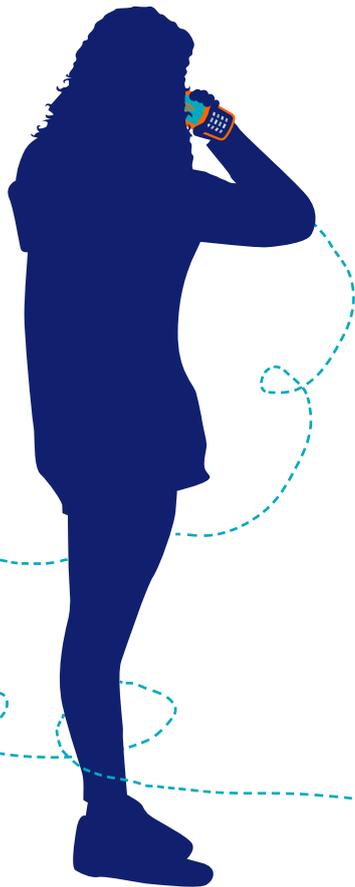


Keeping Connected:

How teacher outreach calls can support student wellbeing and continuation of learning during COVID-19 school closures



What is an outreach call?

Outreach calls are brief phone calls between a teacher, a learner and their families. Outreach calls allow teachers to check in with students and their caregivers, show support, discuss at-home learning, and link families with services if needed. Outreach calls are not for teaching via phone. That is not sustainable and is unlikely to be effective.

A call can be as short as 5 mins and should take no more than 15 minutes. Children can find it hard to concentrate on the phone for longer periods of time. Outreach calls should be made every two to three weeks and only continue if the student and caregivers agree to the calls.

Teachers should only start making outreach calls if they have information on how to connect children, their caregivers, or families in need of additional support to health, protection, or other services.

See page 6 under Problems and Solutions for ideas for contexts where outreach calls might be difficult.

When teachers or other volunteers conduct outreach phone calls to support children's wellbeing and learning it is critical that the risk of a teacher or volunteer themselves being abusive to children and families is mitigated.

*Following best practice **safeguarding procedures** is essential to ensure we keep children and families safe.*

Work with your safeguarding focal point to take key steps such as appropriate training and induction, using a 'Code of Conduct for Phone Use' and requiring teachers or volunteers to complete 'Phone Call Records'.



Why do outreach calls?

Schools are key for information sharing, social interaction and often provide a caring community around children and their families. Teachers play an important role in supporting children's wellbeing and learning in school. When schools are closed to stop the spread of COVID-19, continuing regular communication between school and home will help children, parents, and teachers:

- Children can receive support and encouragement from their teacher and feel more motivated to continue learning from home.
- Teachers can check in with parents and caregivers about any learning or wellbeing challenges for students, and provide guidance, answer questions or inform about available resources (e.g., remote learning materials).
- For some children and families, being able to speak with a trusted adult, like a teacher, may help in referrals so they can access essential protection or health services.
- Teachers may feel better able to continue fulfilling their professional role and to feel connected to their school community.
- Teachers can help encourage children (and their caregivers) to return to school when they reopen, and to help the transition back to school and classroom learning.

3 things teachers should know before starting outreach calls

1. First, LISTEN

During this time of stress and social separation, one of the most helpful things we can all do is listen, free of judgement. Teachers won't be able to solve all of the challenges students and caregivers are facing, but teachers can listen with empathy and, if necessary, link to further support. For tips on how to listen actively, see below.

” *“Yes, I understand.”*

2. Focus on LEARNING and WELLBEING

Often, a teacher's communication with a child or their caregivers will focus on their academic performance in school. However, we know that children are only able to learn if they feel safe and well. During COVID-19 it is even more important for teachers to help children learn, as well as to stay safe and healthy. Ask about how home learning is going, but do not put additional pressure to keep up with assignments and do not try to teach by phone.

3. Be ready to LINK

Check which services are available and functioning before the calls are made and have contact numbers for these services available to share with families if requested. If anything is said on the calls that suggests children or their families are facing immediate harm or safety risks (violence in the home, forced labour, etc.), teachers should know how to safely report this to the relevant health, social services or police services.



How can teachers plan outreach calls?

You are a teacher - not more, not less:



A teacher has a very important role to play in supporting learners in crisis contexts. Children look to their teachers as role models and sometimes the most trusted adult outside of the family. But this role also has limits. Teachers are not psychologists or counsellors and should not act like one. If a child needs professional help that is not related to teaching, you should help them link to those services.

”

“I will try to support you as much as I can, but I am not a counselor. I can share information and link you to support available to you.”

Important tips on active listening and supportive communication

Children or their caregivers might share with you their difficult or negative feelings and thoughts.

- Use active listening skills, by listening: “yes, I understand” clarifying: “what do you mean” or “can you give me an example” and summarize, “what I hear you saying is...”.
- Do not minimize the concerns - do not say “oh, that is nothing” or “stop worrying” instead use normalizing phrases when appropriate, saying “many feel the same as you”, “yes, I hear what you are saying, that is a very common reaction because of the situation we are in”.

Confidentiality and safety considerations:

As a teacher, the safety of children should be your number one priority. Treat any information shared with confidentiality. If you need to seek advice or guidance from a colleague or other professional, do so without sharing the personal details of the child or family. In some countries reporting child protection concerns is mandatory. Be sure to explain these limits to your confidentiality.



If the child does not sound comfortable to talk do not continue and give them an option to contact you when they do feel comfortable speaking, through a missed-call, text message, or other communication. Do not make false promises and do not promise you will keep issues shared with you confidential if they or another child is at risk of harm or abuse. If one of your students tells you about harm or safety issues, ensure the family is referred to additional support services. If you become aware of child abuse or neglect this should be confidentially reported to the appropriate child protection agency and/ or social worker immediately.

The questions below are only suggestions, teachers do not need to use all these questions in one call. It is better to make several short calls over every two to three weeks than only one long call. The questions are suggested for children 6-17 but can be adapted depending on the age of the child, their level of comprehension and confidence. It is important to not seem intrusive but instead supportive and encouraging.

Begin the call

Introduce yourself and explain that you are calling because you would like to help your students learn and provide support, even when schools are closed. Ask to speak to the child first and explain you would like to speak to the parent or caregiver afterwards. It is important to also speak with the parents or caregiver to provide an overview of why you are providing outreach calls to students. Provide parents or caregivers with a brief overview of what you spoke to the student about.



For your student - questions to ask, advice to give

- **How are you?**
Ask an open question and listen. If the child is shy, ask questions like - how are you spending your time? How is the family? Is everyone healthy?
- **Are you able to study at home while schools are closed?**
If children are currently not able to study, reassure them that a lot of other students will also be finding this situation difficult too. Do not get angry, try to understand why the child is not able to learn at home and suggest solutions.
- **What resources are you using to help you learn or revise?**
Make sure children know what resources are available to help them (books, radio, TV, for example). If they aren't able to access distance learning resources, suggest they use anything available to write/draw something every day. Encourage: say that you would like to see what they have written/drawn when schools are open.
- **When you are learning, where do you sit? Who is helping you?**
Encourage children to learn in a place that is safe and comfortable. Remind them to ask for help from adults or older siblings in the household.
- **What is most difficult about not being at school?**
Explain that most children in the world today are unable to go to school because of COVID-19 so they are not alone. Reassure children that schools will reopen as soon as it is safe and that many people are working hard so that this happens as quickly as possible.
- **What do you enjoy? What works well?**
Explore the positive coping mechanisms that the child/ family use and highlight them for the child. "Ah so you have a daily routine, that sounds very useful. Many people find that having a daily routine helps them". Ask the child to mention some good coping mechanisms - even very small. The purpose is to give the child self-confidence and a small sense of control.



"What do you enjoy?"

- **End the conversation by providing practical tips on how to keep learning and stay well during school closures**
"Many children have found this useful...", "Maybe you can try this and you can tell me how it was when we next speak..."
- **Agree on the next steps.**
Make sure you tell the child what you will do - do you plan to talk to the parents about any concerns - will you ask them for permission to refer to additional support? Explain to the child what your plan is.
- **Ask if the child has any questions.**
Provide any information you are able to give. If you don't know the answer, say so. Do not make false promises, such as when schools will reopen if this is not yet known.



For the parent or caregiver - questions to ask, advice to give

- **Be positive**

Start by saying something positive about the discussion with their child, for example, commenting on one of the child's strengths or skills. Remind the parent/caregiver that there are challenges for everyone because of COVID-19, but together - child, parent/caregiver and teacher - we can work together to solve problems.

- **Talk about solutions**

If the child discussed any challenges with learning at home, discuss and recommend practical solutions with the parent or caregiver. Ask the adult to encourage the child to continue learning even while schools are closed. Link adults will locally available resources and tools for the continuation of learning.

- **Available learning resources**

Remind parents what learning resources (books/radio/TV) are available for their children. Remind parents that they themselves have a lot of knowledge that their children can learn – life skills, songs, stories and family history can all be ways for parents to teach.

- **Encourage a simple routine**

Ask about their routine, and explain to parents that establishing a simple routine at home will help children (and parents!) manage this stressful time. Knowing what to expect during the day provides stability and helps children focus.

- **Playing as well as learning**

Explain that playing is an excellent way for children to learn. Encourage parents to allow their children play time every day even if learning and chores must also be completed.

- **Parents and caregivers need support too?**

Ask the caregiver: "How are you?". Actively listen and use supportive communication techniques. Reassure caregivers that this is a stressful time for everyone, and that it is important for carers to take rest and find ways to relax. Remind caregivers that in order to care for their children, they must also try to care for themselves; this will help our children be well and happy. Ask the parent or caregiver if they have support from other people in their community.

- **Agree on next steps**

Discuss any additional support needs for children, or particular risks or challenges they are facing. Discuss a plan together and agree on what action will be taken and when.

- **Ask if they have questions**

Caregivers may have practical questions about school reopening, tuition fee waivers, exams etc. Be ready to share any accurate up-to-date information you have. Reassure the parent that this information will continue to be shared through regular channels (PTA, radio announcements, SMS messages, etc.).

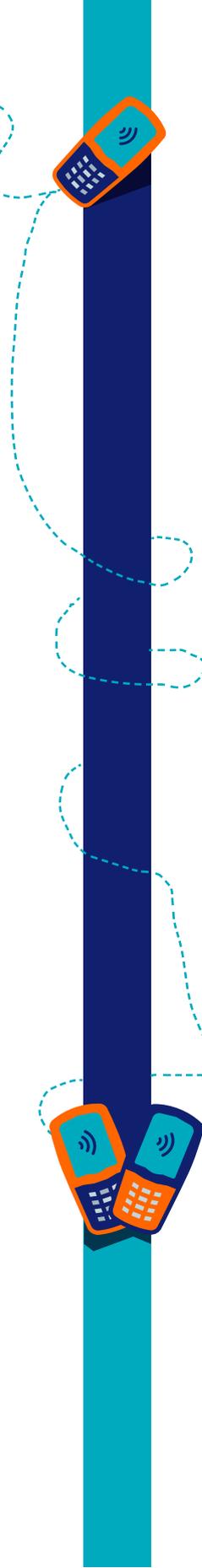


"Do you have any questions?"

- **End the Call**

Let the parent know when you will next call. Remind the parent or caregiver who they can contact if they urgently need health or protection services. Depending upon your circumstances and time available, let the parent know they can send a message to ask for help to support their child's learning if needed.





Problems & Solutions



It cost too much

Teachers should not be expected to pay for communication with their students out of their own pocket. Explore phone credit payments by government, school or NGOs or even as a donation from a phone network.

Teachers do not have parent's phone numbers

Try to establish a telephone tree, where the teacher first contacts just one parent and asks that parent to share the phone number of other parents that they know.



It takes too much time

Teachers may be having to manage their own children or other stressful personal circumstances. If all teachers are unable to make phone calls, text messages could be sent with the same questions and tips shared above. A colleague or other volunteer could be asked to help. Although calling all students in a class is ideal, if time or money is limited, consider prioritizing calls to children who may be most at likely to drop out or facing protection risks while schools are closed.



Teacher Wellbeing

Teachers need support too

Teachers taking on this kind of communication role while schools are shut should also be supported themselves. Establish a buddy system, peer-to-peer support calls, or ensure that senior teachers or other education personnel are in contact with teachers doing outreach calls. Where possible, teachers can stay in regular contact via WhatsApp groups to support each other.

Developed in collaboration:

