

## Support for teachers welcoming children back in Level 2

In hospital based ECE services we often have children and families moving from the security of the hospital with health teams, clear understanding of illness, risks and responsibilities back into their community settings - for many this can be a stressful time. Similarly, after so many weeks at level 4 and level 3 many people will be feeling a bit anxious about leaving the safety of their bubble in level 2; this is totally normal. We need to learn how to reintegrate with a sense of safety into our communities. Everyone will have a different level of comfort in this process – be kind, patient and understanding with yourself and others remembering that some will be just thrilled to be back – while others will be more cautious.

### Transitions: Welcome back

- Communication is critically important as we welcome children and whanau back to your centre or programme. It is helpful to have clear indications of what to expect, outline safety plans and new ways of working. Remember that when stressed we don't process information as well as we normally would – simple messages, both verbal and written may be helpful – messages may need to be repeated.
- Be prepared that for some young children the length of time away may mean that they no longer hold strong memories of your space and staff - set the tone for comfort with a warm welcome ensuring that your interactions with parents and staff are positive, clear and confident - taking time to listen to their concerns and working together to make a plan.
- Remember you are already experts at welcoming, transitioning and settling children into your spaces; for many children returning in level 2 may be more like their first days of attendance and some extra settling and support may be required for children and their caregivers. Talk to your team about what this might look like...are shortened days helpful to start? more frequent, informal check-ins with parents to reassure them all is going well? What would make parents feel at ease?

### Reducing Anxiety:

- Importance of relationships: Connections are calming...for you as teachers, and for your children and their whānau. Take time to check in, reintroduce yourselves, welcome them in and show them around, help children to find their friends, remind them of the things they enjoyed doing together, show them photos, share stories. Be proactive about explaining to parents that you are being purposeful in this to reduce children's worries.
- Remember that children often respond to other's anxiety – be proactive in finding ways to reduce anxiety...helpful for you, individual children and groups
  - Simple explanations about changes to routines are helpful – “washing our hands keeps us / our friends / family safe and well”
  - Normalise new expectations around hand hygiene – rather than making this a point of stress build hand-washing into routines
  - Take time to breathe ...build in moments throughout the day
  - Prepare children for transitions
  - Support self regulation – create opportunities for expression of big emotions, using excess energy and taking time to slow when they are tired – getting back to your centre may be exciting, and overwhelming.
- Be very clear about expectations that those who are unwell will not be attending. Parents/caregivers will need to feel their children are safe in your space.

### **Environment:**

- It may be helpful to spend some time thinking about how you can use your environment to help shape new behaviours:
  - there is no need to enforce social distancing of children in ECE, we do not want children to feel pushed away or separated but we can use the environment to create spaces to encourage some social distancing naturally,
  - set up spaces for hand hygiene that provides cues
  - create nooks to tuck away and get some space if things are overwhelming.
- Sensory overload – after many weeks at home be aware that for you and for the children that the busy-ness and the noise levels with everyone back in one space may feel overwhelming at times. Create spaces for withdrawing / quiet time.
- Keeping it clean – it may be helpful to have a discussion to decide how/when and by whom things will be wiped down, soaked, washed. You may need to plan to revisit this to adjust it as it becomes clearer what the workload is and where the pressure points are. Be prepared that parents may ask about cleaning and how this will work - they may find the thought and planning put into this reassuring.

### **Keeping safe and well:**

- Get clear within your team and your wider community about the importance of staying at home if unwell.
  - It may be helpful to acknowledge previous ways of working – teachers would often come in if unwell to ensure staffing, and would often accept children who were not very well in the past as they know parents are pressured to work...BUT we need to be clear that we can no longer do this
  - Moving forward, to ensure the safety of everyone, children, staff, and community we all need to work together to stay safe – anyone unwell will need to stay at home - it helps protect us all and is critically important to ensure we do not risk increasing community transmission. It is important everyone is clear and in agreement with this within your group.
  - This may require a mindset shift in your community, it may be helpful to create messaging that frames the positive contribution – “we know it might be inconvenient to keep your child at home today – we really appreciate you helping us to keep everyone safe/ensuring we don’t have to return to level 3/4 ”

### **A mindful moment: a short active calming activity for young children**

*Can you breathe like a tree? Stand, grounded. Feel your feet flat on the ground - standing straight and tall take a deep breathe in, slowly until you feel your chest and tummy are full....then slowly let it out. Lift your arms like branches on the tree reaching for the sunshine – with your fingers stretched wide breathe in, slowly and out, slowly – enjoy the warm sun shining down on you, breathe in .....and out....now gently swaying move your arms back and forth like branches in a gentle wind, slowly side to side, breathe in and out....now the lovely autumn leaves at the end of your branches are fluttering to the ground – wiggle your fingers and float your hands down to your sides....breathe in .....breathe out.....  
What strong, gentle trees you can be....*

Kindness counts - it is important to remember that those who have been exposed to, or are, potential or positive COVID19 cases would never have asked for it, may not know how it came to be and may be scared and upset themselves. Shame and blame are not helpful - this virus is extremely contagious - remembering that our goal is not that no one will ever get it but that we work together to minimise the spread. We have done such a fabulous job knuckling down to ensure that we break the chain - and if someone does get it we are in a great position to be able to quickly identify contacts to prevent the spread and provide them the care required to recover.