3 April 2020

Dear parents and carers

As we come up to the Easter holidays, thank you for all you are doing in these weeks of isolation. Let’s hope there are plenty of Easter eggs around to treat everyone. The next fortnight will be the official school holidays and most schools will not be setting formal tasks to do as they have been doing in term time. This may bring a sigh of relief to some families. Some families may appreciate the structure school task provide. Some schools remain open as childcare for vulnerable children and children of key workers. In some areas, hubs have been set up to include children from many schools. You can check the details with your school if your child has been attending in these last two weeks.

We have had many conversations with families and the theme coming through is that many parents and carers are feeling a bit overwhelmed with the amount of information and links that are coming their way from schools and other agencies. Families are finding it hard to know where to start and which resources are best suited to different ages and/or abilities. Teachers may be forgetting that some parents and carers are not familiar with the curriculum and not always able to help their children in the way they would want. Many parents and carers are worried that they can’t get their children motivated to do the tasks and that they may fall behind.

Remember that everyone is in the same situation and many families are struggling in similar ways. If we focus on helping our children feel safe, comforted and nurtured during these weeks, this is just as, if not more important, than anything related to schoolwork. Lower the bar of expectation. Some formal learning is great but activities like board games, cooking together, watching box sets and talking a dig for a walk are just as beneficial. It may be that your family is finding its own rhythm and fitting in activities outside school hours.

For many children in care, silences, lack of busy routine and restriction of freedom can be especially hard to deal with and feelings of rejection and confusion may be bubbling up. We are well into the second week of being at home and we expect some of the novelty may be wearing off a little, now that the children realise that they must stay in and can’t socialise with their friends. Without being able to go out to work and have variety in our week, many people will be feeling fed up and bored. Humans are born to be sociable and we need interaction with others. If your kids are fed up, grumpy, whiney or angry, their behaviour is showing us that they are struggling. They can’t always use words to describe how they feel. Don’t worry as this is normal and we are not in an easy situation. It may be easier to take each day at a time and not focus on the days and weeks ahead. It will pass eventually.
(although it seems a long time, when we look back it will seem short) and we are all in this together. Use your support networks and reach out if you need to.

As a lot of learning is now online, pupils are spending much more time on screens than usual. The online materials are a great resource but there are risks with children being online. Schools will have looked at their safeguarding practices regarding online learning. You can check with your school to see if they have updated their website. The government have issued school and colleges with guidance on safeguarding and if you are interested, here is the Link: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-safeguarding-in-schools-colleges-and-other-providers/coronavirus-covid-19-safeguarding-in-schools-colleges-and-other-providers

**Keeping children safe online at home is vital.** We can all encourage our children to talk about how to stay safe and we can observe carefully to make sure we don’t miss any signs that they are putting themselves at risk. Children can be more tech savvy than parents and carers, so we all need to upskill! Setting boundaries in terms of time and content is a good idea, because we are all going to be spending more time on our devices. Adults can model good digital routines and talk about the sites they are using to encourage children to be open about what they are doing. You may already do these things but its worth reviewing your routines at home. The NSPCC is a good place to update your knowledge and their link is here: https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/

- Make talking about the online world part of the daily conversation. Talk to your child(ren) about what they are doing online and who they are in contact with. Reassure them you are interested and ask them to show you their work or apps they are using. Be positive and ask them if they are worried about anything. Be positive but also share your concerns and explain why you are worried about certain sites or apps.
- Share reasons with children about why they should never share personal information online without your permission.
- Be informed and ask for advice about parental controls, privacy settings or about social media. The NSPCC advice line can help. 0800 8005002 or talk to your social worker or the schools Designated Safeguarding Lead.
- Encourage the use of digital devices in shared areas in the home so you can monitor openly.
- If you are worried about your child accessing inappropriate material, talk to them about what they are seeing or sharing. Explain what is and isn’t appropriate for their age and make sure they know about how the law protects them. You can report any content to the police via their website: https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/
- Gaming - look out for any bullying, talking to people they don’t know, in-game purchases and scams. Many games have channels with thousands of members and there is a risk of young people being groomed on these platforms.
- Livestreaming and videoing are popular, and these can be creative and fun. Encourage your child to share the apps with you so you can talk about them together. Agree what’s appropriate as a family.
Check your settings and use privacy and location settings to keep your child safe.

Be as knowledgeable as you can about the websites children are using. Explain the reasons for your boundaries so children are developing their own understanding and be there to help and support if they have problems.

The Easter holidays may have a different pattern to them. How can we make the holidays seem different to school time? Remind your children why they are staying at home and how this is helping keep themselves and others safe. Schools really do value your support and all the work you are doing with your children. A positive to come out of these challenging times is the chance to make time for one another. We are in touch with all the children's' schools and working closely with them to help make this easier for everyone.

Take care and best wishes from the Virtual School team.

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