THE BACKPACK TOOL

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

‘The Backpack’ is a strengths-based reflective tool designed to support conversations with children and young people who may be finding school attendance, relationships, or life in general a bit difficult. Inspired by the idea that we all carry different things with us (some helpful, some heavy), this visual resource invites young people to explore their experiences in a safe, creative, and collaborative way.

SECTIONS OF THE TOOL:

What I Carry

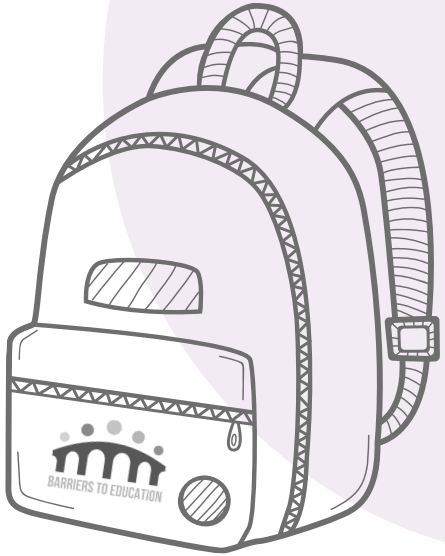
- Strengths, positive relationships, interests, coping tools - anything that helps the young person manage. Aims to help young people identify their strengths, supports, and personal resources.

What’s Heavy

- Worries, challenges, stressors - anything that feels hard or overwhelming. Aims to give them space to name the challenges or "heavy things" they’re carrying.

What I Need

- Hopes, wishes, and ideas for support - what could help lighten the load or make things feel more manageable. Aims to encourage problem-solving and planning, by identifying what they might need to move forward or feel better supported.



“Sometimes it helps to think about life like a backpack we carry. Some things help us along the way, and some things feel heavy. Let’s look inside your backpack together and see what’s in there.”

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HOW TO USE:

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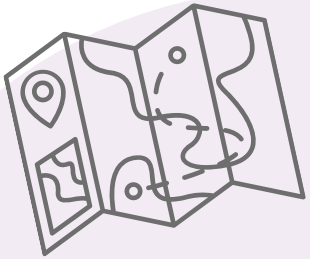
- It can be helpful to do the activity with the young person in a quiet, low-pressure environment. Give them time to reflect and choose how they want to share (writing, drawing, talking, etc.).
- Be curious but not intrusive. This is their story - you're there to listen, support, and make sense of things together.
- You can use the prompts under each section to guide conversation if needed.
- You could use visual aids, such as stickers, drawings, or colours, if the young person would find those useful.
- It can be helpful to normalise struggles and acknowledge everyone's backpack is different.
- You can revisit the backpack over time, as it can change as the young person's situation and strengths evolve.



What I Carry (Strengths / Protective Factors / Supportive things)

These are the things the young person already has in their backpack, things that help them keep going or make them feel stronger, safer, or happier.

- What are you proud of about yourself?
- Who helps you feel safe or understood?
- What helps you feel calm or happy?
- Are there times that going to school (or being around others) feels okay? What's different then?
- What helps you feel calm or better when things are tough?
- What do you enjoy doing (in or out of school)?
- What has helped you manage hard times before?
- Are there any routines, objects, or pets that help you?

You can describe this as the "useful stuff" they already have packed e.g. water bottle, torch, map = support, coping tools, trusted people, etc.

What's Heavy (Worries / Barriers / Difficult Feelings)

These are the heavy things in the backpack - stuff that makes things feel hard, tiring, or overwhelming.

- Are there things or people that make you feel worried or upset?
- What makes you feel tired or drained?
- Is there something that gets in the way of doing things you'd like to do?
- Is there anything that makes you feel like you want to stay away from school?
- What feels heavy or hard to carry right now?
- Are there things that make going to school difficult?
- Is anything worrying you at home or in friendships?
- Are there parts of your day that you really don't like?
- Do you feel misunderstood anywhere?

Here, it could be helpful to say "You can name things that feel like big rocks in your bag, things that make it harder to walk or keep going."

What I Need (Hopes / Wishes / Support Needed)

These are the things they wish they had in their backpack - extra tools, support, or changes that would help them feel more able to cope, attend, or enjoy learning/life.

- What do you wish was different about school?
- Is there something that would help make things easier or less stressful?
- Are there people you wish understood you better? How?
- If things were better, what would that look like?
- What would make your day easier?
- Are there things you'd like to learn or get better at?
- Is there anything you'd like to try that might help?

This is about asking: What could go in the bag to help you on your journey? Maybe a better pair of shoes (coping tools), a friend to walk with (support), or a map (clear plan/goal).

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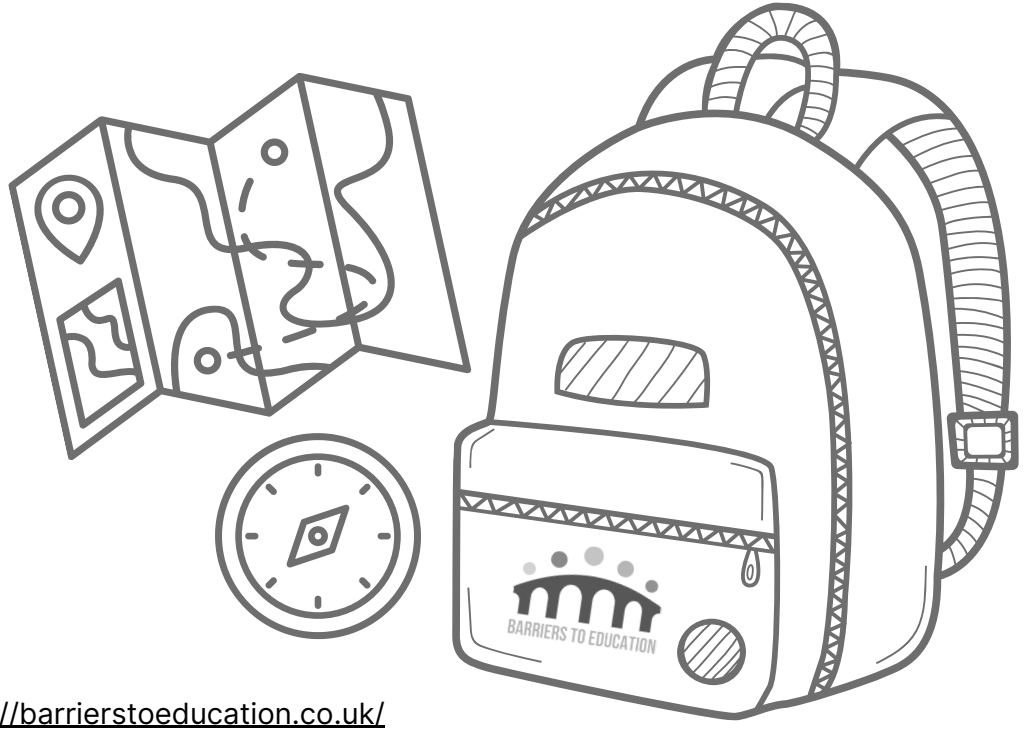
MY BACKPACK

What I Carry:

What's Heavy:

What I Need:



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