April 27th 2020
Dear parents and carers,

We have now all had confirmation that lockdown has been extended so our new normal continues a while longer. It is very difficult to manage all the uncertainty and to know exactly what the next few months will be like. Your children may be getting used to either being at home or being in school without formal teaching. We are all wondering what it will be like when things get back to normal and especially wondering how our children will manage school again. All school leaders will be planning and putting things in place to support both staff and pupils to return as smoothly as possible when the time comes.

The Virtual School team are in touch with all schools and supporting staff with attendance and safeguarding as well as advising on the best provision for our looked after children. We have been heartened that most schools have really stepped up and doing some innovative things such as online class meet ups, video assemblies, regular contact with families and doing home visits. Online tuition is working well for targeted KS4 pupils and the take up has been good. Our post 16 team have undertaken a huge piece of work contacting and catching up with all our post 16 young people and finding out what they are up to and helping them with next steps.

Personal Education Plan meetings are still going ahead with all the frustrations of virtual meetings! We are all getting much more familiar with video meeting platforms.

A quick reminder about the foster carer app which was mentioned last week. It is a fantastic resource for carers and very easy to use. If you have not received your letter with the unique code - please contact Sarah Hazell or look out for an email from your Virtual School case holder. We would love more carers to use the app because it is a great way to access training in your own home and in your own timeframe.

Reading
The Virtual School understands the importance of reading and how this key skill can open doors as well as transport us into different worlds and perspectives. Studies have shown that children who are read to regularly, with an adult within the home, develop language faster and become successful readers in school. Below are some initiatives we are excited to talk about which will support families with reading materials and ideas.

Letterbox parcels are being sent out this week to children in early years up to year 6 and perspectives. We work closely with the Book Trust and we are funding the parcels for another year. The parcels will be delivered monthly for 6 months and the aim is that children can build up their own collection of books, games, and stationery. For further information www.letterboxclub.org.uk

For children in Key Stage 2 (years 3-6) we are pleased to be able to send children The Phoenix Comic. The Phoenix is a 32-page comic featuring 7 or more thrilling story strips, a puzzle competition, and a new non-fiction strip. It is a weekly comic delivered to your door funded by Oxfordshire Virtual School. Each issue is packed with stories from top children’s writers and illustrators. All content is original. Children can send in their own artwork and stories for the comic. Parents/carers just need to email fanfare@thephoenixcomic.co.uk with the subject heading as OXCC. If you would like information about the Phoenix comics then please visit their website: www.thephoenixcomic.co.uk
To help develop reading with children under 5yrs of age Oxfordshire Virtual School have enrolled in the Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library book gifting programme and funding from Make My Day Better covers the costs so the books are free. All children enrolled in the programme will receive one age appropriate book to keep, every month, from birth until their 5th birthday.

The books will be delivered by post and personally addressed to each individual child. This is a wonderful opportunity for parents/carers to share books with children to help develop their enjoyment of reading. Further information about Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library please visit their website: www.imaginationlibrary.com

Audible are making a range of children’s books available for free so that children can listen to audio books- a great way to make reading accessible. There are literally thousands of titles available for all age groups. www.audible.co.uk/cat/Children

Local libraries also have books available to download. https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/leisure-and-culture/libraries/library/books-and-reading/ebooks-and-eaudio

ideas for encouraging reading:
- Set an example and let children see you reading.
- Create a reading space with some cushions or make a reading den.
- Try a reading challenge - 15 minutes a day, read one book a month, read 5 books all from different genres-mystery, comical, sci fi etc
- Read a book of a film or TV series.
- Set up a mini book club in the family- find a book everyone can get hold of - then hold a virtual book club meeting where everyone talks about what they thought.
- Set up a book swap and share books with friends (making sure they have been wiped down before exchanging!).
- Graphic novels and comics are great for reluctant readers.
- Read to your pet - sounds crazy but reluctant readers sometimes like to read aloud to their dog.
- Talk about anything your kids are reading - ask questions and open up a conversation about whether they like the book, what it makes them think about or just recount the story.

Finally, as lots of you are aware, we have been working closely with Populate Cooperative and Ark T to develop care packs to deliver to children at this time. Please visit the new website which has creative challenges that you can try together. They are fun and led by local artists. https://oxfordshirekindnesswave.org.uk/

Take care and best wishes from The Virtual School Team

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