



Returning to School after Lockdown – Guidance for Parents

As we approach a time where schools may return to teaching following the covid-19 pandemic, many children and young people may find the transition back into school a stressful and unsettling time. Especially if they have individual challenges, family stress or are transitioning to a new school.

Here are some ideas about how to prepare and encourage your child to do this reintegration with confidence.

Preparation

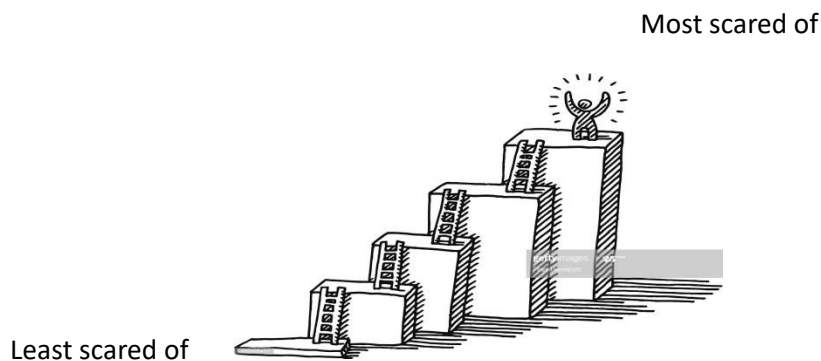
Sharing concerns and feelings

Talking to your child about how they are feeling going back to school is important. Allow them to share their feelings and accept some fear is normal. If they find it hard to talk, perhaps encourage them to draw or show you their feelings through toys. Ask what they have enjoyed about lockdown but what they have missed about school. Try to expand on areas such as how they feel about learning, friendships, teachers and all the recent changes.

Some of these questions may help –

- What are you most looking forward to?
- Who makes you feel safe at school?
- Do you have any worries about the school work/learning? Who can help?
- Are there any friends you would like to have contact with before going back?
- What would make things feel less stressful? How can I help?

To rate their feelings, use a ladder like this:



For younger/primary children, you may find stories helpful such as –

Invisible String by Patrice Karst

Everyone Worries by John Burgerman

Don't Worry, Be Happy – A guide to overcoming anxiety by Poppy O'Neill

Huge Bag of Worries – Virginia Ironside

What to do when you worry too much? A kid's guide to anxiety – Dawn Huebner

Manage your own feelings

Recognise your own concerns about them returning to school and talk to another adult about these, not your child. You may feel worried about the following – new measures, teachers, how lockdown and the pandemic has impacted your child, disruption of their learning, your child's friendships or their health and safety at school. Talk to school, other adults/parents or access support to help manage your worries. If your worries feel unmanageable to you, your child will pick up on this and it will make them feel it's not safe to go back to school.

Connection

Encourage children to connect with teachers and friends before returning to school. It is helpful if children have individual contact with their teachers, both old and new in order to re-establish attachments and start to build new relationships. The child's biggest concern may be re-establishing friendships. Try to increase communication with peers before returning and if needed make a plan to walk in with others or meet a friend on the first day back if possible, remember social distancing will still apply.

As a parent/carer, contact your school/teacher to share any anxieties your child may have about returning and also to update them on how successful or unsuccessful home schooling has been. It is important the teacher gets a general sense of your child's experience. It is also vital they know of any significant family events during lockdown such as illness, loss or changes.

Ask your school what changes will be in place due to social distancing and timetable adjustments. It is important your child has as much knowledge as possible to alleviate anxieties and give them as much control as possible about what to expect.

Hopes

List your child's hopes about returning to school, including things they are looking forward to and things they hope to do again once they return.



You may need to explain that school will be very different if social distancing is in place and you can use this time to build resilience to possible changes.

The Return

Globally this has been a time of unease and a huge loss of fundamental security. However, some children may have experienced some positives during lockdown due to fewer demands, less school and friendship pressure, a quieter schedule, more time with family and possibly more contact with distant family via technology. Some young people may have been around intense family stress and pressure or experienced less attention than usual due to parents having to balance work and childcare demands. It is important therefore to accept that every child will have had a different experience and will need a different approach to supporting them back into school. Don't lose sight of your knowledge as a parent/carer and knowing what strategies help your child in times of stress.

Ask yourself –

- What helps them cope – what strategies do they have?
- What behaviours might people see if my child is struggling? What soothes them?
- What has someone done in the past to help them feel less anxious? Who at school do they feel safe with?
- What works well in school?
- What support networks have you and your child got?

Routine

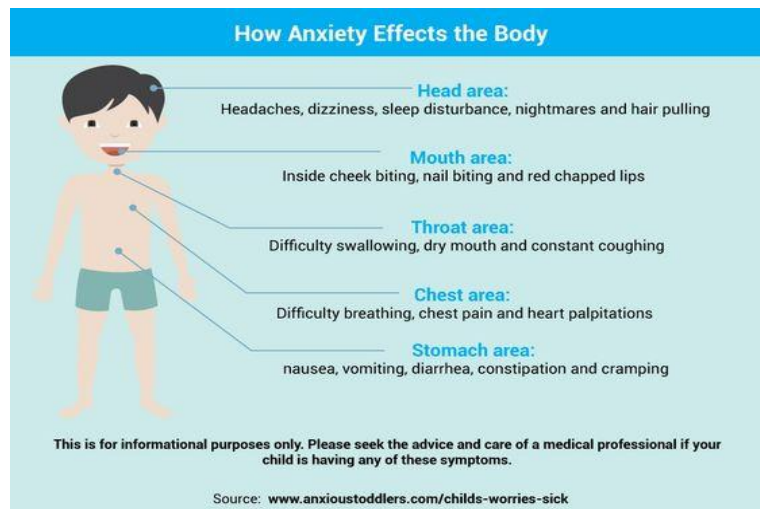
Although things are still uncertain, some predictability may be useful during transition. Re-establish routines by listing things to do before, during and after school, this will include sleep routines as they may have altered during lockdown. Ask school to give some idea about what the school day might look like before they go.

Anxiety

Your child may be experiencing raised anxieties about returning and/or is refusing to go back.

Anxiety is a bodily warning signal in response to a real or perceived threat. This is a normal response and can be helpful in small amounts as it can increase concentration and performance. However, if anxiety is high and constant, it can result in an inability to cope with stress both physically and

emotionally which can manifest in symptoms such as tummy aches, headaches, lack of sleep, tearful/depression, feeling overwhelmed or aggressive.



Some helpful ways to support your child with anxiety are;

- Regulate the emotion by encouraging deep breathing to slow the body and distract negative thoughts
- Share and name feelings/thoughts and open communication and provide information about emotion
- List negative thoughts and come up with alternative more resilient ones, for example;

I can't do it	➡	I can't do it yet, I can do hard things
It is too scary	➡	I am O.K. people can help me...one step at a time
I am useless at	➡	I am not expected to know everything, I can ask for help

- Externalise 'anxiety' as something separate to them, you can ask questions about anxiety like this;
 - What would you call it?
 - What does it say to you?
 - How does it get in the way?
 - Who is in charge, you or that?
 - Who and what are its enemies?
- Exercise and physical activity helps reduce anxiety – walking, running, yoga etc.

School Refusal

A feeling of increased anxiety may also cause avoidance and this may have a direct influence on how your child feels about going to school. If your child is tearful, angry, distracted, avoidant, refusing, panicked or distressed in the mornings or when thinking about school, you may need to make a plan with school about how to support your child. A joint approach with school will help to build coping strategies for your child, improve communication and from this make a plan to gradually increase their confidence to return to school.

Separation

Some children may experience separation anxiety from the parent/carer after this extended time together. They are leaving a familiar environment and back to a less predictable and more socially challenging one. Encourage links with safe school staff and friends before returning and if needed, help your child to make plans to meet them on their return as a safe base.

Transitional object – allow them to take something from home in their pocket or school bag in which they can be reminded of the safety net that is home and family, and that it will still be there on their return. Younger children may benefit from something visual or sensory like perfume and older children might appreciate messages of encouragement hidden in their belongings.

Separation anxiety will ease once they have become adjusted to the school environment again and should pass relatively quickly if they were settled in school before lockdown occurred.

Practicalities

As a family, returning to school may not mean returning to ‘normal life’ as you knew it. You may need to make practical changes to childcare, working patterns and routine if schools are on a phased return. It is helpful to consider this before with your employer and any other adult involved to plan for any hurdles you may face.

You don't have to be a therapist to support your child through this transition. *Your* knowledge of *your* child and love, are the most important factors in helping them to feel at ease with the situation. Many things will affect how they feel about the transition but if they feel they are able to share and express their feelings and together you tolerate, work through them in a supportive, loving relationship this should reduce the distress it causes.



