it will be particularly important to model good talking and listening skills, and empower children with the vocabulary and resources they need to express their emotions, thoughts and feelings. Many pre-school settings have also found using the Arts a useful way to help children explore their emotions and create opportunities for discussion.

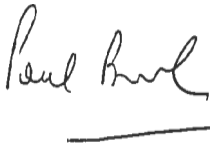
13. Some of our younger children may be confused about the return to pre-school and the change to routine. It will be important to prepare the children for upcoming changes and to take time to explain to them the likely sequence of events over the next numbers of weeks – for example that they will return to remote learning for a short period, will enjoy their Easter Holidays and will then return to pre-school for the summer term.

Useful resources

14. A range of useful resources have been developed to support pre-school practitioners during these challenging times. You will be familiar with many of these already, but I thought it might be helpful to provide links to some of these at Annex A.

15. In conclusion, I want to thank you all for your mammoth efforts and dedication over this very difficult period and to wish you all the very best for the return to face-to-face learning on 8 March.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Brush". The signature is written in a cursive style. Below the signature is a short horizontal line.

PAUL BRUSH
Director of Early Years, Children and Youth

Annex A
Links to pre-school information and resources

- [Pre-school restart guidance](#)
- The EA's [Supporting Learning](#) resources
- Pre-School Education Professional Learning Portal. **This is a place for pre-school educators to access resources, share ideas and take part in professional learning** <https://www.easds.org.uk/sds/portal2/createaccount/>
(One Time Invite Code: a4815p)
- The Education Authority (EA) has developed a website through C2k *MySchool*, to host resources and to provide a gateway to access a range of online Teacher Professional Learning sessions and webinars. Access to the website is available to all pre-school education settings via a "Supporting Learning – TPL" icon on your *MySchool* front page. The following link will also provide access
<https://sites.google.com/c2ken.net/teacherprofessionallearning-ea/home>
- CCEA has launched a [Wellbeing Hub](#), which includes a range of resources and links to support children's health and wellbeing
- Getting Ready to Learn – the EA's GRtL website has a range of resources to support delivery of the programme and engagement with parents
- [RISE NI \(Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland\) resources](#) and [parent website](#).
- [ETI publication - Pre-school examples of approaches to learning and teaching during the Covid 19 recovery phase](#)
- [ETI remote learning advice](#) (including pre-school)
- [CCEA home learning resources](#) (early years resources included in the primary section)
- A wide range of [resources for children with SEN](#) developed by the EA Early Years SEN Inclusion Service, including on cognition and learning, sensory processing, social and behavioural wellbeing and supporting language and communication
- Further extensive pre-school resources for children with SEN are available from the [EA Autism Advisory and Intervention Service](#); and the [EA Sensory Service](#) for children with Visual Impairment and Hearing Impairment.
- Early Years – the organisation for young children (EYO) '[Shaping the Restart](#)' guidance document.