All Around the Child: Supporting and Understanding Anxious Online Learners.

INTRODUCTION

As with all aspects of our lives at the moment, continuing to educate our children is extraordinarily challenging and uncertain.

As adults, either in a professional or personal capacity, or both, we have a responsibility to guide our children through the "new normal". In fact, not only to guide them through the "new normal", but to establish the new normal at the same time as acting as guide!

To effectively support our children, we need to zoom out and look at the big picture. We need to explore different aspects that might be having an impact – not just on the child as learner, but the whole child.

It is not just 'the way' children are currently learning or 'the where' they are learning which we need to reflect upon. It seems obvious, but we need to ask questions they will have which relate to 'the what' has led to them learning at home. Issues and worries and questions which relate to the on-going pandemic.

To do this it is worth breaking the big picture down into smaller pieces and look to develop strategies around these; to think around the child.

Thinking Around the Child

Leading children from uncertainty to certainty
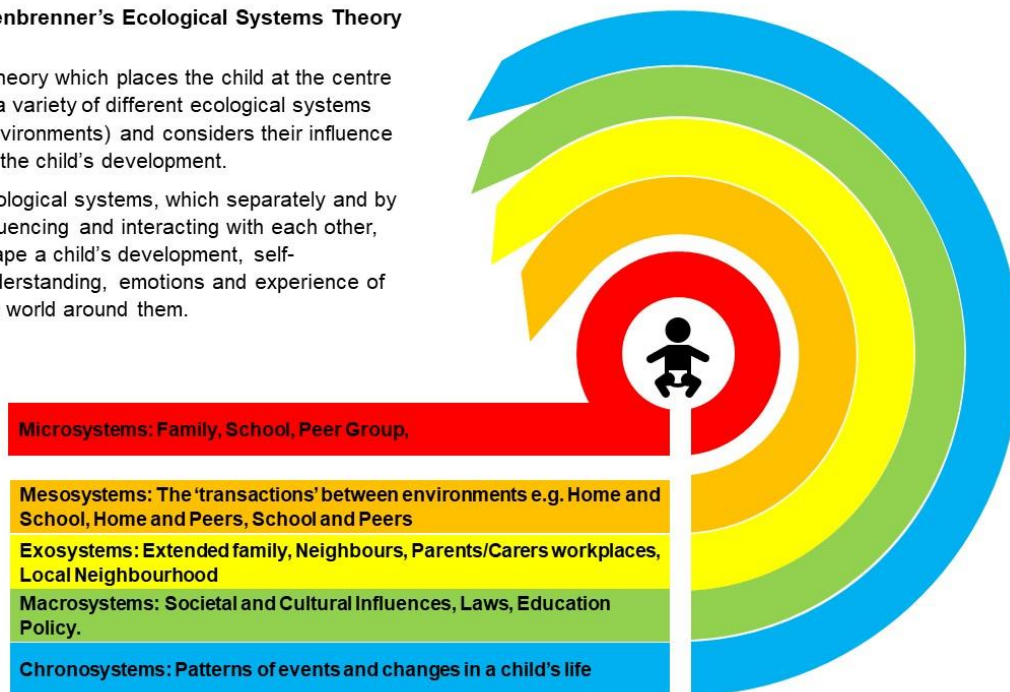
A WAY OF LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE THEMES.

It's worth considering our big picture themes and looking at these through a model which explains how children develop and grow. This works for adults too!

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

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A theory which places the child at the centre of a variety of different ecological systems (environments) and considers their influence on the child's development.

Ecological systems, which separately and by influencing and interacting with each other, shape a child's development, self-understanding, emotions and experience of the world around them.

Microsystems: Family, School, Peer Group,

Mesosystems: The 'transactions' between environments e.g. Home and School, Home and Peers, School and Peers

Exosystems: Extended family, Neighbours, Parents/Carers workplaces, Local Neighbourhood

Macrosystems: Societal and Cultural Influences, Laws, Education Policy.

Chronosystems: Patterns of events and changes in a child's life

BIG WORRY QUESTIONS:

What are the **Big Worry Questions** our children might want to ask? These lie at the heart of the reasons why their lives and education (and ours) feel very much upside down.

These questions will have an impact on an emotional level and impact on motivation too. These questions may contribute to the child, previously a happily engaged learner, becoming anxious and avoidant.

Also, for the child who didn't find learning straight forward in the 'old normal', they may add further barriers to learning.

- What are the 'Big Worry' questions that children might have about the current situation which could impact on an emotional or motivational level?

- What are the best ways for us to address these?

- Who might best address these?

Find space to discuss the Big Worries that children have about the pandemic. These questions can be listed, ordered, discussed and then ripped up and thrown away.

It's not necessarily about having all the answers but finding time to talk about the questions

ROUTINES:

Routines can offer a sense of security and a structure within which learning can take place.

Whilst in many cases children may now be following a timetable broadly similar to the ones they follow in school, key routines associated with the school day have been stripped away.

It's worth asking: **What significant routines are now absent?**

Identify where these gaps are and explore ways to fill them

- What has changed? Learning 'now' vs. Learning 'then'?

- What's the difference In School Learning vs. Out of School Learning?

One key routine currently absent is the trip to and from school.

Leaving the house before the start of the school day and going for a quick walk and repeating this at the end of the day can help define a start and end point to the day. There is a physical benefit to this too.

A key and significant absence are social routines. These are fundamental to learning and well-being.

Replicating routines or re-establishing alternatives is helpful. Physical as well as social routines. Day time and bed time routines

ENVIRONMENT:

For some children 'bringing school home' may in itself be the single biggest trigger for anxiety. Routines like the end of the school day can give children a logical point of closure when school can be put down and home life picked up. The boundaries are now blurred.

Managing the home environment to allow a distinction between home as home, and home as school is important. Clearly easier said than done when there is real pressure on space.

The change of 'classroom' is also worth exploring. Within the school classroom the child can be noticed and make themselves noticed more easily when they are stuck or in difficulty. This can be less straightforward in an online environment.

How can we help children 'reach out' from home to connect with the teacher when they are stuck?

Competition for space can present real challenge. Siblings learning in the same area, parents at home needing space for meetings- anyway in which you can plan to manage the environment will be helpful.

What is also notable about the "home classroom" is the absence of other pupils. Your child will take their lead from other children when in a classroom. Working alone is really tough.

It is important that school is turned on and off. Home is not school and it is vitally important that remains the case.

RESOURCES:

Schools are under enormous pressure to somehow ensure that learning continues. Many turning to online platforms and live lessons. For some children this environment may bring its own challenges.

Some schools are insistent on cameras being turned on so that children can be seen. This may make some children feel very vulnerable. As adults seeing ourselves on screen can take some getting used to. For some children it is another example of school 'invading' home!

The other point to consider is that young people will be more reliant on social media to socialise than ever and this may cause 'screen time conflict'

Building in screen breaks isn't just important to provide variety in learning but to allow space later in the day for screen time which sustains peer-to-peer relationships.

Blend Learning- Just because the expectation is currently on 'Live' lessons doesn't means that's the only way.

Use technology in a way which considers the vulnerability of pupils.

Remember gaming and social media use is about socialisation and not just recreation.

EXPECTATIONS:

Expectations need to be re-adjusted. (Everybody's)

Sometimes the expectations children set themselves are very high. Not necessarily a bad thing but expectations need to be realistic and possible. The current situation means these need to be adjusted.

Without moderating our expectations, we can quickly diminish motivation.

We don't necessarily want the 'perfect' learner – striving for perfection can be very limiting and in itself led to anxiety.

The 'Possible Perfect Learner' (flexible/realistic) v. The 'Impossible Perfect Learner'. (inflexible/unrealistic)

As adults we need to moderate our expectations too. The expectations we place on ourselves, on children and also teachers.

What are realistic expectations? Adult expectations and the child's expectation of self. How are these moderated and differentiated in the current environment? What is your possible? Don't try for impossible perfection

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Along with absence of familiar routine another key change comes with the roles.

Your primary role as parent/carer is as parent/carer. This has to be preserved. You are not your children's teacher.

For teachers the role has been redefined with changes in the way you can reach out and relate to pupils and identify when they might be struggling. There is a greater reliance on parents and carers to support your work. How can this relationship be developed?

As parent/carer the way you **MAY** feel the need to act in your role of teacher may compromise how work and are perceived as a parent/carer.

Work alongside your child as Problem Explorer not necessarily Problem Solver.

Look out for yourself and each other. What opportunities are there to reach out and support each other? Peer to Peer. Teacher to Teacher- Teacher to Parent – Teacher to Child- Parent to Parent.

All around the Child.

Peer influence and modelling in class is helpful to learners. How do we help children overcome the feeling that they are learning in isolation?

TIPS TOOL BOX

Keep talking and exploring worries and concerns with your children. Re-assurance is key but acknowledging and validating worries is as important.

Keep a '5 a Day' diary. 5 things your child has learnt today. If they have 5 lessons -1 per lesson. This is a good way to 'turn school off'. Review at the end of the week. Use this to focus on the positives.

Struggles-Solutions-Successes. Another way to close the day. As an adult share your own - ask your child to "co-solve" these with you. Highlight the successes. One is enough. It might not be anything to do with school! Keep these visible!

Work on Routines

Challenge unrealistic expectations (yours as well as theirs!)

The 'Worry Cycle' (resources below will support on this) (Trigger-Thoughts-Emotions-Beliefs)

The Worry Cycle
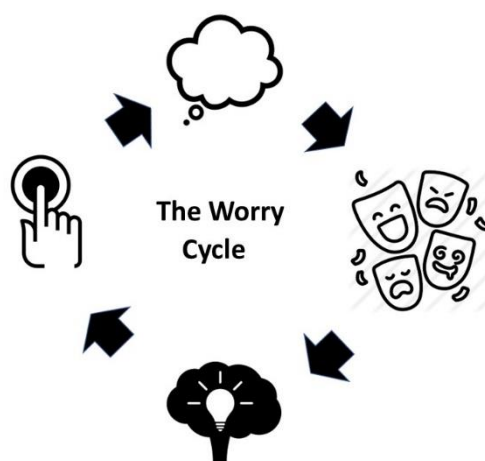
Your best is good enough – Our priority is our children's happiness and well-being

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RESOURCES

- Developing self-compassion https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/
- Understanding perfectionism https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Perfectionism
- 'Starving the Anxiety Gremlin' by Kate Collins-Donnelly
- 'Think Good, Feel Good' by Paul Stallard.
- My Hidden Chimp by Professor Steve Peters
- Challenging all or nothing thinking: https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/ThoughtRecordSheet7.pdf
- 5 Simple Strategies for Manging Anxiety Dr Pooky Knightsmith https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ip_LCrZRINE
- Problem Solving and Managing Worries: http://cedar.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/schoolofpsychology/cedar/documents/liiapt/Managing_Your_Worries.pdf

QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

WHO ARE OUR ANXIOUS/AVOIDANT LEARNERS?

The current changes in learning environment may, for some children, have been the trigger for anxiety or 'avoidant' behaviours around their learning. Of course, for some children they may simply be exposing anxieties and a difficult relationship with school and learning, that under normal circumstances, weren't too far below the surface.

- Who are the children struggling with home learning/online learning/blended learning?

- Are the children we are talking about the same children previously on our radar when children were in school full time?

- Do we have previously anxious children who might now be thriving? - Why?

How do we identify the children we are looking to support?

What can we learn from the children who might be thriving at home? Any lessons for the future?

How can they help us identify the gaps we need to fill for those who aren't?

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