

22nd January 2021

Dear Year 11 Parents/Guardians

I hope you are all well and are settling into a home-schooling routine once again. Lockdown presents us all with many challenges and one of those that we face as staff is ensuring that we are setting enough and suitable work whilst not putting undue pressure on you as parents as we understand everyone has different pressures and circumstances at home. My wife and I are both qualified teachers and have one nine-year-old son (Isaac) yet we are certainly not finding it easy. Trying to fit home-schooling around our own work commitments is a challenge let alone competing with the attractions of Minecraft and You Tube. I know other staff report the same experiences so please be reassured that very few of us have home-schooling completely nailed - and I am not sure I believe those who say they have!

I am mindful of trying to continue to support the mental health of boys and their families through another lockdown. I therefore outline some of the support we can offer below:

Supporting Year 11 parents with home-schooling

During the last lockdown much of the lower schoolwork was set by teachers online using Show My Homework whereas this time we are delivering up to four live online lessons a day using Microsoft Teams. This has been a steep learning curve for us all and I am aware this is still a new platform for you as parents. This is one of the reasons why we ran a support session for parents and boys in Year 11 as soon as we could. This week we are aiming to do the same for boys in Years 7, 8, 9 and 10.

For boys in Year 11 there is the added pressure that the Government has now confirmed that boys will be assessed based on evidence of their work throughout the year and so, what teachers are asking for is evidence upon which to base their teacher assessments. For Year 11s, this may feel very different from the last lockdown, where TEAMS lessons were focused more on content delivery and there was less expectation that boys produced work in their own time. We understand the pressures this creates and are doing what we can to contact home, where there are concerns and offer our support, where needed. Those boys in Year 11 who have needed laptops should hopefully have received them by now. If not, please contact us. If you or your son is struggling, please let us know.

Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of boys and parents

I think we are all finding the experience of lockdown much harder this time around. However, I think we have also learned a lot from the previous lockdown and key to that is the importance of mental health and wellbeing.

What we have experienced this time around with Year 11s is that those boys who have fallen behind on their work are now seeing an impact on their mental health - and this in turn, has added great pressure for some families. We all need to nag, cajole, persuade and encourage but this should not be allowed to develop into real tension, and if it does, modifying the work, setting smaller tasks or even starting again tomorrow are all acceptable strategies to use. No one will judge you as a parent, as we have all been there. If you feel it would be helpful for staff to talk to your son about his work, please let us know.

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It is our priority to ensure that we continue to support our boys and their families as best we can, and ensuring mental health and wellbeing is vital to this. We fully understand that during these times of uncertainty, we may all, at some point, benefit from extra support around mental health and wellbeing. Staff have been asked to ensure that contact is made with boys and their parents throughout this period of lockdown to continue to provide pastoral support. Please do engage with these calls - they are vital for ensuring that communication lines remain open and enable us to provide the support needed. The impact of social isolation on mental health is also a factor which must be recognised. As such, we have signposted below key resources that are available to our boys and their parents / carers.

Support for Boys:

Number 1 for students to access support: <https://student.kooth.com/>

A free, private and confidential service where you can talk about anything <https://www.childline.org.uk/>
24/7 Mental Health Support <https://giveusashout.org/get-help/resources/>

For parents to support their children:

Self-Harm Support <https://www.battle-scars-self-harm.org.uk/what-is-self-harm-all-about.html>

Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Support <https://www.youngsomerset.org.uk/the-hubs>

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services <https://camhs.elft.nhs.uk/>

Online Mental Wellbeing Community <https://www.kooth.com/>

Eating Disorder Support <https://www.swedauk.org/>

Support for Parents

A bank of toolkits and resources on a variety of topics: <https://www.safe4me.co.uk/resources/>

Mental Health Information Services <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

NHS Mental Health Support <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/>

Emotional Support <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Anxiety Support <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>

Managing Wellbeing <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zrmhscw>

Government mental health support during coronavirus

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/newadvice-to-support-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak>

Full time working parents - Keeping in touch

Much of this letter will now focus on tips and strategies for managing home schooling. I wish to reassure parents who work full time that we know you are relying on us to keep you informed of your son's progress. With this in mind, we have altered our SIMs notifications, to include 'missed a virtual lesson' and 'has not completed virtual work' so that parents can be informed immediately if their son has not attended or is beginning to fall behind. These messages will be sent to you via MyEd, so if you wish to keep track of your son's progress, please make sure that you have easy access to this App. In most cases, this should be enough for parents to be able to have a discussion with their son and ensure he is on track. However, if you become overwhelmed by this and require further support, please contact us.

Advice for managing home-schooling.

1. Your mood

For many of us the need to balance working from home and ensuring your son is keeping up with their schoolwork is stressful. For those with more than one child, especially from more than one school, the situation can be even harder to manage. If you are feeling upset, anxious or indeed resentful that you are now home with your son and you are 'expected' to ensure he remains up to date with his work then these feelings will be transmitted to your son which will no doubt lead to conflict. So firstly, you need to accept that this is the situation you are in, understand that these feelings are normal and that we have all been there, and realise that the school is here to help. First and foremost, by removing the feeling of 'expectation'. All we expect is that you do your best. Please try to accept and embrace that this is the situation, and we are going to make the absolute best of it together. You as well as your son will benefit from this.

2. Create a daily routine

We all know that boys as well as adults thrive on routine. This should be built around the online lessons and boys should take some responsibility for creating the routine themselves. Sit down with them and have them make a routine for each day. If it helps, you may want to create a schedule using pictures and put it up on the wall so they will know what is coming next throughout their day. When your son knows what is happening next, they will automatically be less anxious and more prepared.

3. Have a consistent area to work

Choose one area of your house where your son can complete his work. In larger households this may need to be flexible as you juggle the needs of more than one child and the needs for adults who are also working from home. However, try to keep the area as consistent as possible and ensure that all his work and equipment are stored in one place at the end of each day.

4. Take breaks

Boys will naturally have breaks in a normal school day, between lessons, at break and lunchtimes and even within lessons as staff move from one activity to another. The online timetable has been deliberately created to give boys up to four periods of input each day, with breaks between them. Boys work best in short bursts and 30minutes of intense effort is better than an hour of less focused work.

5. Go outside

Where possible try to get outside every day. Whether that is a daily walk or other form of exercise, time in the garden or even just outside the front door time outside in the fresh air and natural light will not only break up the day but also help lift the mood.

6. Create other learning opportunities

Helping out around the house and garden are all worthwhile learning opportunities as we are helping prepare boys for the real world once they leave school. Helping make lunch, washing up, tidying the house and putting things away at the end of each day, will all help keep them busy. It is also good that they follow their own interests and I have been amazed at many of the things that the boys built and made during the last lockdown. Some form of physical exercise should be encouraged every day.

7. Quiet time

This can be essential for you all as a family. Whether the boys spend time in their bedroom, the garden or simply in a different room giving them (and you) a time to read, watch TV or play a computer game will be of benefit to you all.

8. Tutor time/Social contact

This session has been included to allow more social interaction and contact than the other lessons and it is therefore important that your son attends these to keep in contact with his tutor, as well as his friends. This is also a chance for your son to raise any concerns that he may have. It is also worth encouraging him to stay in contact with his friends and family through face time/Zoom rather than simply messaging/texting.

9. Physical exercise

There are weekly exercise challenges posted on TEAMS in the PE/Games Year Group Teams folder which are normally set on Mondays. There are also lots of fun Youth Sports Trust activities saved within these groups such as 60sec challenges, Home PE and family activities. In addition, there are links to the SASP stay active at home challenge, with a Lockdown Activity Timetable. There will be regular posts and links to PE throughout lockdown and boys can also view their Chads PBs, the number of Chads completed and much, much more!

10. Ask for help

Staff will endeavor to contact home regularly so please do ask for any help and support if you feel you need it. Staff will also talk to the boys so if you would like staff to remind them of the need to keep working hard then please let them know.

11. Accept it for what it is

What is important is that you are actively trying to support your son with his education. Exhausting and I am sure frustrating as it will be, please remember that at some point in the future schools will be back open as normal and the staff at Brymore will do all that they can to ensure boys catch up with any work missed.

Expectations of staff

I understand many of you will be working and so the natural time for you to contact staff will be in the evenings. Please be mindful this may well be the only time staff get to spend with their own family and so they will not always be able to reply immediately. Indeed, staff are reporting the strains of the 24/7 nature of their work now and I have told them that they need to protect some time for themselves and their family. Please also try to contact staff using e-mail rather than through TEAMS as this is purely a tool for teaching and handing in work.

Expectations of boys

The minimum expectation of the boys is to attend all the taught lessons and try their best with the work that is being set. If boys fail to attend a lesson or complete the work set staff will record this and you will receive a message via the My Ed app. As mentioned earlier, we have adjusted our behaviour notes on SIMs to reflect the changed nature of students working, so you will now note that a new set of behaviour statements are being put onto SIMs by staff. When staff let you know that your son has missed a lesson, this is for your information only and staff will not be issuing a sanction for this. There could be many legitimate reasons why boys are unable to attend a live lesson making it impossible for staff to deal with each individual case. However, I feel it is important that parents particularly in Year 11 are made aware of this information. Boys who work well will also receive merits in the usual way. Thus, boys can continue to work towards their badges and certificates.

This letter is designed to support parents and boys. We do not wish to add to what is already a tense and difficult situation for many. What we do know, is that where boys have a focus, a goal and a sense of accountability, they tend to be much happier. This is particularly true of Year 11s, for whom the removal of final exams can be a confusing and demotivating experience. Therefore, we are emphasising the support we are offering to keep boys on track, to remind boys of how they are now being assessed, to make sure parents are informed about their son's progress and to ensure that Year 11 boys understand their responsibility and their role in the coming weeks.

Once the Government release further details about how the GCSE grades will be awarded then I will update you immediately. They are currently consulting with schools and one such proposal is that boys will be asked to complete assessments in school (or at home if the lockdown persists) so that staff have some robust evidence to inform grades. Consequently, the message remains the same, boys need to continue working hard and complete the work that is being set by staff.

Thank you once again for your continued support and understanding and please do not hesitate to contact the school should you have any concerns.

Yours faithfully

MARK THOMAS
Headteacher