

Managing a Child's Anxiety About Return to School in the COVID-19 Pandemic

There's a lot parents can do to help reduce anxiety in children and adolescents as they return to school. Please explore the tips below to help ease transition and reassure anxious students before school starts and throughout the school year.

Validate Feelings

It is OK and very normal for children to feel anxious about returning to school. Tell your child this and validate their feelings. And for parents, it's OK and normal to feel anxious about a child returning to in-person instruction and for their own return to the office after working from home. You're doing a great job!

Communicate

Talk to children about what is happening and what they can expect. Keep conversations age-appropriate, being careful not to share unnecessary information.

Reassure Safety

Parents should stay calm and stay positive, and remind children that grown-ups are all working together to keep kids safe as they return to school. Parents can use examples of what the different school staff are all doing on this front. While we can't promise children they won't get sick, we can show them that we are confident in the measures and precautions schools are taking. Parents can also review with their child ways the family has practiced being safe at home and in public, such as wearing masks, washing hands frequently, and maintaining social distance.

Establish Routine and Structure

Parents can remind children of their daily schedule especially since many have experienced school since March 2020 with a different type of schedule. For example, a parent might walk a child through the process: "Mommy will hug and kiss you at drop-off right next to the tall tree by the front doors..."

Promote Flexibility

While routine and structure are important, flexibility is also key. Given the pandemic's fluid nature, it's prudent to have conversations about how conditions, routines and environments may change in the future.

Work on Emotional Identification

Work together with children to help them communicate and understand their feelings. This is called emotional literacy. A tool like a "feelings chart" where different faces illustrate feelings can help children identify what they might be experiencing. Movies like "Inside Out" also do a great job teaching emotional literacy.

Explain and Model Emotion Regulation

Children take cues from their parents about how to respond to situations. Those nerves may be mutual, parents should model their emotions appropriately. Use this as an opportunity to model coping skills. For example, a parent might say, "When Dad is feeling worried, he takes three deep breaths."

Praise

Children respond well to praise. Parents should be sure to call out behaviors they want to reinforce. For example, "I loved how you put on your shoes so quickly when we needed to leave for school."



If children feel anxious at school, they can rely on “pocket” coping skills. These are skills that kids can pull out of their literal or figurative pockets and employ in the moment:

Deep Breathing

Diaphragmatic or belly breathing lowers the heart rate and blood pressure and helps the body relax.

Watch “Mindful Breathing: Diaphragmatic or Belly Breathing” at www.choc.org/Coping to learn from a CHOC psychologist how to do this.

Grounding with Five Senses

This technique helps a child calm down by focusing on their senses. For example, a child can focus on five things they see, four things they hear, three things they feel, two things they smell, and one thing they taste.

Watch “Mindful Grounding” at www.choc.org/Coping to learn from a CHOC psychologist how to do this.

Use Numbers

To bring themselves into the present moment, a younger child can try counting backward from 100 or an older child might count backward by seven from 100. They can try naming as many animals as they can in one minute or naming all the colors they see in the room.

Sensory Tools

Small sensory tools like a stress ball or fidget tool can help. Parents should work with teachers to see what would be appropriate to make available for their child.

Muscle Relaxation

Ask a child to pretend they are squeezing a lemon in their hand. They should squeeze it hard like they are getting all the juice out, noting the tightness and pressure. Then have them “drop” their lemon and note how relaxed they feel. They can try it again with their other hand.

In our video “Progressive Muscle Relaxation for Younger Kids” at www.choc.org/Coping, a CHOC psychologist illustrates progressive muscle relaxation.

Use Positive Mantras or Self-Affirmation

Kind, reassuring words can help a lot. A child and parent may work together to come up with some phrases a child can say to themselves when they feel anxious.

Employ Technology

If a child has a smart phone, tablet or other device, a parent can help a child create a folder of cute, funny, silly or comforting images or quotes that they may look at when they are feeling anxious. Be sure to be mindful of any rules about using smart phones in a child’s classroom.

RESOURCES

Handout adapted from original article: [Managing a child's anxiety about going to school in a pandemic \(choc.org\)](http://www.choc.org)

Additional CHOC blog articles on this and related topics: www.health.choc.org

Free coping and stress relief videos developed by our CHOC mental health professionals: www.choc.org/Coping or www.choc.org/StressRelief

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