

Mental health and the coronavirus research bite #2:

Supporting children and young people with unplanned endings.

About this series

We are aware that parents, carers and those working with young people might have many questions about how to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic. We know that it can be hard to find evidence about the best ways to tackle some of these challenges. The Evidence Based Practice Unit (a collaboration between the Anna Freud Centre and UCL) is producing a series of 'research bites' based on very rapid reviews of existing research. These are not thorough or extensive reviews, rather they aim to offer concise and timely insights on some topical issues.

The question: how can parents, carers and professionals support young people with abrupt or unplanned endings?

Whilst schools are closed to most pupils and social distancing measures are in place, young people are experiencing a variety of endings they may not have been prepared for. Some young people may be unable to see important figures in their life, including school staff, mentors, sports coaches, family and friends. Although many of these endings will only be temporary, some, such as those for children transitioning from primary to secondary school or those finishing secondary school, may be more final.

Endings, particularly those which occur abruptly and when there is uncertainty about the future, can be difficult for children and young people and for the parents, families and school staff supporting them through these transitions and changes.

Adolescents face a unique set of developmental challenges associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. During this transition, young people develop their educational, occupational and broader life goals as they move towards increasing independence and autonomy. Endings and disruptions to schooling and social life during this time can be particularly difficult to navigate.

Past research can help us understand how best to manage unplanned or abrupt endings, including how to support those young people who are unable to sit their exams, and those who are leaving school without certainty about when normal activities will resume.





How did we answer this question?

We conducted a very rapid review of the research literature, looking for published research that relates to managing unplanned, abrupt or challenging endings, closures or transitions. Conducting a literature search in this way is less rigorous than conducting a systematic reviewⁱ but helps us find relevant evidence quickly. The abrupt nature of school closures during the coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented, and this may partly explain why there has been limited research published about managing endings in a school setting.

Because parallels with the current coronavirus situation are hard to find, much of the existing research relates to treatment endings within a child and adolescent mental health context, or to endings when a child leaves a care setting.

This research bite also includes findings from work carried out as part of a PhD undertaken by Holly Bear at University College London, in conjunction with the Anna Freud Learning Network. The research by Holly Bear and the Anna Freud Learning Network was conducted with practitioners working in a range of settings, and with young people. It aimed to fully explore the factors that can make ending treatment a challenge, approaches that are helpful, and how we can improve endings for children and young people. From this research and the work of others, we can draw out some key evidence-based ways of supporting young people during this time of change.

ⁱ A systematic review summarises evidence about a topic by looking at the results of multiple studies.

What did we find out?

Endings come in many forms and affect young people differently, depending on their experiences, expectations and age. Endings which are unplanned, abrupt or happen under challenging circumstances can cause feelings of disappointment, loss, abandonment, confusion and sadness for young people.^{1,2,3} While endings can be difficult for young people, they can also be hard for the adults who support them.¹ We know for example that ending therapy with children in schools can evoke long-term powerful emotions among counsellors.⁴

Although endings are sometimes challenging, there are several ways in which adults can support children and young people to experience more positive endings:

- » **Preparation.** While it may not always be possible under current circumstances, preparation gives young people time to come to terms with change and for networks and supports to be established.^{1,5,6}
- » **Focusing on accomplishments, rather than losses.** It can be helpful to frame the ending as a moment of transition and growth, rather than as a loss and final closure.⁶
- » **Communicating honestly, while being hopeful about the future.** It is important to avoid making unrealistic promises about when activities will resume or what the future will hold.⁷ Having regular conversations to check in with young people about their worries and hopes may help in managing expectations. While honesty and openness about the future is key, optimism and hope that things will get better are also important 2

for promoting a positive outlook and managing worries and anxieties.¹

- » **Normalise worries and anxieties.** It is normal to feel worried or anxious when activities and supportive relationships end during times of change and uncertainty. Home-based self-management strategies, including physical activity and breathing exercises, may help to manage these feelings of anxiety.ⁱⁱ
- » **Sustaining social support networks.** The coronavirus pandemic means that young people are experiencing endings without the usual social support systems of schools and activities. Sustaining social ties with friends, siblings and other loved ones (online and by phone, for instance), is important to help young people feel connected and supported.^{2,8,9}

Take-away messages

Endings that are abrupt or happen under difficult circumstances can understandably cause feelings of disappointment and loss for young people. The research on endings mostly relates to mental health treatment endings, or to young people leaving care. Uncertainty about the future, including how long schools, community support, and extracurricular activities will be closed makes managing endings within our current context even more challenging.

The research evidence reviewed highlights that although endings are often difficult, there are strategies that can help children and young people to achieve more positive endings. These include, preparation; focusing on accomplishments rather than on losses; being honest but hopeful about the future; normalising anxieties and sustaining social support networks.



Thanks to Holly Bear for carrying out rapid literature searches and for summarising the information in this research bite.

ii See our research bite on self-management strategies for young people experiencing anxiety for more information.

References

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About EBPU

The Evidence Based Practice Unit is a child and youth mental health research and innovation unit based at UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences and the Anna Freud Centre. Founded in 2006, this collaboration bridges cutting-edge research and innovative practice in children's mental health. We conduct research, develop tools, provide training, evaluate interventions and disseminate evidence across four themes:

Risk | Resilience | Change | Choice

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