

Returning to School: Not A Simple Move by Dr. Natalie Geary

Our daily life has been profoundly altered by the Coronavirus pandemic. Our children are caught in the uncertainty and change. For many, the return to school has brought a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Consider these tips to help your children navigate some of the complicated emotions they may feel as they return to the classroom.

How can I help my child feel less anxious about returning to the classroom:

The return to school, especially a new school can be stressful, each year, let alone during a global pandemic. Try to have an open conversation about how understandable it is to feel anxious. They may feel nervous or reluctant to return to school, especially after learning at home since last Spring. Review the expected changes: the need to wear masks at all times, the need to stay distanced from their peers. Many children will also feel scared about their health and safety: Reassure them about the safety measures their school has put in place to help keep students and teachers healthy. Remind them that washing their hands with soap is important to keep them and their friends safe. Remind children how fun it will be to see their friends and teachers.

Wearing a mask makes my child feel more nervous. What should I say to her?

Empathize with your child: wearing a mask can be uncomfortable, especially when running around and playing. Wearing a mask can feel scary, because it reminds them that Coronavirus is still a threat. Children may also get upset or frustrated by the fit of the mask, or keeping track of their mask. Be sure to offer them several options of a safe mask, and consider having them put it on a lanyard around their neck. Remind your child that the teachers and school employees are working hard to help keep your family safe. Discuss how important it is to follow the safety precautions to take care of more vulnerable members of our community.

How can I encourage my child to follow precautions (such as frequent handwashing, physical distancing, etc.) at school without alarming her?

Probably the best way to keep children safe from COVID-19 and other diseases is to encourage regular handwashing. It should not be a scary conversation. Explain that hand washing helps by preventing the virus from spreading from one person to another, because if your hands are dirty, the dirt spreads from one person to another. In this case the “dirt” is just hard to see. Avoid use of the word “germs” - it connotes magical thinking, especially in the minds of younger students.

My child is not part of the same group as his close friends returning to school and is feeling even more isolated. How can he feel more connected to the classroom and his friends?

Every school that is reopening has a slightly different plan. Many offer the option to remain remote. Many are staggering classes. Each child will have a lot of adjusting to do, and that may include being separated from his best friends. Uncertainty brings with it a lot of anxiety: try to learn who will be in your child's "pod" or classroom group, and reach out to those families to increase cohesion. Allow your child more time than usual to engage in phone calls with friends, where appropriate. For those with access to the Internet, safe and monitored use of online games, social media and video chat programmes can provide great opportunities for children to connect. Encourage your children to use their voices online to share their views and support those in need during this crisis.

How can I best ask my child how she is coping?

It is always best to ask a child how she is feeling, not assume by her behavior. Do not label her emotions, simply ask if she is feeling good today. Ask how she slept, and ask about her friends. But ask gently, not intrusively. It's important to be calm and neutral. Reassure them that their emotions may change regularly and that's okay. This helps children feel safe to express difficult feelings such as anger, fear or sadness. Remember that children take emotional cues from the key adults in their lives – including parents and teachers – so it is important that adults manage their own emotions well and remain calm, listen to children's concerns, speak kindly and reassure them.

What I should look out for as my child starts back at school?

In addition to checking in on your child's physical health and learning when she goes back to school, try to keep an eye out for signs of stress. It's important to demonstrate that it's normal and OK to feel overwhelmed at times. There are concerns that stigmatization and bullying may increase when children return to school, due to misinformation around COVID-19. Remind your child that the virus has nothing to do with what someone looks like, where they are from or what language they speak. Remind your children that everyone deserves to be safe at school and online. Bullying is never acceptable, and if it occurs, the incident should be shared with a trusted adult immediately. Be alert if you notice your child becoming withdrawn or upset, or using their device more or less than usual, it could be a sign that they are being bullied online.