Distance Learning – Top Tips for Schools and Settings

Introduction

We recognise that schools and setting have spent the last fortnight planning for prolonged closures in addition to responding to the ongoing Covid-19 emergency. Most schools are now well advanced with their planning and this document is designed to build on the planning to date as we all adapt our ways of working. Schools and settings are welcome to use all or some of the tips in their planning.

It is evident that schools and settings use a range of schemes, approaches and digital tools in their everyday practice. This guide is therefore not a "how to" of distance learning but designed to provide hints and tips that schools and settings can use as a reference in supporting learning over what looks set to be an extended period of closure.

We are suggesting that schools and settings focus on consolidation of existing learning over the coming weeks. We are likely to see high rates of illness and variable levels of engagement which will make new learning challenging. There will inevitably need to be a period of catch-up nationally once schools and settings return to scheduled schooling. There will also inevitably be a period of adjustment for staff, families and children with the resilience of all tested. We therefore mustn't lose sight of well-being for all and the importance of creating a sense of routine, particularly in the early weeks.

This document is designed to share hints and tips on overall approach and to complement the live list of digital resources produced for schools and settings; https://hfl.mobi/ORLSolutions. This list will be expanded over the weeks of closure and complemented by regular blog posts that will focus on subject specifics and best practice emerging both from within Hertfordshire and beyond: https://www.hertsforlearning.co.uk/hfl-blog

Moving forward, the HfL advisory teams will be contacting the schools and settings they work alongside to offer ongoing support and will be gathering knowledge and best practice which they will seek to contextualise with you.

Key Considerations:

- Not all families have online access or devices for each child to use. This will particularly be the case where parents are working from home – ensure that there is a balance of activities to include printed materials and books.
- Do you already have tools that can allow learning to continue? Consider how you can make more effective use of these systems before looking at new options. See our blog https://www.hertsforlearning.co.uk/blog/question-if-there-free-alternative-can-support-your-longer-term-strategy-you-invest-remote
- If considering a new online learning tool (e.g. Google Classroom or PurpleMash) ensure that you are aware of the data protection implications. The HfL GDPR service can help if you are unsure.
- Ensure that children can continue building safe habits when using online tools – remind them of mixing up activities, sharing their online learning with adults. Moreover, promote the importance of them keeping active and moving around if they have been still for too long.

- Agree the routines and expectations for staff; they will need to be able to manage their own workload whatever their home circumstances.
- Some staff may require support to identify appropriate online activities and require confidence to use new online learning tools. Consider how you will manage this so each class has equality of access to learning.
- Communicate clearly with parents to manage parental expectations. Schools are adopting a range of approaches designed to meet the needs of their school communities; managing their expectations early will support the wellbeing of all.

First Point of Contact:

- Through this extended period of closure schools and settings will need to give families a first point of contact, which for most will be the website. The website is an already established communication tool for sharing information with families and prevents teacher email accounts being clogged and unanswered in the event of sickness.
- The website is a relatively low technology solution and will be a quick and easy way of sharing learning tasks and links to learning activities for schools that don't routinely use digital classroom offerings (e.g. Google Classroom or MS Teams). Class blogs can be built into websites and help schools with lower tech offerings to keep a sense of community.
- Ideally schools should ensure that staff can upload and change website content by themselves. If you use a website provider you might want to agree a timeframe with the provider to ensure updates are timely. Where only one staff member has administrative access, give the same level of access to other members of SLT to allow content to be updated in the event of their illness.
- We would suggest that schools set up generic email addresses that a number of staff can monitor to support children and parents with queries on learning with a rota for answering. It should be stressed that this this is a local decision and whilst considered best practice, schools and settings need to make choice around support to children and parents appropriate to their context.

Suggested Strategies:

- Keep a feeling of community – use your school website to share the school's key messages and prevent feelings of isolation. Regular notes from the Headteacher and blogs from class teachers will be welcomed by families and children and promote the shared learning journey. We recognise however that capacity may be limited and schools and settings should be clear that communications may depend on levels of sickness within the school. The forthcoming information from HfL should support schools with information they may wish to share with parents for distance learning activities. HfL will endeavour to blog template keeping in touch communications that can be adapted locally by schools and settings.
- Refresh content- it is likely that there will be plenty of new content across a multitude of channels, to maintain engagement in learning share this content and ask children to share photos of them enjoying it.
- Don't add too many tasks at once – don't overload children or families and allow them time to explore the current learning tasks. There is naturally going to be a period of readjustment particularly in the first few weeks.

- Build a routine – add new learning tasks on the same day each week e.g. Monday morning, to maintain a sense of continuity for parents and children to support good rhythms of learning.
- Concentrate on consolidation of learning. Families will be managing in a range of circumstances; seeking to consolidate learning this year is likely to achieve greater success than encouraging new learning. Ensure you are clear on learning objectives to support both parents and children's understanding of the purpose of the task.
- Be sensitive to the wellbeing of families. In many households both parents will be expected to work full-time from home in addition to fulfilling caring duties. This will undoubtedly put extreme pressure on some households and the level of support that children are receiving will vary significantly.
- Communication with parents – it can be useful to set up a clear communication stream for parents to ask questions about the learning tasks. Think about a reasonable response time and share with parents to manage expectations.
- Personal projects – alongside regular tasks, give children a personal project to explore which keeps them motivated.
- Have realistic expectations for teacher feedback – consider how and when teachers will give feedback on pupil learning, noting that some teachers may need support to provide online feedback. Again, decisions around feedback will vary by school and setting and should be made in the context of their community.
- Recognise that you may need to review and adapt your strategy – if closures continue for a sustained period, you may need to consider blending a number of online learning tools or a different approach.

Advice for Parents

The following sites provide helpful advice for parents:

- Advice for anxious children: https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3695/how-to-support-your-child_corona.pdf
- NSPCC/O2 helpline 0808 800 5002 9am - 7pm
- Change for Life Activities: https://www.nhs.uk/change4life/activities
- www.internetmatters.org (including advice by age group)
- www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers (including advice on Parent controls)
- www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre (including safety tools on social networks)
- https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/advice-and-info/share-aware.pdf (including talking points, getting the family involved and 'safety starts with you'

HfL has provided a template newsletter on the Covid-19 intranet page of The Grid to support wellbeing that can be adapted locally and sent to parents for support.