

22nd January 2021

Dear Parent/Guardian

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 YouTube. 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 parents with home-schooling

During the last lockdown much of the work 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 may be a new platform for you as parents. We will therefore run two live support sessions for parents where myself and Mrs Davis will go through the support available to you, our expectations and technical advice about TEAMS itself. Your son will be sent an invite on TEAMS and you are asked to join him at the times specified below. Please note these are designed to be supportive to you as parents, are not compulsory, and there will be a chance for you to ask questions at the end. We have already run a similar session with Year 11 parents which also focussed on exams. These sessions will be:

Tuesday 26th January 2021 at 5.00pm - Years 7 and 8

Wednesday 27th January 2021 at 5.00pm - Years 9 and 10

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. In my view this is so much more important than any lost learning and it was clear when the boys returned last time that they were able to catch up and re-engage quickly, despite what you may have read elsewhere nationally. Of course, completing the work set is important, as in itself it will help with mental health as it provides a focus for the day, but it should not become a source of serious conflict. 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.

It is therefore 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 the boys and their parents / carers.

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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-healthhelplines/>

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>

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 be assured 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 30 minutes 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 60 sec 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. We have adjusted our behavior notes on SIMs to reflect the changed nature of students working, so you will now note that a new set of behavior statements are being put onto SIMs by staff. These include information for parents whose son has missed an online lesson but also sanctions for boys who have not met the behaviour expectations, outlined in our Code of Conduct for online learning, which was sent to families in November. 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 are made aware of this information. Boys who work well will also receive merits in the usual way. In particular, it is worth noting that the English department are continuing to reward students for reading for 20 minutes a day and commendations will be awarded for those who produce excellent work. In this way, boys can continue to work towards their badges and certificates and the Student of the Week awards.

Once again, I thank you for your continued support, patience and understanding as we try to work through this difficult situation together. I hope you can join myself, Mrs Davis and other staff next week in the TEAMS meetings, which will be recorded should the time be inconvenient for you. Invites will be sent out on Monday however if you have any concerns and you are unable to attend the meeting then please do not hesitate to contact the school.

Yours faithfully

MARK THOMAS
Headteacher