



Dear Parents and Guardians,

Solitude brings with it unwanted, as well as welcome, time for reflection and this week brought inspiration from the most unlikely of places. Holocaust Memorial Day found me with the local Rabbi, suitably distanced, observing the annual ritual (usually attended by more than just the two of us!) of a short prayer at the side of 'Anne Frank's Tree' just down the road in Russell Park. It is amazing to think that Anne Frank spent two years of her teenage life hiding from the Nazis in a small annexe in Amsterdam, from which she could just see a patch of sky and a chestnut tree through a window in the attic. Standing at the replica in Russell Park was to be reminded of the inspiration her diaries have brought to so many over the years; and which seem so poignant right now.

We, for the most part, are not beset by her problems (thank goodness); but there is no doubt that this pandemic has been hard on young people. In particular, being shut away from one's friends, or not knowing about exams, or when one might return to some form of normality, or missing favourite activities, or what the longer-term future might hold, has been tough on the mental health of young people in our own school as well as nationally. We are acutely aware of this and I thought I might just take some time to list some of the ways that we have sought to deal with it this time round, continuing, as we do, to learn from our experiences.

1. Cameras in lessons are increasingly on rather than off. This helps boys and staff to connect better; and is easier for staff to see when boys are engaging, or not, and how they are feeling.
2. We continue to place emphasis on good tutoring. Tutor periods remain an essential part of the day, but tutors have also attempted to engage on a one-to-one basis as far as possible with their tutees.
3. We have used, via tutors, quick mental wellbeing surveys for the older boys. These have helped to flag up several issues which we might otherwise have missed and have enabled us to have good conversations with boys and parents alike.
4. With the younger (prep) boys, tutors and heads of year have been phoning around to all parents.
5. We have adapted our lessons to regulate screen time more effectively – so, slightly longer morning breaks; an extra five minutes between lessons; more opportunities to switch off screens to allow for writing on paper or reading away from the screen; movement breaks during double lessons; and as good a balance as we can find between synchronous and asynchronous lessons.
6. We have chosen to stay with the six-day week. In all honesty, some agree and some disagree with this; but we feel that to shift the Saturday morning lessons to Tuesday and Thursday afternoon (or Wednesday in the prep school) would be counterproductive, particularly in winter, when those afternoons are the only times in the week when boys can spend extended time outside in the fresh air during light hours.
7. Similarly, the six-day week allows for screen time to be punctuated more effectively with non-screen time.
8. We have attempted to keep as much sport and extracurricular going as possible – not, of course, in person, but at least by providing as much incentive and opportunity as possible, by checking in on the boys where we can and by maintaining an element of house competition through Strava. You can see from the Upper School and Prep school newsletters just how much is on (a prep link is [here](#)).

9. Timetabled PE classes are now being run on a big screen from the Old Theatre, allowing the boys to feel part of something collective.
10. On-site boarders (there are about 40 here) have been bubbled together for extracurricular activity; notably, this week, badminton in the Sports Hall and snowman-building on the playing fields!
11. There is a library of wellbeing reading “options” gathered in one place [on Firefly](#) by our librarian, to help tutors (and parents) support boys.
12. We are continually trying to understand what feels like the right levels of work to be given to (particularly) the younger boys.
13. Our school counselling service has moved online and continues to work its full hours.
14. We have held more staff training than ever to share good practice in online learning and to stay ahead of the game. This, we hope, leads to more variety in delivery and interest for the boys, as well as greater awareness of staff to the pupil experience.

Further to this last point, and underpinning all of the above, of course, is a commitment to our staff; the airlines always tell us that you must put your own masks on first, before helping your children! It is important that the teachers stay fresh, well and motivated, so that we can provide the best possible support for the boys. So, thank you, as ever, for all the encouragement you have been giving to them – what they are doing is not easy, particularly as many have their own young families to look after, but it is so much better when we are all pulling together as we are. Likewise, we recognise how difficult it is for all of you at home, and we hope to do all we can to make that easier. So, we shall try to keep the mutual appreciation going!

Which brings me back to Holocaust Memorial Day and the reminder of a great quote from the inimitable (late) Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

“Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope.”

There is still, I am afraid, quite a lot of uncertainty ahead of us. We will continue to furnish you with as much information as we have when we have it – and, in particular, Mr Baldock has been in touch regularly with the exam year groups and we will continue to be so. Some boys (and adults) are finding this uncertainty extremely challenging; but we do have every reason to be full of hope. We have a great community, and it continues to shine brightly and to retain its passion. When we do finally emerge, it will be incumbent on all of us to throw ourselves into everything this school has to offer with a renewed vigour – we will have a lot of sport, drama, music and collaborative work to catch up on, and we intend to do just that!

With all best wishes for the week ahead,



James Hodgson
HEAD MASTER