

Let's talk about it

Welcome Back Check-in Guidance



A 60-90 minute session to check-in with children ages 5 and up when they first arrive back to school (preferably within the first week) or in another activity space after COVID-19 closures. This is a guide to provide basic support to children to help them process their feelings and experiences, before adjusting back into regular social contact with peers and routine classes or activities.

This tool is designed for use by adults – including classroom teachers - who facilitate activities with children after experiencing school closures, COVID 19 home isolation and physical distancing. In family-based programming, this tool can also be used with caregivers in attendance. This check-in session with children aims to support them to process their experiences through COVID-19 school closures and lockdowns to help prevent longer-term negative impacts on psychosocial development.

Why is this important?

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, children and families globally have experienced limited access to essential services and have experienced enormous pressure, especially communities affected by conflict and displacement. In particular, the majority of children have been out of school, isolated and without access to safe spaces to learn and play with their peers. With a reduction in support and the economic effects of lockdown restrictions, many households have also been under increased stress. Some children have witnessed their caregivers experience increased anxiety, irritability and exhaustion. As a result of these combined factors, children's mental health and wellbeing could be at risk. Space to discuss these challenges amongst their peers and share experiences with the guidance of a trusted adult will support children to process the effects of the global pandemic and the various consequences.



Common reactions to stress and social isolation in children



Children who have experienced prolonged social isolation due to COVID-19, or have been out of school and haven't engaged with friends because of social restrictions, may experience anxiety, extreme worry and sadness, and a feeling of powerlessness and uncertainty. Although they may feel excited to see their friends and teachers and return to a routine of going to school, they may also be anxious about reconnecting with their social and school life (including keeping up academically). They may also be worried about new rules in their school for physical distancing and the uncertainty of whether schools might close again. Some children may have experienced extra difficulties if they were isolated at home with a vulnerable mother, father or caregiver who may have been unable to provide a safe and nurturing environment. Without access to friends and supportive adults outside the home, children's wellbeing and development may be affected by the lack of stimulation, routine and security.

Benefits of a check-in with children

- As a supportive adult, you will gain insight into how children are feeling about returning to school and what they need to feel safe and supported as they enter back into regular social contact with peers and routine classes or activities.
- You will have the opportunity to put children at ease, actively listen, provide encouragement and normalize their experiences.
- You will have the opportunity to observe whether there are any children who need extra attention and support.

Children will:

- Have the opportunity to reflect and strengthen self-awareness as they share how they experienced COVID 19,
- Get the chance to understand their own reactions and feelings related to the experience, which also helps them effectively manage their emotions.
- Experience that they are not alone and that peers had similar experiences, and
- Know they are supported and gain an understanding of the resources available to them.

How to Facilitate a Check-In, Step-by-Step:

This guidance includes a script for a 60-90 minute session comprised of a partially structured conversation by way of a “Check-in,” which takes place after the children return and see one another again, or start a new activity after a long period of COVID-19 restrictions and closure of schools/children’s spaces. The intention is to create an understanding of what has happened and to reduce any feelings of anxiety, sadness or confusion.

The check-in session has 6 steps

- 1** Introduce the session: how much time will be spent on the check in, how will it be done and what is the purpose of this check-in?
- 2** How has COVID-19 affected us, our families and our communities?
- 3** What has helped you while schools have been closed?
- 4** What are we looking forward to?
- 5** What are we nervous about?
- 6** How do we take care of one another?

You will need

A room or sheltered space where the whole group (suggested no more than 30 children) can sit safely together. If possible, everyone should be able to see one another. A blackboard/whiteboard, chalk/a pen to write on the board and paper and pens for activities.

Adapting the Check-In for different ages: Facilitators should consider the age and developmental level of the children in their group before planning the Check-In. Here are some simple ideas for adapting this session for younger and older groups of children:

- **For younger children (5-8):** Consider shortening the session or potentially repeating the session over a number of days using different prompt questions or activities to give more children the chance to share their experiences and feelings. If you have access, consider using a COVID-19 children's book (like [My Hero is You](#) (IASC, 2020) to illustrate and prompt the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask children to start by drawing how they felt during the lockdown, and using the pictures to guide the discussion. With any adaptation, make sure to end with Step 6 – how to take care of one another.
- **For older children (12-18):** With older children, give space for them to talk about what they know about the virus and lockdown, and correct any misinformation. Allow time for older children to research answers to any questions they have and discuss their findings together. Providing time to journal – writing or drawing feelings and experiences – might be particularly appropriate for this age group.

Tips for the facilitator

- 1** Acknowledge when a child shares, for example by making eye contact and thanking the child for their contribution. Make sure that everyone gets the chance to say something if they wish to. Dividing the children into smaller groups can be one way to make shy participants more comfortable to participate. You can invite a child to share, but don't pressure them.
- 2** You can provide general examples but be cautious not to speak about your personal experiences during the pandemic besides using broad statements such as, "I missed seeing everyone in school, what about you"? This check-in is about the participants, it's important to keep them as the main focus of the conversation.
- 3** The times are indicative and flexible. Some groups may spend more time on one topic than another, but do not exceed the total time of 90 minutes.

1

Introduction to the session how much time will be spent on the conversation, how will it be done and what is the purpose of this check-in?

(10 minutes)

Tips for the facilitator

The conversation must be led by an adult who will be responsible for ensuring that the conversation is safe and inclusive. It is important to stick to the schedule as you must make it through all the steps and limit the conversation to 60-90 minutes in order to keep everyone's attention.

To start the session, sing a short song together or play an interactive game as an ice breaker activity. If physical distancing measures are still in place, use a game that adheres to the guidelines.

Introduce the check-in session by saying, "Welcome back, it's great to see you! I've really been looking forward to it and I'm sure you have been too. It has been an unusual time and for some of us it has been really difficult. Some may have felt it was nice to spend more time with their family¹, others may have had mixed feelings. Many of you may be a bit nervous about what it is going to be like to be together again. So, we will spend the next hour or so talking about how things have been in our community, how we have been, and how we can help each other as we adjust back to a routine of attending classes or activities".



Go through the basic rules or have the children suggest and agree on them (If possible, write it on the board)

- There are no right or wrong answers – we respect everyone's opinion
- We don't laugh at each other
- We let each other talk and we listen to one another
- You don't have to say anything if you don't feel like it
- Ask if there are other ideas for ground rules

¹ If you are working with unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), you can change the language as appropriate.

2

How has COVID-19 affected us, our families and our communities

(10-15 minutes)

Tips for the facilitator

If a child shares something that is difficult, use techniques such as generalization, “Yes, I can understand that, there are many others who have felt the same”. This part has 2 steps, first we talk about how COVID-19 has affected our lives, and then how it made us feel. The key is for participants to understand the connection between what has happened and the feelings they have had because of it. For example, “we have not been able to see our friends and this made us feel lonely.”

Start by saying that, “COVID-19 has affected everyone—children, adults, and young people. Now we will talk about how the **events** have affected our lives”. Focus on **events** and give some examples:

- We have not been able to see and play with our friends.
- Schools were temporarily shutting down.
- Our parents, grandparents or brothers and sisters may have become our teachers or helped us with our schoolwork.

Ask for examples and provide recognition for any, and all, examples given.

Then ask about how these changes make them feel. For example, “We have seen a lot more news online and on TV and radio that has made some of us worried.” Facilitators can ask children to draw or act out how the **events** made them or people in their community **feel**. For example, have prepared drawings of different feelings such as sadness, anger, confusion, etc. or ask children to draw the various feelings they have named.

Finish this part of the conversation by emphasizing that all reactions are completely normal, and that there is a connection between the way our lives have been affected by the current **events** and the way we **feel**. Remind the participants that it may be helpful to discuss feelings and thoughts of being scared or sad with others. Encourage children to talk to someone they trust.



Note to the facilitator:

If you notice that participants are hesitant to share (this may be the case with children who have experienced adversity)— you can switch the exercise around. Instead of asking the participants for input, you can provide a list of common events and the associated feelings and ask if anyone recognizes these in themselves or within their community. It may be easier for children to recognize feelings they have experienced, rather than to name their feelings.

3

What has helped you while schools have been closed?

(5-10 minutes)



Note to the facilitator:

This part of the conversation is a brainstorm on the strategies that have worked well for them. You can let the participants talk together in pairs first. Of course, this must be done safely following Covid 19 guideline.

Next, make a list of ways that have helped them to feel better during the crisis. You can provide some ideas that others have found have worked for them:

- Talk with a friend on the phone
- Play with their siblings
- Ask for support
- Go for a walk
- Give examples of other ways people in the community have helped themselves to feel better during the crisis

If time is available, consider practicing as a group one way to help feel calm – Belly Breathing.

Belly breathing:

Practice this to help your children (and you!) feel calm. Say in a calm slow voice and practice alongside your child: “Put both your hands gently on your bellies. Sit up straight but relaxed. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable or place your gaze towards the ground if you’d like. Now let’s breath in slowly and feel our bellies fill up with air. Our bellies should get nice and round. And now breath out and feel our your bellies get small again, slowly.” Count from 1 to 5 slowly while you both breathe in, and then count back from 5 down to 1 as you both breathe out. Repeat 4 times. When finished, ask your child how he or she feels. Share how you are feeling too.



4

What are we looking forward to? (10-15 minutes)

Now say, “Many children and adults are really looking forward to seeing their friends and getting out again. What are you, or other people you know, looking forward to most?”. This gives children an opportunity to verbalize positive expectations and hear from their peers about what they are excited about. You can also turn this into an activity and ask them to draw what they are looking forward to and sharing it with the group or the person sitting next to them.



5

What are we nervous about? (5-10 minutes)

Reassure the group that there are many children who are nervous about coming back to school or other activities again. Some are wondering whether their friends are still their friends, some are afraid of getting sick and some are worried about falling behind in school. For some, it's like starting the first day in a new school, with butterflies in their stomach. Ask if participants can relate with any of these **feelings**.

Tell the participants, “it is important to know and talk about what they are nervous about and that they can ask for help and together we will find the best way to help and care for one another”.



6

How do we take care of one another?

(20-30 minutes)

Start by saying, “We all help to take care of ourselves and each other. This can be done by supporting one another and by following the health guidelines to help keep us safe. We will remind you of them occasionally as we learn new practices”.

Give examples of practices that help us stay safe:

- Review good hygiene practices and practical measures
- Review the distance requirement and practical measures as described in the school policy
- If personal protective gear or masks are used, discuss why and how it is utilized
- Include other COVID 19 reopening rules

Now, let the participants ask questions about the health practices above. Then ask the participants, “What it will take for us all to get started well? Here you can supplement and say, “Be patient with yourself and one another as we learn new practices and start new routines and help to support one another for example, pay special attention in case someone is feeling left out and be sure to include them. Make sure to tell an adult (preferably use a specific name) if you are upset or see others who are upset around you”.

Ask children to create posters or leaflets (depending on the supplies that are available). The posters can include drawings or key words that show how they are going to take care of themselves and others through health measures and supporting one another with difficult feelings and thoughts. If restrictions allow, you can encourage children to create a song, drama or theater production that can be put on for others.

End on a positive note and say that you and all the other adults are looking forward to helping everyone have a good time back at school and that it will be great to get started again.



Note to the facilitator

There may be children that need extra support or additional services. Before conducting the check-in session, be aware of what services exist, how children can access them and what you can do to refer children to these services if needed. After the session is over, and in the weeks following, continue to actively monitor your group and identify and refer children who are particularly distressed or in need of additional support or specialized care.

Developed in collaboration