

MANAGING THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL TRANSITION

Change is hard for everyone, but can be especially challenging for children. While there are back-to-school jitters every year, the transition may be more stressful this year with all the uncertainties of the pandemic. Practical and emotional preparations can help smooth the way.

Practical preparations

Talk about what to expect. What routines will be brand new? What's not changing? Walk them through what will be different (*see examples on right*). It's okay to tell them you don't have all the answers right now, but share your confidence that your family will be able to manage whatever comes your way.

Shift gradually into school-mode. 1-2 weeks before school begins, start moving bed and wake times up by about 15 minutes/day until you reach school hours. Re-up on morning routines. Gradually reduce screen time. You might want to reinforce the shift (especially if school is virtual) with an "end of summer" ritual.

Focus on the positives. Help them see what they can look forward to. If they'll be returning to the classroom emphasize that they'll see their friends and teachers again. Remind them of the fun activities they'll be able to resume. If re-upping on virtual learning, point out that teachers have had more time to prepare and this may be a better experience compared to when learning went virtual with little warning. Share a sense of excitement and enthusiasm with your child.

Provide reassurance. Kids are likely to pick up on the controversies and safety concerns related to returning to school. If your child is returning to a classroom, fears may grow, but not be voiced. Talk about how the school is managing cleaning and distancing. Explain that the administrators, teachers, and the school nurse get information from scientists and doctors who help them understand how to help kids stay safe.

Revisit healthy hygiene "rules," including mask wearing proper handwashing, cough etiquette, and keeping hands off their face. Emphasize that even though some things seem like they are going "back to normal," they still need to be careful. Reassure them that their teacher will help them remember what to do.

What might be different at school?

If your child is returning to the classroom, review safety measures that will be put in place. Describe how this might impact their school day. Examples may include:

- › Their teacher, other adults, and possibly students may be wearing masks, gloves, or other protective coverings. Nurses may be wearing full PPE coverings that could be scary for a child.
- › There may be regular (non-invasive) temperature checks required – at home or at school.
- › Students may be grouped into "cohorts" and classes may be smaller. PE and recess may have some restrictions.
- › Desks may be widely spaced or separated by clear barriers. Hallways may have directional arrows. Lockers may no longer be in use.
- › Students may eat lunch at their desks or outdoors in small groups, not in the cafeteria.
- › The teachers, rather than students, may be the ones to change rooms for different periods.
- › The hugs that are a norm in lower grades may be off-limits for now.

American Academy of Pediatrics

Emotional support

Be prepared for resistance. Children may have grown to enjoy aspects of staying at home during the pandemic – spending more time with you, more time for hobbies and games, etc. The end to this lifestyle may draw out a variety of feelings – sadness, anger, confusion. Talk about it and your own feelings, but stay upbeat. You may want to stick with some of the routines that have been meaningful to smooth the transition.

Have realistic expectations. It takes some time for children to fully acclimate to a new schedule, even if some aspects are a return to an earlier routine. Take their age and temperament into account. You may need to provide regular reminders of what they need to do next. Try to be patient if they forget or make a mistake. Gently redirect them towards the plan you put in place.

Help them manage and express their reactions. Know that you might see stress reactions in your children – *box on right*. Depending on their age, they may not always be able to express what they are feeling. Be gently supportive. Remind them that everyone gets a nervous feeling when facing difficult situations. Acknowledge their stressors, but share your confidence that they are strong and will manage the concerns.

Don't overlook "normal" back-to-school worries. If your child is changing school levels or starting in a new school, try to "fill in the blanks" as much as you can. Go to the school for a visit if it's possible. Problem-solve together and work on strategies for how to deal with concerns. Talk about friendships and how they might build them. Remind them of their unique talents, and talk about realistic goals for the school year.

Model the behavior you want to see. Kids look to adults for cues on how they should think, feel, and react to a situation. Keep calm, confident, and positive. Show them how to use deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques to help calm anxiety. Respond to challenges with flexibility, modeling effective problem-solving. This not only helps show them how to cope with change more effectively, but it helps you, too!

Be mindful of your child's personality and behavior patterns. If they have anxious tendencies or existing mental health concerns, you may need to reach out to school personnel ahead of time to discuss your concerns and put a plan in place. If you see changes or reactions to the transition or stress signs that concern you, and they go on for more than a couple of weeks, contact a mental health professional. Your EAP can help.

References

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2020). COVID-19 planning considerations: Guidance for school re-entry. Retrieved from <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). Helping children cope with changes resulting from COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/helping-children-cope-with-changes-resulting-from-covid-19>

Stress signs

Pre-schoolers

Thumb-sucking, sleep disturbances bedwetting, clinging to parents, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal.

Elementary-age

Irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.

Teens

Sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, poor concentration.

National Association of School Psychologists

Remember your EAP is available 24/7/365.

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