

Supporting Mental Health and Wellness During the Return to School

Going back to school after a summer break can be an adjustment, even under normal circumstances. This year brings additional challenges and stress because of COVID-19. It's important to acknowledge that returning to school will look and feel quite different this year, whether it's in-person learning, remote learning or a combination of both. You can help your children to know what to expect, be flexible when things are uncertain, and feel confident about the return to school.

Understanding stress

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone in unique and varied ways. Many families have experienced financial, employment, social and health challenges. Some have experienced significant disruptions and losses. We have also all witnessed inequities, systemic prejudice and the impact of anti-Black racism in our society during this time. For some, this has been very personal and painful. Children and youth are all returning to school with their own COVID-19 story.

The challenges that students have experienced may be associated with feelings of anxiety. This is a natural response. Anxiety can show up in different ways. Your child may tell you that they are feeling fearful or overwhelmed. Or you might notice things like frequent headaches, trouble sleeping, irritability or emotional outbursts. Your child might seem withdrawn, or overly tired or restless. Being watchful for signs of anxiety can help you to provide support early, before the problem worsens.

There are two main ways we can help young people who are experiencing stress:

- help them to find ways to cope with feelings of anxiety
- find ways to help reduce the stress itself

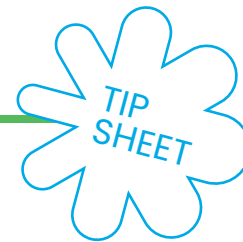
Not all stress can be avoided, but sometimes we can reduce it. Having tools and strategies ready to cope with stress is important, so that we and our children can be less negatively affected.

Ways to support your child with the return to school

Take care of you, so you can be your best to support your children

This has been a very difficult time for everyone. It's especially hard on parents, who have been juggling so many things these past several months. That includes supporting your children's learning at home, often while trying to manage work demands, staying on top of household responsibilities, caring for elderly relatives, etc.





Often, our own self-care comes last. During the return to school period, it might be a good time to try to move that up your priority list a little bit. Try to take time each day to do something just for you that helps you to feel well and happy. You know best what that is. Practicing self-care and positive coping during uncertain and difficult times is a powerful tool to support your children.

To get you started, here are few ideas that parents and caregivers have told us can be helpful at this difficult time:

- Try to take time for the basics – choose foods that give you good energy, establish a sleep routine that leaves you feeling refreshed, and enjoy some fresh air and exercise.
- Pay attention to your own stress levels and notice when you are starting to feel overwhelmed. Use this as a cue to take a break. Take small breaks throughout the day to just “be,” or to engage in something you like to do. Take a few deep, slow breaths when you start to feel anxious or upset. Try just listening to your thoughts, and practice noticing them without judging or denying them. Even five minutes of this sort of quiet reflection can have a positive impact. Be compassionate with yourself. Give yourself a break; you’re doing the best you can.

Get organized

Though there are still many uncertainties, you can take some time to think through what the return to school might be like and what your child will need to feel comfortable and successful.

For example, public health guidelines include directions related to hand-washing and mask use. Practice having your child wear a mask so they know what it feels like. Wear one yourself so that they can get used to seeing adults wearing masks, and learn how to listen and ask questions when they don’t get to see facial expressions in the same way.

Another idea is to set up a workstation for learning if you can, so that different zones of the house are for learning, and others are for playing and being together as a family.

You may want to think about scheduling for the fall to include blocks of time that are unstructured, and allow your children time to just relax and process all that is happening. Limiting demands and having space to be together without tasks, is one way of reducing stress.

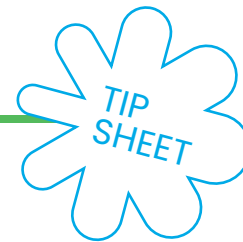
Talk to your child about the return to school

Children may feel nervous about returning to school. It is important to be honest and allow space for them to express their concerns, while avoiding too much focus on physical safety and/or risk.

Check in regularly with your child, as their emotions and feelings will likely change from day to day or week to week. You can normalize any fears as a response to the uncertainty, and can reassure them. Even though things are different, they can manage and there will be adults there to help.

It can be helpful to remind your child of the positives of going back to school, such as seeing their friends again. Perhaps make a list together about what they are excited about. Knowing that not all children will be able to return to in-person learning, you could brainstorm ways that your child can stay connected with friends and teachers while also physically distancing. Remind your child that when school starts they will be supported and safe, regardless of whether this return is full, virtual or a hybrid.





Pay attention to special transitions

The return to school has special meaning and challenges for those who are experiencing other big transitions this coming school year.

For example, we want our youngest learners who are starting kindergarten for the first time this fall to have a wonderful start to their school journey, even if it looks different than it would in other years. All of the usual traditions about gathering up supplies, and leaving for school photos and memories, can be just as exciting as ever.

Similarly, students starting high school, or moving to a new school, may be more nervous than normal because they have missed the usual transition experiences, like visiting the school in advance. Take up any opportunities from your board to do virtual or live start of school visits. For older children, look through the school or board website together, or review information sent home, to learn more. Reassure your child that there will be many caring adults at school to help them to navigate their new school.

Finally, some students will be returning to school for an extra year because their grade 12 was interrupted by the pandemic. If you have a child in this group, you know about the losses they have experienced and the changes to their plans. Your child may need a little extra reassurance and support, as they likely didn't plan on going back to school and may have a range of feelings about this unexpected return.

Start to introduce familiar routines

As summer draws to a close, you may wish to gradually start to move back to a schedule that is closer to the one you use during school time. This may mean going to bed a bit earlier, getting up earlier or eating at more regular times. You can begin to gather school supplies as you normally would.

For younger children, practicing school could be helpful. For example, do the walk to school together, or arrange visits with a small number of friends to get used to being with others.

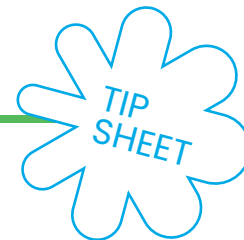
For older children, you can encourage them to identify what their routines could look like, and make a plan to get back to regular routines.

Conversation starters for the return to school

In discussions with your child, consider asking these questions:

- Who are you looking forward to connecting with this school year?
- What is one thing you're hoping to do during the school year?
- What are the strategies that really worked for you during remote learning? Are there things we can build on?
- How are you feeling about this school year?
- What's one thing you feel excited for?
- Is there anything you feel a bit worried about?
- How can I help you to feel comfortable about school?





How can I get more information?

- Check the school board's website for up-to-date information on what to expect and any last-minute changes/ information.
- Follow the news and public health announcement and guidelines.
- Get ideas about self-care from our [personal resiliency tip sheet](#).
- Try some [everyday mental health activities](#).

Visit the [COVID-19 / Return to school section](#) of our website for more information related to mental health and COVID-19.

Visit websites with more great information:

[Children's Mental Health Ontario](#)

[Parents for Children's Mental Health](#)

[Psychology Foundation of Canada](#)

[Anxiety Canada](#)

[Wellness Together Canada](#)

[COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#)

