



**SENSIBLE SENCO
TRANSITIONS
& COFFEE MORNINGS**

Transitions and virtual coffee mornings3

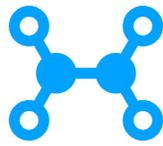
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TRANSITIONS AND VIRTUAL COFFEE MORNINGS

VIRAL?

Well that blew up, didn't it? One minute I casually mention virtual coffee mornings as a good solution to the current problem, the next moment everyone, everywhere is asking for information on how to run a coffee morning!

Let's prefix this by explaining, I presented part of the webinar series around the role of the SEND Leader during the current school closures. My part of the webinar was to look at what SENCOs could be doing, and having come across several questions on social media around worries about transition I threw a comment in there about virtual coffee mornings for parents of SEN pupils and some online work with students. (A couple of my local schools had asked for a suggestion and this was what I had proposed and they ran with.)

THEN... IN PERSON

I'm a great fan of the traditional coffee morning. Ironic, since I don't drink coffee. I've written about it for many other publications before, including my piece in *Boys Don't Try?* by Matt Pinkett and Mark Roberts. (An excellent book, if you haven't read it. <https://amzn.to/2VU6B1W>) Rather than parent's evenings which can be very daunting for some of the parents of our youngsters, or 1:1 meetings where they feel there are too many professionals against them, this is a safety in numbers, safe forum with a group of like-minded individuals facing similar issues. There will always be the nay-sayers who feel that it's not for them, or that it isn't private enough, that's fine they can have their one on one discussion with me, but faced with an empty hall one evening after another I knew I needed to do something to engage my families.

From my majority of parents who never came to anything I then had my handful who made up for it! Primary schools are more likely to know who I mean by this...the parent who needs to speak to you or the TA or the receptionist for 'just a quick one' every day, twice a day! These parents find it very difficult when their child transfers to secondary school and will either camp out in reception whilst everyone walks the long way around or might disappear only to be impossible to engage when we then actually need them!

I held a regular coffee morning, not once a half term, but every Friday morning. It was hard bloody work! Two hours every Friday morning from 0830 to 1045 for a whole year. When people hear this they ask me why.

What I am about to say next, I have rephrased many times and given up trying to being politically correct; you're all adults and know exactly what I'm trying to convey. Whilst some of my parents of children with SEN are "average", most of my parents had learning needs themselves, a poor educational background and experiences, English as an Additional Language or a lack of parenting skills through their own life experiences. In effect, most of the families I was dealing with had special educational needs of their own before I could even begin to tackle those of their child.

Some had been permanently excluded from school at the age of 13 or 14 and never gone back, others had their child at 12 or 13. Some went to special schools in an era where we didn't put them through academic systems and others arrived in the country with no English and mothers who taught them that girls stay at home. It was an uphill battle.

It is no wonder that when faced with an invitation to parents evening and the prospect of sitting in front of 11 or 12 teachers to be told how their own child was doing that some of them just didn't turn up. Whether it was fear of a repeated experience, not wanting to hear what their child might be doing, or just sheer overwhelm, I never got to the root of for each individual, I'm not nosy enough, but I can hazard a guess.

I think there's an important difference between primary and secondary that needs to be noted here. In primary schools they have very few 'adults' to have to deal with, usually 1 or 2 a year. Primary schools can be seen by the parents as their childcare for the day (stereotyping) and whilst the SATs have an element of pressure there isn't the same buzz of academia that shrouds a secondary environment. I've taught across all sectors and primary schools always feel more like an extension of home, where the children are children and a part of the family. Whereas secondary feels like a hospital visit, or trip to a corporate building; we are 'visitors'. Maybe it's the size, or the need to move from department to department, or the abundance of adults. Secondary schools seem to come with a whole range of additional rules from stricter enforcement of uniform to an expected 'maturity'. In a nutshell, primary schools are not as scary to the parents (and children) as secondary schools can be!

However, look outside the secondary school gate at the end of the day and they clustered together in the safety of a huddle, chatting. The ones that had been in to school to see me, perhaps when something had happened, would often reference the parent of another child.

And when partners couldn't attend, family friends often came with them...who just happened to be another parent.

So, my coffee mornings were born. A space for them to get together, in a supervised huddle if you will, and talk about their child, if they wanted to.

My coffee mornings had a structure. 10 minutes to come in and settle and grab a drink. About an hour of me prattling on about something, I had a different theme each week, some of which are listed below. Followed by time for another drink and a delivery of bacon or sausage rolls from the cafe across the road whilst they were able to grab me or my colleague for a more private chat if necessary.

I didn't do it alone. I'm not that talented! This was because my parents were needy (in the nicest sense). For the first few weeks I could guarantee that I'd be collared at the end of every session by the same parent, with the same questions and the others hovered patiently, or not. My colleague would chat to them and after a few weeks one of the other parents stepped in to make sure that my neediest parent had her to talk to immediately after, giving me space to talk to everyone else. They were a really close knit group and they looked after each other.

Whilst most were parents of children in years 7-9, I also had parents attending whose children were due to join us in the following couple of years. And a few whose children had left the school but they liked my sessions on different themes so were using them to support their own studies into becoming TAs.

Why did I do it weekly? Because that is what they wanted and needed. They needed that routine of knowing they had their SENCO time weekly. Bearing in mind some of my parents were barely literate, they functioned much better with routine than trying to plan for a parent's evening that comes around on random dates throughout the year.

Now, I was lucky. I had the time (well, I made the time) to be able to do it. I have no doubt that if I hadn't arranged a regular slot by the Christmas break I would have been spending far more time in meetings trying to resolve issues!

I could go on...but I'll save it for another post and move onto virtual coffee mornings instead.

(Themes of my coffee mornings: All the Dys's, The Melting Teenage Brain, How to claim benefits (yes, seriously, I had a support group come in and provide advice), SENDIASS (or Parent Partnership as it was), How to create an email account and use the internet safely, an

introduction to secondary school maths methods, extra sessions to support with options, sessions from our EP/S</ASD team/behaviour support...and more)

NOW - VIRTUALLY

COFFEE OR WINE...OR IS IT ORANGE JUICE?

I made a video about the transitions and gave some ideas of how that could happen during this rather unusual period, that said most of the ideas could be adapted for any normal transitional period. I make no apologies for the fact I concentrate on primary to secondary transition. Whilst I've taught the little-ones it is over 20 years since I've been involved in their transition into school and I'm not going to tread on the toes of those more experienced than I! That said, we are all professionals and I'm pretty sure we can adapt an idea from one context to another.

Now, I'm not proposing a weekly virtual get together with the families who may have SEN pupils transitioning between schools, although if that's what works for you and your families - go for it!

What I'm suggesting is a virtual get together with the primary school SENCO, the secondary school SENCO, the parents of SEN pupils, and perhaps the Y6 teacher and year 7 head of year/transition coordinator. The primary school is best placed to know which parents would benefit most. Some won't want other parents to be aware their child has needs, and it will need to be handled sensitively, but as it is an opt in service, if they don't want to attend they don't have to.

The primary school is also more likely to have the contact details to be able to set this up... and I am painfully aware that some secondary schools deal with 40 or more primary feeders. Where you are only gathering one or two children from those then it's a great opportunity for them to get to know each other through mixed groups (children and parents).

OK, so I think there are two aspects to the virtual transition. That which is to reassure the parents and let them ask the questions they need. Whether you do this during the day (coffee) or the evening (wine) to accommodate the fact that some parents may not be able to take time off from work - is entirely your decision. You could put on a couple of sessions and let them choose?

Personally, if I was running it, I'd probably order a bulk load of teabags, coffee sachets, hot chocolates and mini packs of wrapped biscuits and send the invite out in the post as well as

online...but that's me! (When I get downtime, I like to do a bit of crafting.). I don't think I'd get away with mini bottles Pinot Grigio though...

The second aspect is that for the children involved (orange juice). There is a real opportunity here for the SENCO to do some virtual work with small groups. Where primary classes are happening virtually then they may be able to sit in on them, or even invite some of the transferring students to participate in lessons with some of the key stage 3 staff.

I have to admit I'm frustrated by the blanket policies that say we cannot use conferencing facilities to work with children, especially when we are talking about professionals working with groups not individuals and there is the opportunity for other adults to observe. If you don't want to use them, that's your choice. I reluctantly have my camera on when I'm using them at home. I don't want anyone to see the mess that is my lounge, the fact the 3-year old is probably watching garbage on the TV, or that my hair is looking a little greyer at the roots than it should do! But when I need to have it on I will do. If you don't want to use virtual conferencing to set up your transition work with families then you can explore options such as telephone calls, pre recorded videos, letters and emails - but they don't really have the same engagement or address the human requirement of needing to 'meet' and interact with others. At the end of the day, it's your choice.

FUTURE - OPPORTUNITY?

What have you learned from the few weeks of remote working that you could take into the future? I've posed the question to a few individuals now and had some interesting responses.

Those schools I was working with, who had tried the remote coffee mornings are going to see if they can get something in place for the future. Whether it's a 1:1 update just before the children return to ensure their exact situation is known, or perhaps a check in after a couple of weeks, or maybe a half termly parent voice opportunity.

Just as virtual teaching will never completely replace traditional schooling, we need the social contact and interaction...virtual coffee mornings won't replace every meeting we need to hold; but there is food for thought (or should that be cheese, to go with the wine?)