**Supporting Children Returning to football after the lockdown**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Uncertainty** | This is a very uncertain time and although it would be great if we could make COVID disappear – we can’t (not yet anyway). Children, like adults, must learn to tolerate some uncertainty. This skill can help us to manage anxiety. |
| **Normalising** | It is also normal to feel very anxious about the changes. Change makes most people feel a bit strange and worried. Some people find this harder than others though. |
| **Different experiences** | It’s important to remember that children have had hugely different experiences during lockdown. Some children who experience anxiety normally, may have found a break from going to school & football, a break from triggers for their anxiety. For them going back to school & football is going to be very anxiety provoking. There are other children who have had a great time with families and don’t want to return to school/football. Finally, there are of course many children who have been in family situations with lots of arguing, and possibly even violence and neglect who will find getting back to school & football a refuge. Do not assume that you know how children feel. |
| **Modelling calmness** | You may be wondering whether to send your child back to football soon. You may have good reasons for wanting to keep your child at home for longer. Either way, just be aware of how you model your own anxiety when speaking to your child about returning to football. Speak to your child when you feel calm yourself. |
| **Listening and validating** | Listen to your child. Hear what their concerns are. Acknowledge their feelings and let them know that you know it’s tough for them. |
| **We don’t have all the answers** | It’s ok not to have the answers. In fact, it’s better not to pretend that you know. We don’t know. It’s possible we may move back to football, then to lockdown and back. This could go on for a while. |
| **Limit news and address misinformation** | If they are worried about getting unwell or making someone else unwell, agree to investigate some facts together. For example, you may look together at the facts in the news, but limit the amount viewed and address any misinformation the child has. You may want to look at what happened in previous illnesses in the past and how we got through it as a Country. |
| **Limit reassurance** | Asking questions is helpful but giving excessive reassurance is not. It’s very tempting to give lots of reassurance to your child, as it may relieve anxiety in the short term. In the long term it keeps it going. Instead listen and ask them what they think, and what they think will help. |
| **Focus on possible strategies** | Help children to focus on possible strategies. Ask them how they adapted to the lockdown. What helped? What might help them now adapt to going back to football? There may be some things that immediately can be done to problem solve the concerns raised. For example, “I am worried that my friends won’t want to speak to me at football”. Agree an experiment to try this out beforehand, such as try contacting a friend to speak or meet in advance of football starting. |
| **Deferring worries** | Children can also be encouraged to make a list of worries and have an agreed deferred time to worry about things on their list. For example, at 4pm spend 30 minutes worrying. This can help to contain worries, and often the worry feels less distressing at this deferred time. |
| **Parents preparing children for the return – routines, reconnecting with friends etc.** | Before returning to school & football, try and prepare children by getting them back into a routine. They will need to go to bed at a reasonable time, wake up early and learn to do the commute again. They could do some practice runs beforehand. If they are not already doing so, help them to reconnect with friends to make the transition easier. They can meet with one friend in a park or via zoom etc. |
| **More contact before the return of football** | It may be helpful for coaches and families to have some contact before returning to football. |
| **Listening to each other** | Coaches should listen to children and not assume how they feel or what they have gone through. Help children to listen to each other too so they can process the changes. It is important to not ignore the changes that have occurred. |
| **As above, limit reassurance, encourage a growth mindset** | Help children to recognise that building tolerance of uncertainty can help them manage their anxiety and develop their growth mindset. It is like building up “mind muscles”. Limit reassurance as this can maintain anxiety. Instead encourage children to ask questions, and support skills in problem solving so they can consider their own solutions. |
| **Worry box and time** | Have a worry box at training/on the club website so players can post their worries in this at training/any time. |
| **Taking care of self and others** | Encourage children to think about their own mental health including eating healthily, exercising, doing things they enjoy, spending time with others. Remember it took us time to adapt to the lockdown, and it will take time to adapt back. Go easy on yourself. |