

VIDEO TWO

RETURNING TO EDUCATION WITH LONG COVID

SCRIPT

Welcome to the Long Covid Kids Educational Toolkit.

Video 2 - Returning to Education with Long Covid

Kath, Mother of Hayden, 15, Long Covid

Video Transcript of Kath (Kath is a white mother with an English accent. She has blonde hair worn up and she is wearing glasses).

"When he was first ill, obviously he couldn't go to school for a long time, and then he did, and he would go in a wheelchair and see a few of the boys and then go in a quiet room on his own with a one to one helper which was really nice. He didn't do any reading or writing and he would just ...you know... do a bit of a class but it would just give him worse brain fog, but it was still nice that he had that opportunity".

In the last video, we learnt about Long Covid in children and young people.

In this video, we look at how educators can support children living with Long Covid. We will cover:

- the right time to return to school after a COVID infection
- providing support to enable participation in education and school life
- and finally possible alternatives for children who need additional support

We asked children living with Long Covid to describe their experience. One child said, "I am worried that I may look and seem okay, but I am not."

[Other speech bubbles also appear and they state: "There can be good days and bad days. Things can be going quite well until they're not again." "I may be a bit better one day, or worse another, or a week later." and 'Sometimes I just can't think straight.']

A sentiment echoed by many children living with Long Covid who can struggle to keep up with the usual demands of school due to fluctuating and often invisible symptoms.

Due to the episodic nature of Long Covid, children living with the condition require a different approach to education. There isn't a 'one size fits all' approach; flexibility is key. Early management strategies can include:

- resting
- pacing
- not pushing through extreme exhaustion
- and lastly, actively seeking appropriate healthcare input.

Unfortunately, children with complex health conditions can be out of school for prolonged periods, ranging from a few weeks to months, or even years, depending on their needs, support structure, and health capacity, with some even unable to participate in education at home.

Caitlin, 12, Long Covid

Video Transcript of Caitlin (Caitlyn is a white 12 year old girl, with a Scottish accent. She has brown hair worn down and falling just below her shoulders, and she is wearing a pink top)

"I missed most of a whole year of school, mainly lying in bed. I sometimes manage school for short periods of time, but miss lots of school work and miss my friends."

Our Education survey showed that 62% of respondents experienced a disrupted education for more than one year.

Health needs can take priority over education for some time and may lead to practical and financial implications for the family.

The Cautious Tortoise flow chart offers guidance to help understand when a child or young person is ready to return to school. Some children require an extended period of rest before they can return to in-person learning.

Children living with Long Covid generally want to be in school - they want to learn - they want to see their friends. The reasons for non-attendance will be based on their complex health condition, and are very different to a child who is anxious about school and engaging in emotionally-based school avoidance.

Maintaining contact with children unable to attend school, facilitates connection and a sense of belonging. This connection provides reassurance that they will be welcomed back to school once they are able.

A simple tool used for identifying patterns between exertion and symptoms is an activity/symptom diary.

It is important to appreciate how the child or young person is outside of school because children may often mask pain, exhaustion or discomfort until in their safe space at home, and worsening of symptoms with post-exertional symptom exacerbation may appear sometime after the initial exertion. Families regularly discuss 'crashes' in our support services, more often crashes are described as 'falling asleep as soon as they get home from school, or immediately zoning out'.

Avoiding crashes is a key strategy of symptom management.

.Hayley, 12, Long Covid

Video Transcript of Hayley (Hayley is a white girl, age 12, with an Irish accent. She has light brown hair worn up and is wearing a black Gremlins T-Shirt and later a pink top)

"I only go to school 3 days a week, so I often find myself struggling to keep up with the different subjects that they're learning, they may have learnt the day before, that I just don't understand, so I have often have to adapt and often find myself feeling disconnected from the rest of the class.

One thing that my school did for me to make it easier to stay full days was, my school had a room called the Sonas room or the relaxation room and it was a room where I was able to go if I needed a break from my class, if I was feeling overwhelmed by the 30 children who were in my class being chaotic. It meant that I could just go and take a break, and there was, like, cushions, and it was like a sensory room, so it was just really nice to be able to have that break, just for some quiet and it allowed me to stay longer when I needed to."

Enabling Participation

Flexible reduced timetables can support children living with Long Covid to return to school.

Other considerations include:

- a calm environment with low sensory input
- frequent prompts, rest breaks or support to complete tasks and sustain energy levels
- more support on some days than others, as symptoms relapse and remit
- gradual reintegration and more timetable flexibility than usual
- and finally home tuition, online learning, or a blended approach

Video 4 will contain more details on how to support children once they are able to attend school.

Every child wants to feel included and understood and to experience a sense of achievement. However, with fluctuating health conditions, we do need to allow for the inconsistent achievement of tasks [speech bubbles appear on screen saying "Do you need rest breaks? You OK? How can I support you?"].

Visible symptoms of PESE can be an indication that energy levels are depleted. For many children, maintaining energy levels is one of the biggest challenges of Long Covid.

A completed example activity diary can be seen in the handbook accompanying this series, as well as a communication template for use between the school and the family.

Regular communication with the child and their family can provide educators with a broader perspective, help to strengthen the connection between home and school, and help children continue to feel part of school life.

Kath, Mother of Hayden, 15, Long Covid

Video Transcript of Kath (Kath is a white mother with an English accent. She has blonde hair worn up and she is wearing glasses).

"His school have been great though, the teachers have come to the house to visit and they've said ... that they will... he's gone back a year, and if he gets better obviously he can go back to school which is really really really nice. Yeah, they've been supportive and kind which has been hugely helpful all the way through his illness, it would have been dreadful if they weren't."

Education Adaptations

Flexible and hybrid adaptations can support the educational needs of children living with Long Covid if they are too unwell to return to school.

Government guidance called "Ensuring a good education for children who cannot attend school because of health needs" says that if a child is too ill to attend school for more than 15 school days (consecutively or cumulatively), the Local Authority must arrange suitable full-time education (or as much education as the child's health allows). This often takes the form of home tuition or an online learning programme.

AV1 robots are a useful alternative when in-person attendance isn't an option. These robots represent the child in the classroom and provide a sense of independence and normality. The robot has a built-in camera and microphone to transmit sound and video of the lesson back to the child. There is growing evidence of the effectiveness of using robots in reducing feelings of isolation for children who are physically unable to attend school.

Hospital schools provide education to children who are too unwell to attend their usual school and aim to ensure equality of access, opportunity and support for children with medical needs. Although this is usually for those in a hospital setting, hospital schools can also be accessed by children unwell at home with any consultant-led diagnosis.

More information is available in the handbook that accompanies this series.

Kath, Mother of Hayden, 15, Long Covid

Video Transcript of Kath (Kath is a white mother with an English accent. She has blonde hair worn up and she is wearing glasses).

"It would have been really useful to have an AI robot for the school, and then he would have been able to take part just virtually, and sort of dip in and out, and maybe not have lost so much contact. As it is... he hasn't...he got worse, he got COVID again September 2021 and he hasn't been at school at all."

Government Guidance

As well as the previous guidance mentioned - Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions guidance and advice states that "A child's mental and physical health should be properly supported in school so that the pupil can play a full and active role in school life, remain healthy and achieve their academic potential." Additionally, some children living with Long Covid may meet the definition of disabled under the Equality Act 2010 which makes it "unlawful for an education provider to discriminate directly or indirectly against a pupil based on their disability."

When a child's needs are above what the school or setting can ordinarily provide, the parents or setting can apply for an Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment.

Rhonda, Mother of a 15 Year Old Boy now recovered from Long Covid

Video Transcript of Rhonda (Rhonda is a Chinese woman with a Brummie accent. She has short red hair and is wearing a blue top).

"My son was in his final year of GCSEs when he developed Long Covid. He attended the first two months of school, and after that he practically did not go. There was this constant pressure from the school for him to attend and we just couldn't do anything about it. It was the most stressful time, both for him and for myself as a parent."

So, to summarise:

- The Cautious Tortoise flowchart can be used as a guide to support a child living with Long Covid to return to school. Pacing and resting are useful management strategies.
- Health needs may need to take priority over educational needs for a period of time.
- Due to the episodic nature of Long Covid, children living with the condition require a different approach to education. There isn't a 'one size fits all' approach so an individual approach with flexibility is key to supporting a child with Long Covid to return to school
- Flexible reduced timetables can support children living with Long Covid to return to school.
- And lastly, hybrid and flexible adaptations can also support the educational needs of children living with Long Covid if they are too unwell to return to school.

In the next video in this series, video 3 we will look at how Long Covid can affect education and the family, and provide some practical tips and guidance.
