

# A Trauma Informed Return to School during Covid 19

The **A**rea **B**ased **C**hildhood Programme



An Foinn Leanaí  
agus Gnóthaí Óige  
Department of  
Children and Youth Affairs



An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus na Tíreanna  
Child and Family Agency

“My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.”

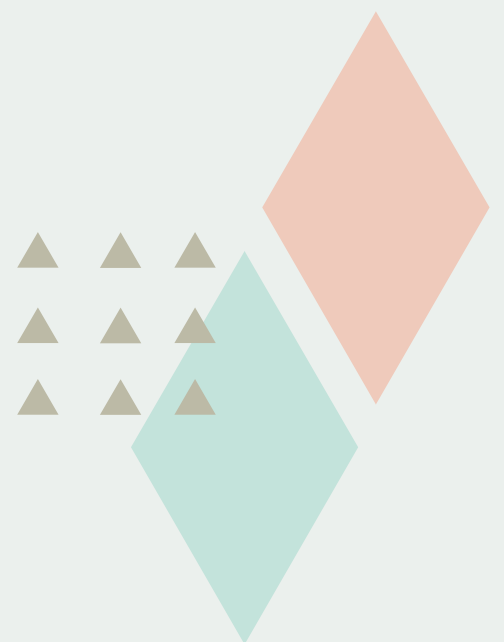
Maya Angelou

*This guide was originally developed by Louise Lunney who is a MA student of Psychology in UCC. She has kindly allowed the ABC network to compliment her document with additional resources to help support schools in their return preparations to welcome staff students and the wider school community as restrictions start to lift.*

*The whole school community has been through a huge period of upheaval with impacts on staff both personally and professionally.*

*This document uses a trauma informed perspective in recognition of this. It focuses on how we can safely relate in a time of social distancing. This guide was developed using several resources written both in Ireland and internationally.*

*Trauma  
informed  
perspective*



# Area Based Childhood Programme

**The Area Based Childhood Programme** is funded by DCYA, and is delivered as part of the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) Programme in Tusla Child and Family Agency. The ABC programme utilises a Prevention & Early Intervention programme, targeting investment in effective services to improve outcomes for children and families living in areas of disadvantage. In their respective locations, ABC sites are operating at three levels of change:

- **Frontline delivery** of services for children and families which support early child development,
- **Capacity building**, facilitation and support to other service providers to implement evidence based ways of working
- **Systems change** efforts with managers and decision makers at local, regional and national level .
- 

## ABC PROGRAMME THEMES AND PROGRAMMING

- Pre-birth to three programmes including evidence informed home visiting and group-based supports for parents, care givers and families.
- Programmes to foster positive parenting and improved child and family social and emotional wellbeing;
- Supporting quality and capacity in early childhood care and education;
- Increasing knowledge and skills for early childhood development, including Infant Mental Health across child services
- Interventions for language, literacy and numeracy development in preschools, schools and with families;
- School and community based strategies for social, emotional wellbeing and improved behaviour; youth mental health and restorative practices.

For more information on the National ABC Programme please contact  
National ABC Project Manager - Bernie Lavery [Bernie.lavery@tusla.ie](mailto:Bernie.lavery@tusla.ie) or at 087 4059799  
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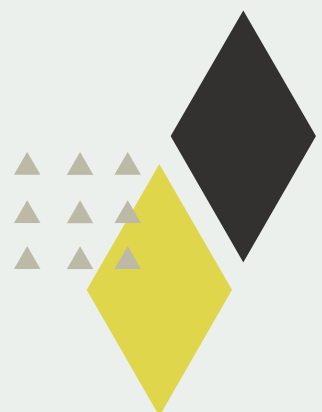


# A Trauma Informed Return to School during Covid 19

## Introduction

The Covid19 pandemic has resulted in significant challenges to the lives of everyone in the school community. For many this has been both a time of individual and collective trauma. Principals, all staff, students and all their families have concerns about safety and the need for protection. For some it has brought grief, loss, economic hardship, and trauma. School staff have faced additional professional stress, and teachers have had to learn new ways to teach children remotely while also worrying about the impact of Covid 19 on students. Principals have faced the responsibility of supporting the whole school community during closure, while also having to plan for school reopening. School closures and home confinement have had a negative effect on many children. During this period, children may have been exposed to a wide range of stressors including fears of infection, frustration, and exposure to large amounts of distressing information in the media (Brooks et al, 2020; Wang et al, 2020; Dalton, 2020). Children are missing out on in-person contact with friends, family members, classmates, teachers and their school community. Some children may be experiencing a lack of personal space at home and the impact of family financial loss. These many stressors can result in enduring effects on children. Covid 19 has dominated the media and conversations, resulting in children being exposed to large amounts of information. This may be distressing for children who do not fully understand the information and they may overestimate the risks to themselves and their families. The pandemic may negatively affect both adults and children's mental health, causing stress and anxiety. Following a pandemic, members of the school community may experience several different emotional and behavioural reactions such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, behavioural problems, somatic complaints, fear, and traumatic grief. (Pfefferbaum et al, 2014)

"For many this has been both a time of individual and collective trauma."





## Potential impact on child development

The impact of Covid 19 may fall hardest on children as they are still developing. The way in which children experience and react to Covid 19 largely depends on their age, level of development and protective factors.

**Early Childhood:** Young children's reduced access to their normal web of caring adults in settings outside of their home environment and the social network of friends, possibly limited access to outdoor play and exploration, along with limited support for parents may result in dysregulation of emotions.

**School-Age children:** This age group of children has been challenged with new ways of learning. Developmentally inappropriate expectations for academic gains via virtual platforms; developmentally damaging expectations related to enforcing rules in school settings for social distancing/PPE.

**Secondary School Level/teens:**

Lack of access to sports or other means of sensory and bodily regulation; lack of access to healthy peer experiences necessary for development.

**Read about age related reactions to traumatic events:**

**For children:**

[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//age\\_related\\_reactions\\_to\\_traumatic\\_events.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//age_related_reactions_to_traumatic_events.pdf)

**For adults:**

<https://www.cdc.gov/masstrauma/factsheets/public/coping.pdf>



## Unequal impact on children

The pandemic is unlikely to affect all children equally. For lots of children, they will have not experienced Covid 19 in a traumatic way. However, there is the possibility that for some the pandemic may compound pre-existing trauma, adversities, and inequalities. Being at home can place some children at increased risk (Alliance for Child Protection, 2020). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) refer to the range of negative situations a child may witness and experience growing up. Children who are exposed to multiple adverse experiences have a higher risk for post-traumatic stress disorder and trauma related issues (Berkowitz et al, 2011).

Access to support and resources following trauma can offer children the potential for recovery and resilience. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be adversely affected by school closures. It is important to put measures in place to lessen this impact.

**Learn more about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):**

**<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/>**

**<https://kpjrfilms.co/resilience/>**

## Role of schools



Schools can play a key role in improving both educational and future life outcomes for traumatised students (Crosby, 2015). The implementation of trauma informed educational practices in schools can assist in providing students with much needed support. A trauma informed school is aware and sensitive to trauma and provides a safe and understanding environment. There are many ways schools can incorporate trauma informed approaches

((The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017).



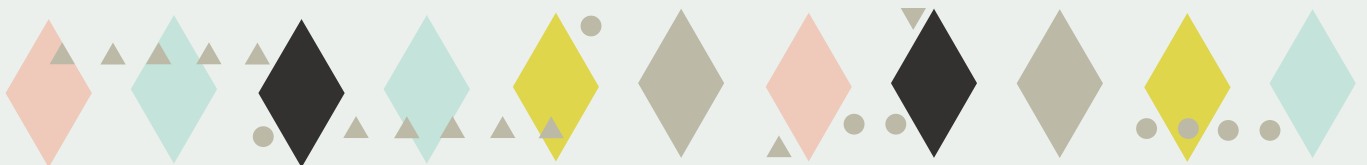
# SUPPORT STAFF

The starting point in developing a trauma informed response is to start with the school staff community. Principals, teachers, special needs assistants, secretaries, caretakers and all other school staff have faced additional stress during this time. Not only have teaching methods changed leading to staff having to learn new skills but they have also had to adapt to working from home. Staff have had to deal with their own personal stressors such as concern for family members, caring for their own children at home as well as supporting their own parents. Concern about students has also been a stressor for school staff. Concerns about returning to school and how this will affect their role in the classroom can also cause stress.

A good level of self-awareness is crucial to creating safe and secure relationships and learning environments. Through tuning into their emotional, mental and physical responses-, school staff can become more aware of their needs and adopt self-care strategies to appropriately resource themselves. Providing opportunities for school staff to avail of training on self-care strategies and tools would support this. It is really hard for adults to help children to self-regulate if the adult is dysregulated. The following presents some self-care ideas to support all staff.

Self-care ideas for school staff:

- Practice self-compassion.
- Mindfulness.
- Take time to check in with yourself and how you are doing.
- Manage your expectations and try not to be tough on yourself.
- Acknowledge everything you have achieved no matter how small it may seem to you.
- Use any social supports you have.
- Create a daily routine as best you can.





## Community care for school staff

Self-care is not just about what individuals do to care for themselves. It is also a collective activity and needs a whole school community response. It provides staff with an opportunity to reflect on how they are feeling both personally and professionally.

- The school should ensure physical safety for staff when making decisions about reopening.
- School leaders can check in with staff collectively and individually on a regular basis to allow a space for reflection. Restorative Practice check-in circle/time each can be very supportive as this can support naming feelings and build relationships and connections.

<http://www.restorativepracticesireland.ie/information-schools/>

- If whole staff sessions are not possible due to social distancing, consider online professional development sessions to promote positive ways of coping.
- Identify and distribute resources to staff who may need additional support at this time with stress or mental health issues.
- Create opportunities for staff to connect with each other.
- Validate staff concerns regarding the return to school. Validate staff concerns for their students.
- If possible, provide a calm, safe space for staff to recharge.

**Webinar providing more ideas on staff self-care:  
Lisa Cherry Trauma, Resonance, Resilience  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8K0Qen7m64&t=67s>**



## Being aware of the impact of trauma

Trauma can affect children academically and socially throughout their experiences at school. It is important to be aware of children's social, physical, and psychological wellbeing as well as how it may present through their behaviours.

Watch a video on the impact of adversity on the developing child:

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-impact-of-early-adversity-on-children's-development-video/>

### Recognising signs of trauma

Trauma in children can cause a wide range of reactions including behavioural changes, emotional distress, grief, difficulties with attention, academic failure etc. However, it is important to recognise that even when a traumatic event does not result in symptoms or behaviours consistent with traumatic stress it can still have an impact on a child's development. School environments that do not recognise when behaviours and emotional dysregulation of a student are the result of trauma may potentially respond in a punitive and harmful way.

Watch Dr. Karen Treisman's video on resurfaced trauma for both children and adults during Covid 19:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msNO7ZmLXns>

Read about signs of trauma in children:

<https://childmind.org/article/signs-trauma-children/>



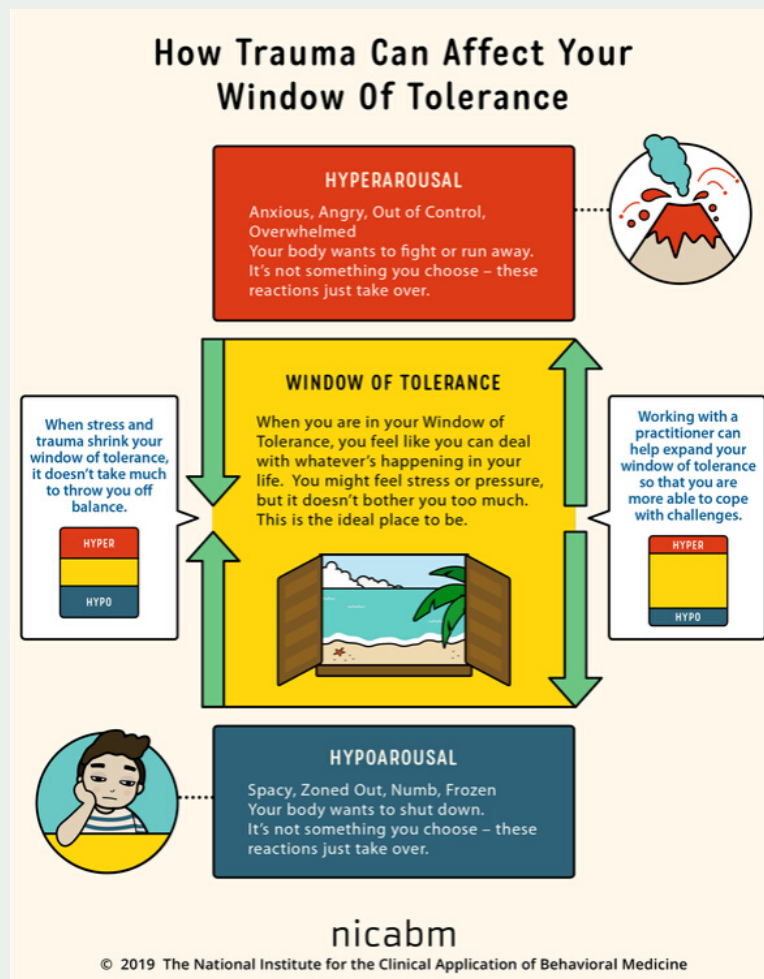
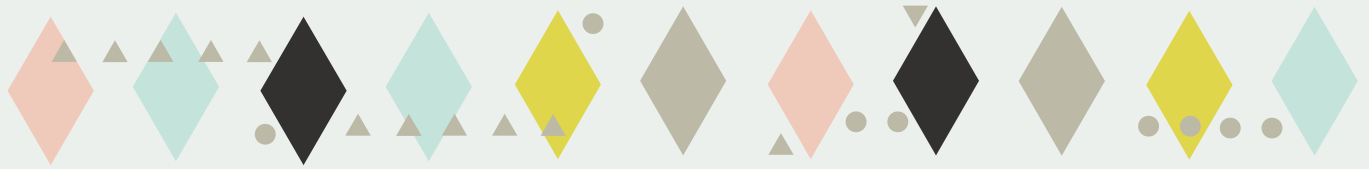
# Being aware of how trauma may affect behaviour in the classroom.

Some feelings children may have which underpin their behaviour include being anxious or nervous, reluctant to return, complaining of physical symptoms, poor concentration, distractibility, regression outbursts, and mood swings. The fight, flight or freeze responses help us escape danger (perceived or real) and are normal responses to threats to keep us safe and alive. Once we've experienced a threat, our nervous system is typically meant to go back to where it was before the threat happened and we are able to feel safe again. However, sometimes this doesn't happen, and we can get stuck in our response of fight, flight, or freeze. A child stuck in a fight response may appear aggressive, snappy, or hyper vigilant. In a flight state, the child may appear jumpy, constantly needing to escape or they may adjust their body language to hide or protect themselves. In freeze, a child may appear unmotivated, non-expressive and feel helpless or depressed. In a classroom scenario sometimes, children can be missed if they appear 'compliant'. The more visible children are often those in fight and flight, children who are withdrawn can be missed.



<http://www.renfrewsupport.org/blog/the-three-fs-fight-flight-or-freeze/>





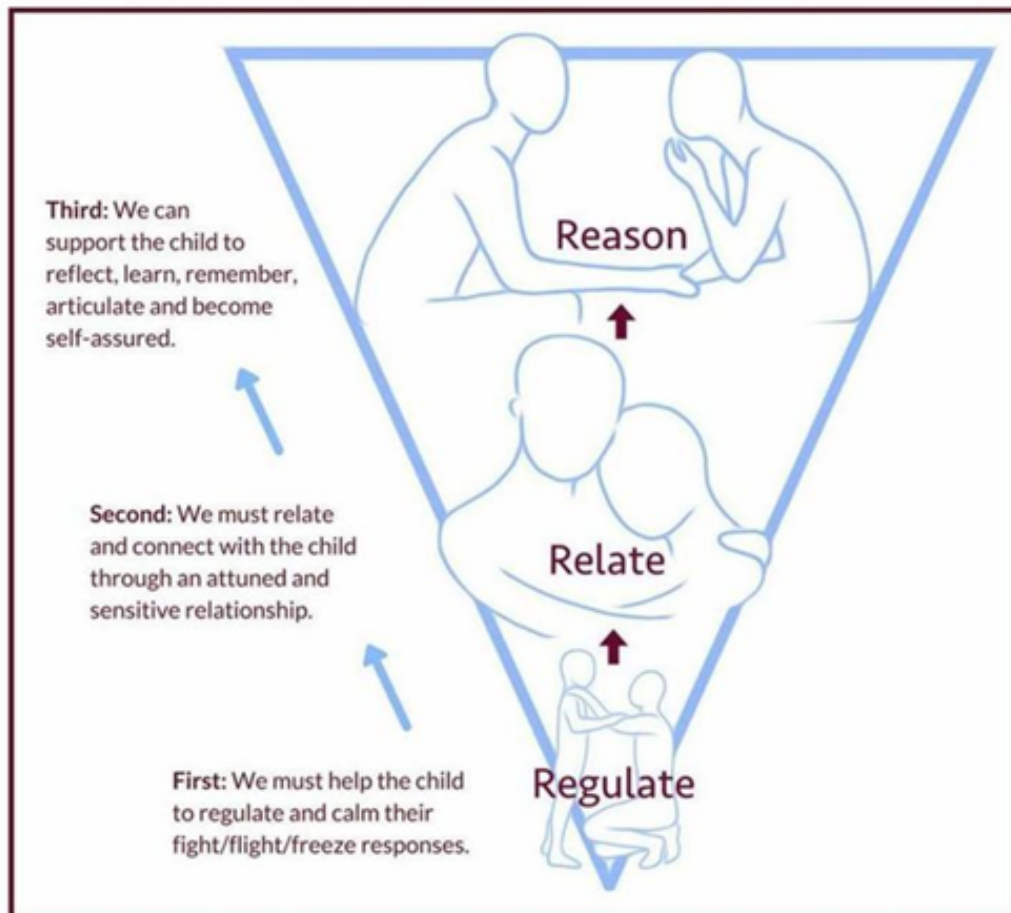
The Window of Tolerance is a term coined by Dr. Daniel Siegal to understand and describe normal body and brain reactions especially following trauma or adversity. When we are in our window of tolerance we can function effectively –we can learn, love, play, use our words to describe how we feel and take in information around us. When we experience extreme stress or trauma, we can get “bumped” out of our window of tolerance. We can become hyper aroused–where we may respond with fight or flight behaviour or we can also become hypo aroused–where we freeze.

According to Dr. Bruce Perry in order to support children to get back into their window of tolerance we must regulate-relate-reason. The order here is very important. Until a child is regulated (i.e. feeling physically and emotionally settled), he is unlikely to be able to relate to you (i.e. feel connected and comfortable). Until a child is related, he/she is unlikely to engage in reasoned interactions/discussions that are critical for problem-solving. This is true for all children and adults and not just those who have been traumatized. This method is often challenging for us as adults, because we have our own triggers (usually revolving around our own life experiences, which feed our beliefs and values, which make up our worldview). We typically try to re-gain control of the situation/child by reasoning with them. Sometimes this looks like questioning, demanding reflection, commanding etc. As we continue to reason with the child and they respond back in a way that challenges how we feel, we become dysregulated along with the child, leading to a battle of wills. The child will typically become more reflexive, which means their emotion and/or behaviour will intensify instead of calm.



## The Three R's: Reaching The Learning Brain

Dr Bruce Perry, a pioneering neuroscientist in the field of trauma, has shown us that to help a vulnerable child to learn, think and reflect, we need to intervene in a simple sequence.



Heading straight for the 'reasoning' part of the brain with an expectation of learning, will not work so well if the child is dysregulated and disconnected from others.

**For information on regulate-relate-reason and the Window of Tolerance check out:**

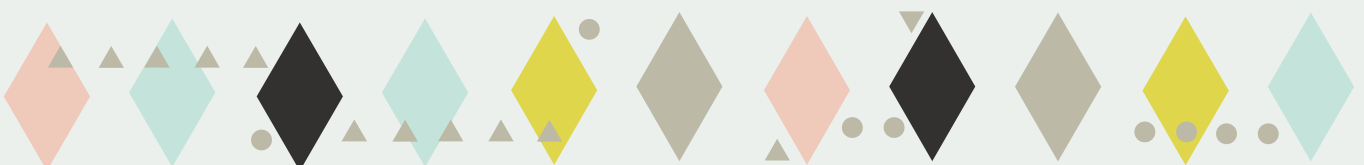
<https://beaconhouse.org.uk/resources/>

<https://makinsoftrauma.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/10-Things-About-Childhood-Trauma-Every-Teacher-Needs-to-Know.pdf>

**Dr. Daniel Siegal developed a useful hand model to explain how the brain works.**

**This short video illustrates this model:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CIJ74Oxw>



# Creating a safe and welcoming environment

Schools can help children feel safe and comfortable by building a supportive and sensitive environment. Children's traumatic responses are often rooted in real or perceived threats to their safety. A child can still feel unsafe after the physical threat has passed. Creating an environment in which children experience physical, social, and emotional safety can help them to succeed at school.



Learn more about how trauma-sensitive schools can help children feel safe:

<https://traumasensitiveschools.org/trauma-and-learning/the-solution-trauma-sensitive-schools/>

## Promoting a predictable and consistent learning environment

One of the first crucial steps is to establish a routine and maintain clear communication. Children need clear boundaries to feel both psychologically and physically safe. The importance of these boundaries need to be clearly communicated, in safety terms, when children return. Rules that may be Covid 19 related should be stated in a positive way (use Do's instead of Don'ts). Instead of using the term 'social distancing', we can focus on 'safe relating'. Having routine in the classroom can give students a sense of stability. Providing predictability through the use of visual schedules of the new school day may be beneficial.

Creating a predicable learning environment can also help to minimise any unnecessary trauma reminders.

This is a short video which illustrates how the restorative check-in can facilitate building relationships and safety in the classroom:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6\\_pLkwaCeY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6_pLkwaCeY)

Read about predictability and consistency:

<https://www.trepeducator.org/consistency-and-predictability>

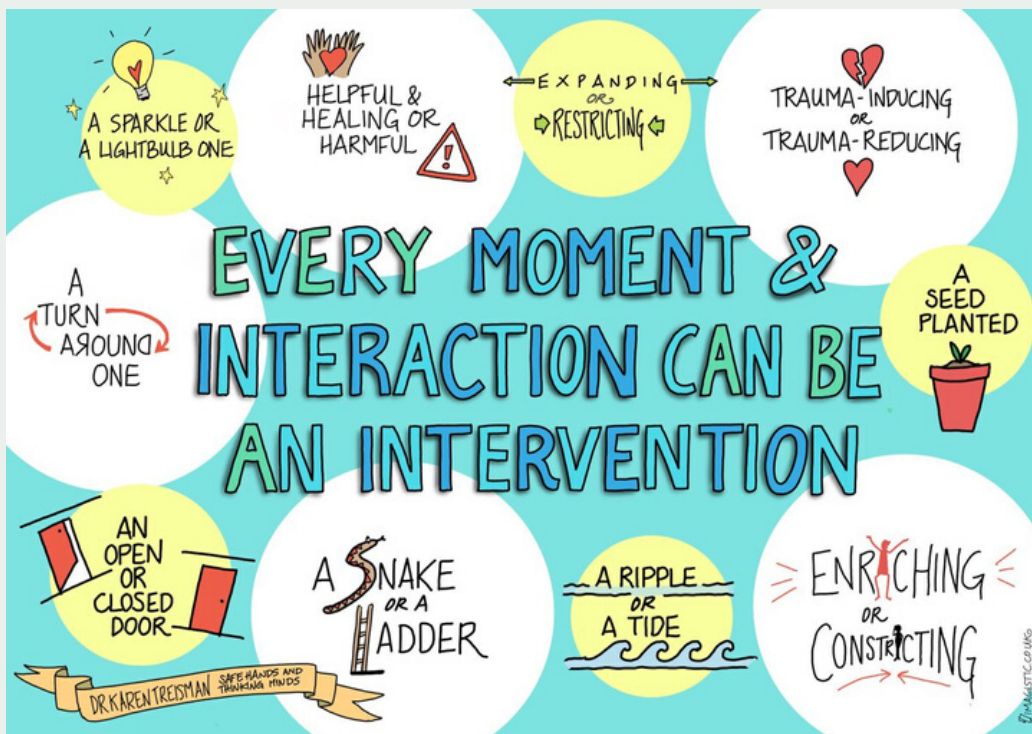


# It is all about relationships!

Focus on building positive relationships between students and school staff.

“The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.”

Bruce D. Perry



Strong relationships with school staff are vital for children who have been affected by trauma. A positive, supportive relationship with one or more adults is of primary importance for children. Relationships with school staff can help children form the foundations of resilience. Dr. Karen Treisman talks about every interaction being an intervention. An adult doesn't need to be a therapist to support a child with actions that are therapeutic.

Watch a video by Dr. Karen Treisman on how every interaction is an intervention: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pBkXbCP3Q4&t=20s>

Watch a video on resilience in children:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r8hj72bfGo&list=PLuKMerO1zya\\_3krFpcOKgaeB2\\_2zQgYua&index=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r8hj72bfGo&list=PLuKMerO1zya_3krFpcOKgaeB2_2zQgYua&index=2)

# Flip the school year

Flip the school year The end of the school year tends to be when we make space for performances, ceremony, time as a community. Why not flip it!

Start your year with these instead. Ease in...and sprinkle it throughout the school year.

- Dramatic performances
- Music and singing
- Past rituals
- Visual/creative art forms

## Brief doses of co-regulating activities

Staff and students engaging in frequent doses of patterned, repetitive, rhythmic exercises together can help regulate children who are feeling dysregulated. These activities, even for a few minutes throughout the day can support children (and adults) to feel regulated.

For example:

- Yoga
- Running
- Walking

**Mindful Gnats App** - Simple mindfulness and relaxation skills for children

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/mindful-gnats/id973919092?mt=8>

[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.handaxelimited.mindfulgnats&hl=en\\_IE](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.handaxelimited.mindfulgnats&hl=en_IE)

COVIBOOK- COVID-19 workbook

[https://660919d3-b85b-43c3-a3ad-3de6a9d37099.filesusr.com/ugd/64c685\\_0a595408de2e4bfcbf1539dcf6ba4b89.pdf](https://660919d3-b85b-43c3-a3ad-3de6a9d37099.filesusr.com/ugd/64c685_0a595408de2e4bfcbf1539dcf6ba4b89.pdf)

COVIBOOK- COVID-19 workbook

[https://660919d3-b85b-43c3-a3ad-3de6a9d37099.filesusr.com/ugd/64c685\\_0a595408de2e4bfcbf1539dcf6ba4b89.pdf](https://660919d3-b85b-43c3-a3ad-3de6a9d37099.filesusr.com/ugd/64c685_0a595408de2e4bfcbf1539dcf6ba4b89.pdf)

I feel worried about coronavirus - Social story

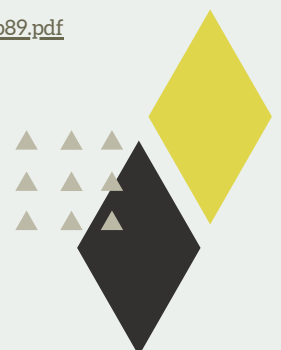
<https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/source/I%20Feel%20Worried%20About%20Coronavirus%20Story.pdf>

Social Distancing - Social story

<https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/source/Social%20Distancing%20Social%20Story.pdf>

Coronavirus - A book for children

<https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/source/Coronavirus-ABookForChildren.pdf>

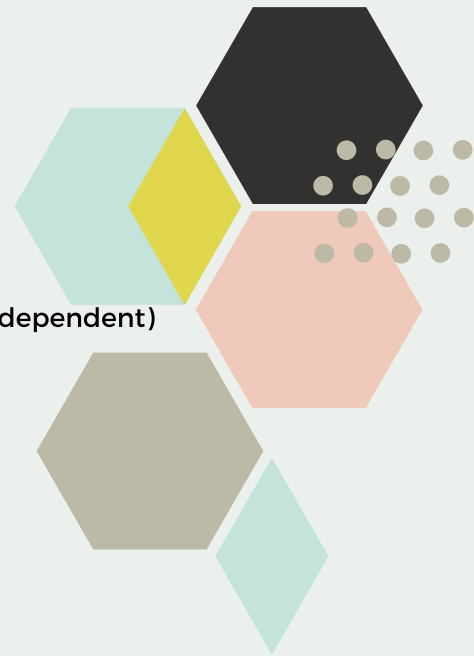


## Building on your School as a Community

Whole Class and Whole School Activities (physical safety requirements dependent)

May need to consider virtual platforms:

- School songs
- School sports
- School performances • 'Getting to know you' scavenger hunts



## Mindfulness meditation

Studies suggest that mindfulness interventions may mitigate the negative effects of stress and trauma related to adverse childhood experiences. Mindfulness meditation involves non-judgemental attention to present moment experience. Meditation can teach students skills that can help them deal with stress and anxiety. To teach mindfulness teachers could use a guided meditation recording or read aloud to students.

It is important to be aware of potential triggers when practicing mindfulness with students. e.g., give them the option to look down at their hands or the floor rather than closing their eyes, as keeping their eyes closed may be a trigger. Ensure that students are given the choice whether or not to participate in mindfulness practices. If a student is not able or willing to participate in a breathing exercise or mindfulness activity, let them know you are there for them, and give them a suitable alternative.

Learn more about [mindfulness](#)

[meditation in schools:](#)

<https://www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/trauma-informed-mindfulness-practices/>

## Use of a restorative practice approach to resolving conflict

Restorative practices are a trauma informed approach to resolving conflict. The approach allows those who have been harmed to convey the impact of the harm to those responsible, and for those responsible to acknowledge the impact of their actions and to take steps to put it right.

Read about restorative practices:

<http://schottfoundation.org/sites/default/files/restorative-practices-guide.pdf>

<http://www.restorativepracticesireland.ie/information-schools/>

<https://www.cdi.ie/our-programmes/restorative-practices/>



# Guidelines for talking to children about COVID-19

## **Honesty**

Teachers should talk to children about COVID-19 honestly and at a level appropriate for their age and understanding. Sharing accurate information and science-based facts will help to diminish children's fears around the disease. It is important that teachers provide children with a trusted source of accurate information.

## **Listen**


Make sure to listen to children's concerns and answer their questions in an age appropriate manner. Teachers may need to take the time to find out what children have already heard about COVID-19 from the media or other sources and correct any misconceptions they may have.

## **What children can do**

Emphasise that children can do a lot to keep themselves and others safe. For example: Explain social distancing and focus on good health behaviours such as covering coughs and washing hands.

## **Express Feelings**

Children should be encouraged to express and communicate their feelings. Teachers should acknowledge that their feelings are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.



# Covid 19 booklet

COVID booklet for children by Manuela Molina Cruz

# HELLO!

**I am a VIRUS,  
cousins with the Flu and  
the Common Cold**



## My name is Coronavirus

MANUELA MOLINA - @MINDHEART.KIDS

WWW.MINDHEART.CO

CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC LICENSE

**I love to travel...**



**and to jump  
from hand to  
hand to say Hi**

**HIGH  
FIVE**





# Have you heard about me?

**YES**

**NO**

**And how do you feel when  
you hear my name?**



**Relaxed**



**Confused**



**Worried**



**Curious**

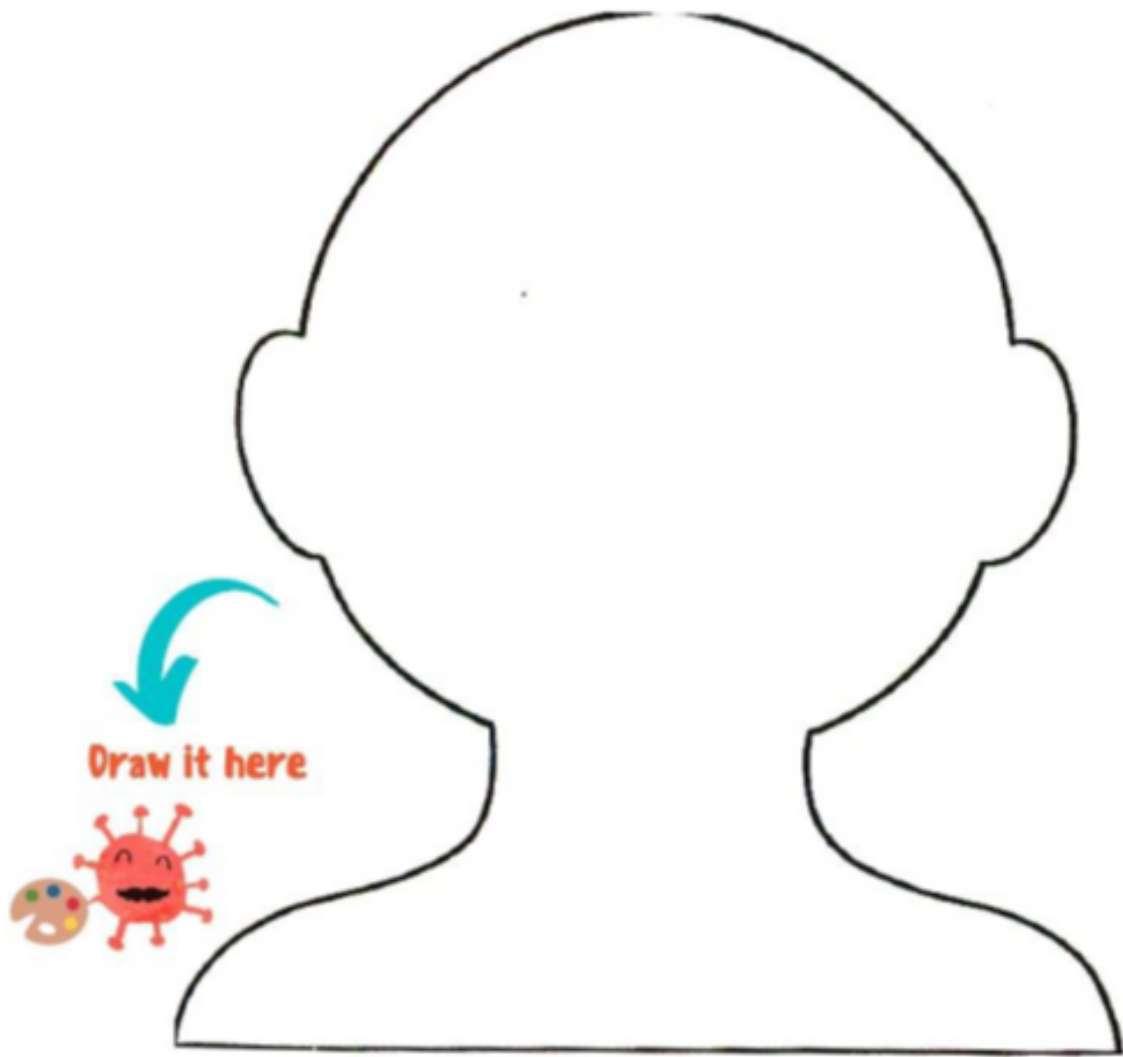


**Nervous**



**Sad**

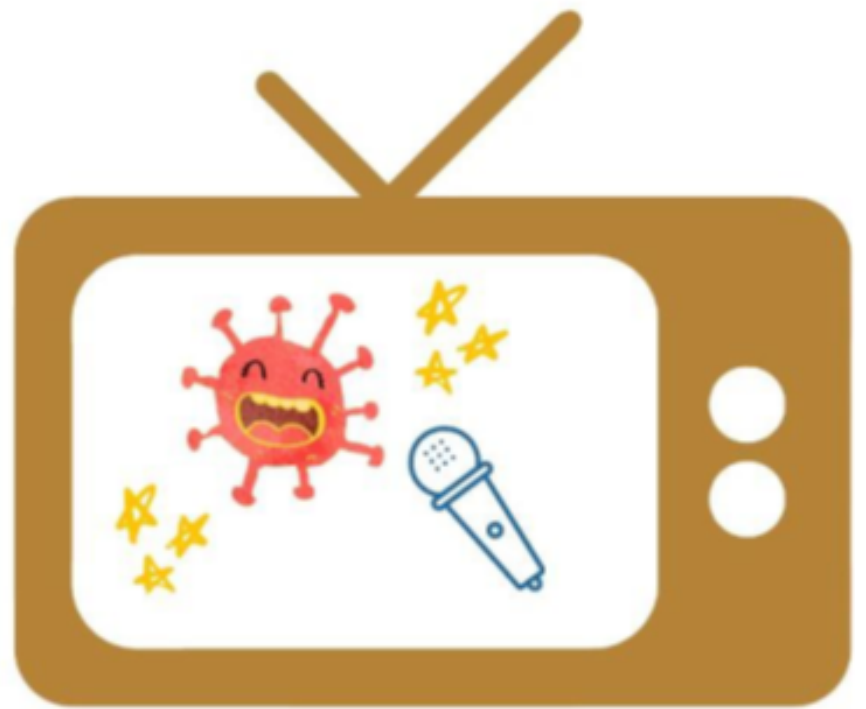
**I can understand you  
feel...**



**...I would feel the same way**

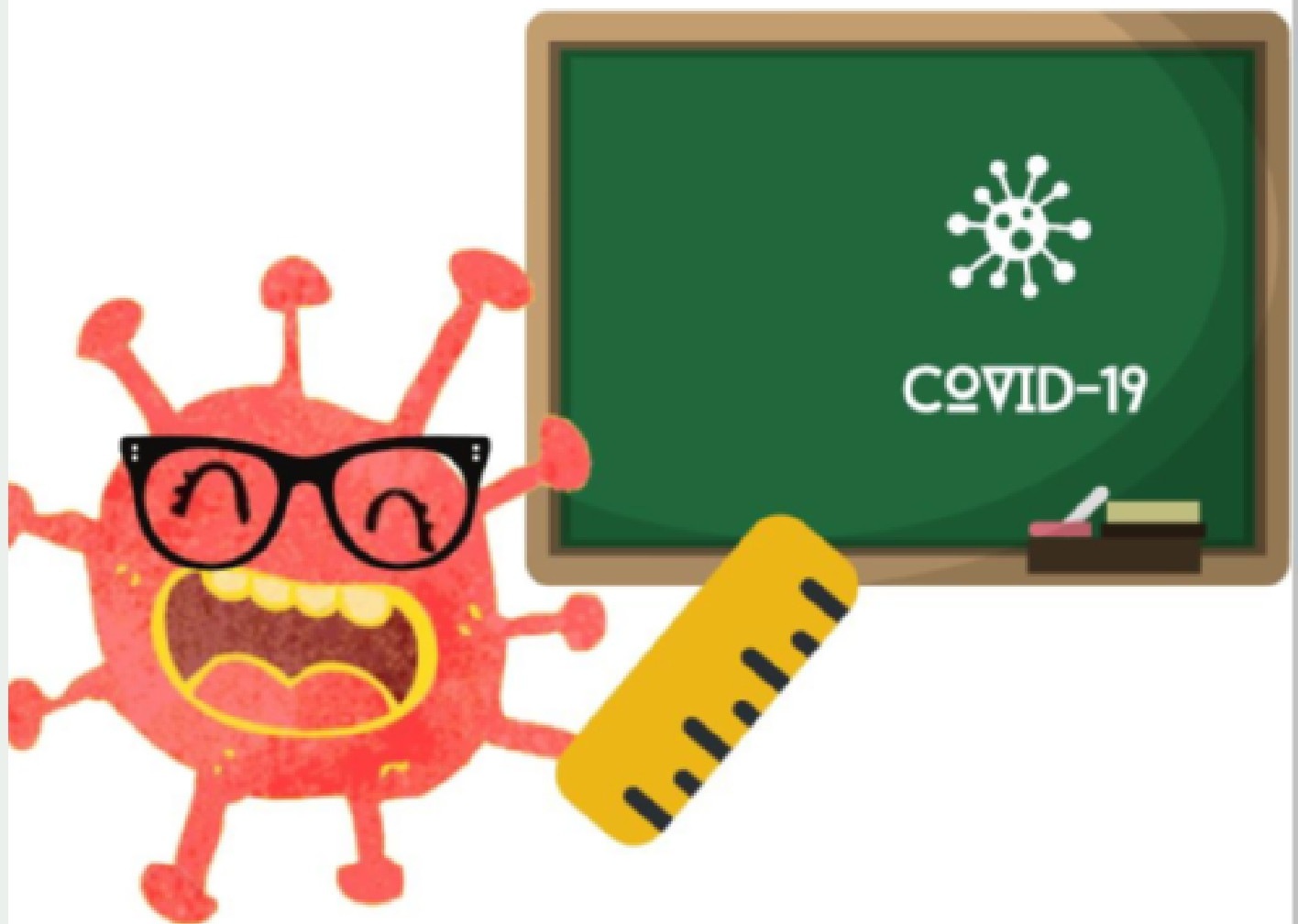


**Sometimes adults get  
worried when they read  
the news or see me on TV**



**THAT'S  
ME!**

**But I am going to explain myself...**



**So you can understand...**

**When I come to visit, I bring...**



**Difficulty breathing**



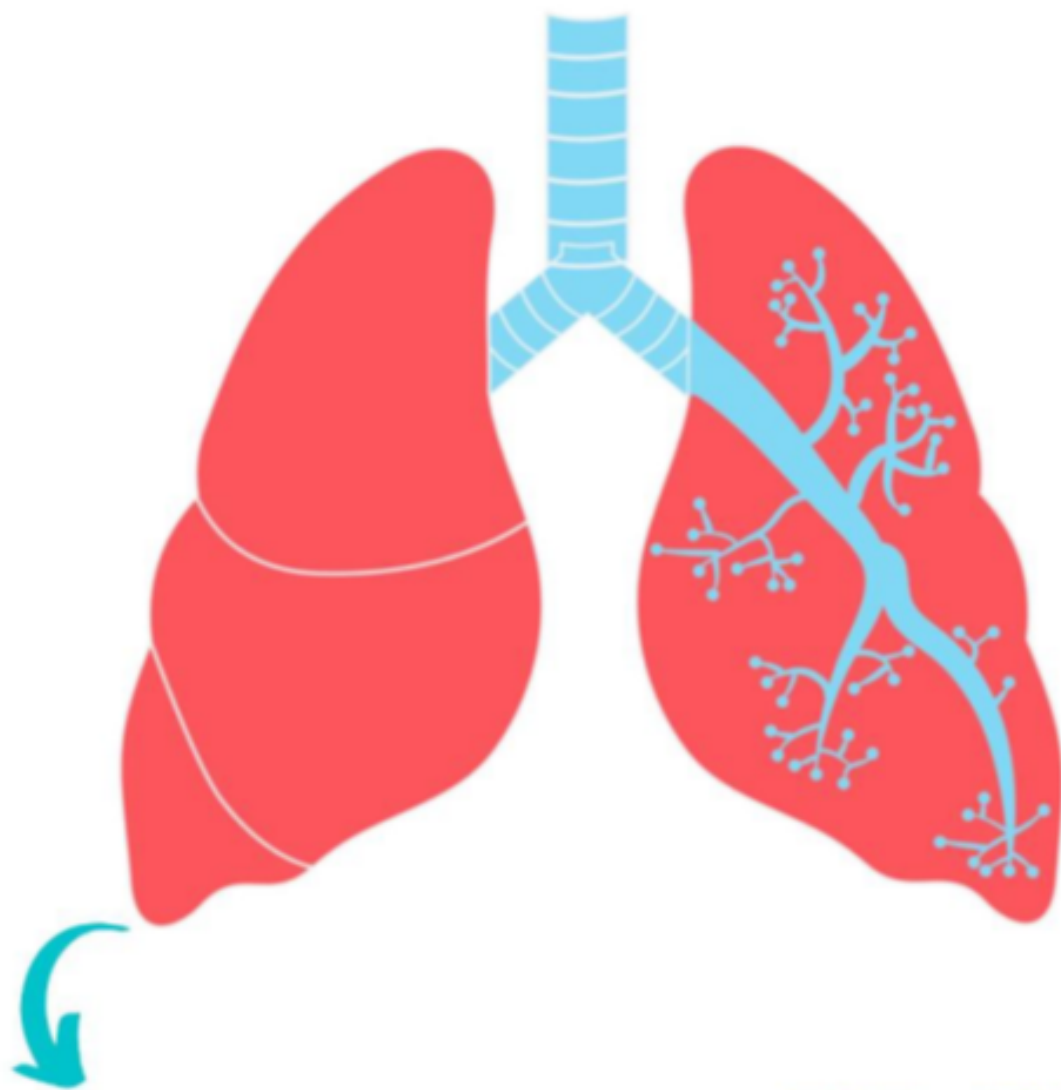
**Fever**



**Cough**



**But I don't stay with  
people for long, and almost  
everyone gets better**



**Just like when you get a  
scrape on your  
knee and it heals**

**BYE BYE...**



**Dont you worry!**

**The adults who take care of you:**

---

**will keep you safe**





# And you can help...

1



**By washing your hands  
with soap and water  
while singing a song**



You can sing your favorite song,  
the happy birthday song, or the  
alphabet song

2



**By using hand sanitizer  
and letting it dry on  
your hands**



Without moving them count to 10

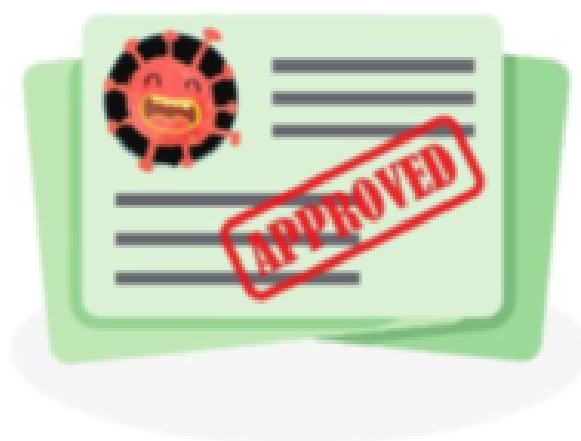
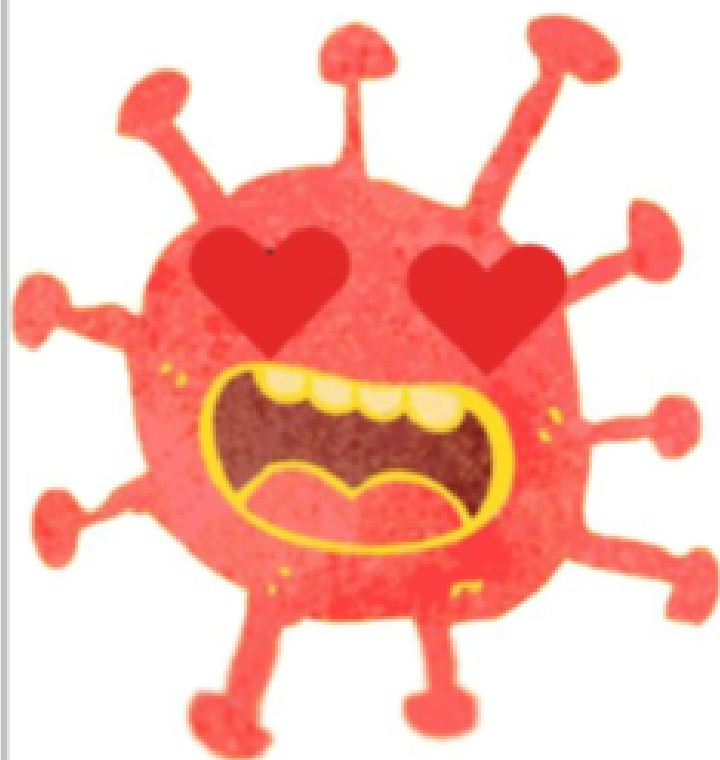
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Once your hands are dry you can get  
back to playing!!

**If you do all that  
I will not come to visit**



**while the doctors work to find a vaccine  
that will allow me to say hi  
without getting you sick.**

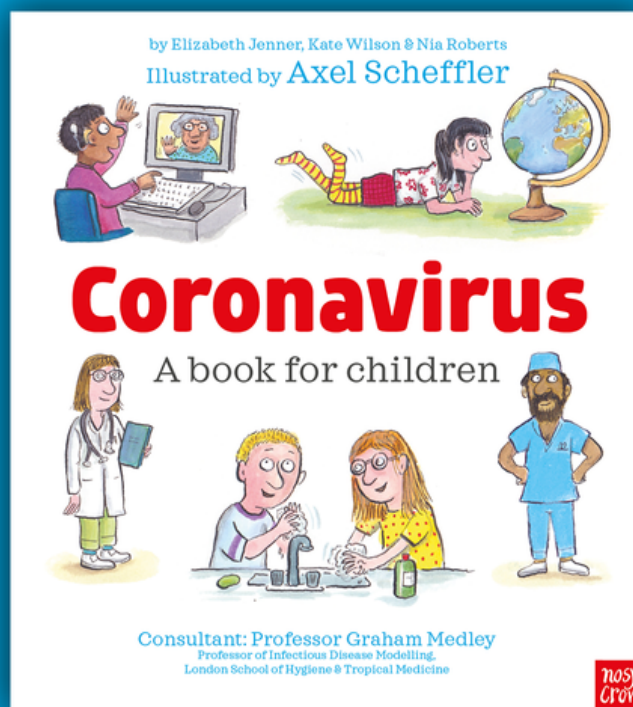


# Coronavirus

## A book for children

'Axel Scheffler has illustrated a digital book for primary school age children, free for anyone to read on screen or print out, about the coronavirus and the measures taken to control it.

Published by Nosy Crow, and written by staff within the company, the book has had expert input: Professor Graham Medley of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine acted as a consultant, and the company also had advice from two head teachers and a child psychologist.'



<https://nosycrow.com/blog/released-today-free-information-book-explaining-coronavirus-children-illustrated-gruffalo-illustrator-axel-scheffler/>



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This guide was developed using the following resources:

“Covid 19 information for Teachers” Prepared by Louise Lunney, student on the MA Applied Psychology, UCC.

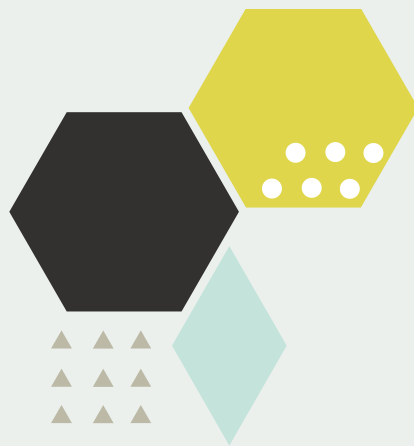
Regulation before education: Strategies for a successful return  
<https://www.emotenow.com/webinar-resources>

A Trauma sensitive approach for schools returning to school during Covid 19’ presentation by Carryn Hennessy  
<http://carrynhennessy.co.za/2020/05/26/a-trauma-sensitive-approach-for-schools-returning-to-school-during-the->

Five ways to help children heal when schools return by Mary Meredith  
<https://www.tes.com/news/five-ways-help-children-heal-after-pandemic>

Trauma Informed school strategies during Covid 19  
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/trauma-informed-school-strategies-during-covid-19>





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