



Helping Pupils Settle Back After Disruption

A Practical Guide for Schools

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Introduction

When pupils return to school after a period of disruption, the priority is not to get straight back to normal. It is to help them feel safe, settled, and ready to learn again. This guide offers practical, evidence-informed approaches that any school can use in the first days and weeks after a break caused by unexpected events.

Children process disruption differently depending on their age, temperament, family circumstances, and previous experiences. Some will return relieved and ready. Others may be anxious, withdrawn, or unsettled in ways that are not immediately obvious. The children who concern us most are often the ones who appear fine on the surface.

This guide is designed for school leaders, pastoral teams, DSLs, inclusion leads, and classroom teachers. It can be adapted for any age group and any school context.

1. The First Day Back

The first day sets the tone. Pupils will be looking to their teachers for cues about how to feel. A calm, warm, structured start matters more than catching up on curriculum.

What to do

- Begin with a structured welcome back routine — assembly, circle time, or class check-in depending on age group.
- Acknowledge that the break happened and that it is okay to feel however they feel. Keep language simple and age-appropriate.
- Avoid asking pupils to share what happened at home unless they volunteer. Some children will want to talk; others will not. Both are fine.
- Reestablish familiar routines quickly. Predictability is one of the strongest tools for reducing anxiety in children.
- Keep the timetable visible and refer to it throughout the day. Knowing what comes next reduces uncertainty.
- Build in extra transition time between activities. Rushing creates stress.

What to avoid

- Diving straight into assessments or tests.
 - Asking the whole class to share their experiences publicly — this can retraumatise or put pressure on children who are not ready.
 - Dismissing feelings with phrases like ‘everything is back to normal now’ — for some children, it is not.
 - Overloading the day with activities to make up for lost time.
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2. Recognising How Disruption Shows Up

Disruption affects children in different ways. Not all of them are visible. Here are some common signs to watch for in the days and weeks after returning to school.

Younger pupils (ages 6–11)

- Clinginess or reluctance to separate from parents at drop-off.
- Regression in behaviour — thumb sucking, baby talk, toileting accidents.
- Difficulty concentrating or sitting still.
- Increased tearfulness or emotional outbursts over small things.
- Repetitive play or drawing related to the event.
- Withdrawal from friends or activities they normally enjoy.

Older pupils (ages 12–18)

- Irritability, anger, or defiance that seems disproportionate.
- Withdrawal from social interaction or going very quiet.
- Difficulty sleeping, fatigue, or complaints of headaches and stomach aches.
- Increased phone use or avoidance of schoolwork.
- Expressing hopelessness, cynicism, or nihilism.
- Appearing fine on the surface but disengaging from things they previously cared about.

Key principle: The children who are most at risk are often the ones who are hardest to spot. Quiet compliance is not the same as emotional safety. Look for changes in pattern, not just visible distress.

3. Creating Emotional Safety in the Classroom

Emotional safety means pupils feel secure enough to be present, to participate, and to ask for help if they need it. It is the foundation everything else depends on.

Practical strategies

- Use a daily emotional check-in at the start of the day. This can be as simple as a thumbs up/middle/down, a colour scale, or a feelings wheel. The point is to normalise talking about how you feel.
- Create a calm corner or quiet space in the classroom where pupils can go if they feel overwhelmed. Make it normal, not a sanction.
- Use calm, steady language. Avoid raised voices, dramatic tone, or urgency in the first week back.
- Be consistent. If you say something will happen, make it happen. Predictability builds trust.

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- Model emotional honesty. It is okay for teachers to say 'I found the break difficult too' if it is appropriate and proportionate.
 - Reinforce belonging. Use inclusive language, celebrate kindness, and notice small positive behaviours.

4. Supporting Pupils Who Need More

Most pupils will settle within the first week. Some will need additional support. This is not a failure — it is a normal response to an abnormal situation.

Indicators that a pupil may need additional support

- Emotional or behavioural changes that persist beyond two weeks.
- Sleep difficulties reported by parents or visible in school.
- Significant changes in academic engagement or performance.
- Social withdrawal that does not improve with gentle encouragement.
- Any disclosure of distress, fear, or harm — follow your school's safeguarding procedures.

What to do

- Have a quiet, private conversation with the pupil. Use open questions and avoid leading them to a particular answer.
- Involve parents early. A collaborative approach between home and school is more effective than either alone.
- Refer to your school counsellor or inclusion team if available.
- Document observations and conversations. Consistent record-keeping supports effective handover and continuity.
- If there is any safeguarding concern, follow your school's established procedures immediately.

5. Working With Parents

Parents will also be adjusting. Some will be anxious about sending their children back. Others may be eager for things to return to normal. Clear, reassuring communication helps bridge the gap.

- Send a short, warm message before pupils return — welcoming them back, outlining what the first day will look like, and reassuring parents that wellbeing is the priority.
- Invite parents to share anything that might help the school support their child — changes in behaviour at home, concerns, or specific needs.
- Avoid overwhelming parents with catch-up requests, homework, or assessment information in the first week.

- If you are concerned about a pupil, reach out to parents early and collaboratively. Frame it as ‘we have noticed’ rather than ‘there is a problem.’

6. The First Two Weeks — A Simple Framework

Days 1–3: Settle. Focus entirely on routine, emotional safety, and reconnection. No assessments. Light academic activity only.

Days 4–5: Rebuild. Begin to reintroduce normal academic expectations gradually. Continue daily check-ins. Notice which pupils are settling and which are not.

Week 2: Sustain. Return to normal timetable but maintain emotional check-ins as a daily practice. Review any pupils who are not settling and begin additional support conversations.

Beyond week 2: If concerns persist for specific pupils, involve your pastoral and inclusion teams. Some children will need longer-term support, and early identification makes a significant difference.

7. Using Daily Pupil Voice to Stay Ahead

One of the biggest challenges after disruption is knowing which pupils are struggling when they are not telling you directly. Traditional check-ins rely on children being willing and able to speak up. Many are not.

Daily pupil voice tools give schools a way to hear from every child, every day, without relying on disclosure. When pupils engage through safe, low-pressure interactions, patterns emerge over time that help staff identify concerns early — before they escalate.

This kind of structured emotional visibility is especially important after periods of disruption, when some pupils will mask their feelings and others will express them in ways that are easy to misread.

Lumii.me provides schools with exactly this capability — daily, structured pupil voice across wellbeing, safeguarding, and social-emotional development, with every concern reviewed by an authorised adult within the school. If your school would like to explore how daily pupil voice could support your return, contact us at ask@lumii.me