Back to School After the Pandemic

Adapted from articles by Ellen Eldridge, and Phyllis L. Fagell

Many kids may be extra anxious about returning to school in-person this year. With the past year-and-a-half having been so chaotic for many students, they may worry that they've fallen behind and won't be able to catch up. Students will have to adjust everything from socializing to schedules. Some kids get anxious over the start of school with every new year. This year, however, many more may be feeling quite stressed about going back, especially kids who struggle with learning, or with making friends, or already suffer with anxiety in general.

A significant number of returning students haven't done full-time, in-person school for many months. They will need to re-adjust to learning in a traditional classroom. They may have to get used to new rules about social distancing, or wearing masks. They will also have to interact more with peers and adults than they have for quite some time.

There are also kids who will be starting the new school year with difficulties they may not have had before the pandemic. Perhaps they lost a family member to Covid-19, or a parent lost their job and the family's financial situation changed drastically. Maybe many facets of their lives were affected by the pandemic, and the family is still overwhelmed. Some families were already facing challenges before the pandemic, and those difficulties were exacerbated even further by the events of the past 18 months.

Whatever a child's unique situation might be, students may need extra support as they head back to school this year. There are things families and educators can do to ease the transition:

1.) Strike a balance between predictability and novelty. Children crave consistency after a trauma, but many came to dread the monotonous pattern of their days stuck at home, and look forward to more time with peers and a variety of activities in their upcoming school year. Play and connection help activate the social-engagement system, and can be very healing.

2.) Be understanding when addressing misbehavior. After remote learning, kids are used to using the bathroom any time they want, and turning off their cameras and muting themselves on occasion to get a break. The transition back to more direct structure may be difficult for some, and patience will go a long way.

3.) Rebuild students' sense of competency. Many students had a hard time with online learning, and their academic self-concept has taken a hit. Others feel awkward and have lost their social footing. To address insecurity, be flexible and help students learn to manage their time wisely. Trust that kids want to do well and that you may not know everything about their back story.

4.) Families and Educators should work together to create a sense of safety. Direct communication between home and school will help provide kids with a feeling that "the important adults in my life are working together to help me feel secure." Collaborate with each other to meet each child's unique needs in order to increase the likelihood of a positive "Back to School" experience this Fall.