

Reducing Children's Anxiety with a Return to In-Person Learning

Healthy Minds

Over the next few weeks, many students will be returning to in-person learning for the first time in nearly a year. While many students and families have long waited and are excited for this day to come, it does not necessarily come without anxiety. In many ways, this return will be like the start of a new school year when it is natural for all children to have some butterflies about all the new experiences that lie ahead. But as we know, this return will be anything but typical with new procedures in place to ensure student safety during the COVID pandemic. We should expect that children will be experiencing increased anxiety about going back into the classroom. Here are some ideas for parents to help ease their children's anxiety with this transition.

Stay Informed

Having a solid understanding of the plans for in-school learning at your school will help you to better address any of your children's concerns. Read e-mails and participate in any virtual meetings as a means to share information about return to school plans.

Maintain Open Communication

Consistently check-in with your children and keep open lines of communication to gauge how they are feeling. Make sure your children know that you are available to talk if they have concerns about the return to school...or about any concerns that arise during a school day.

Give your children space to express themselves and validate their feelings. Taking the time to listen allows parents to more clearly understand what their children are feeling most anxious about. It then provides an opportunity to offer acknowledgement of their concerns and a chance to direct children towards thinking of something they can do about it.

Let your children know that it is normal to feel anxious in new situations. Remind them of times they have started something new and overcome fears in the past. Emphasize that learning to adapt to changes leads to a growth mindset, greater confidence, and resiliency.

Avoid talking about your concerns in front of your children as they will pick up on your anxiety and likely incorporate your worries into their own thoughts about school.

Let your children know you care. If your children are anxious about school, consider sending personal notes in their lunch box or book bag to let them know you are thinking about them.

Review Safety Procedures

You cannot guarantee that your children will not get ill, but you can express confidence that schools have done months of planning to minimize risk and keep everyone safe. Assure your children that all reasonable safety precautions are being taken and they can do their part by following safety protocols.

Review the safety protocols that you know are in place at their school.

Ask your children what they have heard, or what they know about the return back to school. This will allow you to dispel any myths or rumors that they may have heard from friends or through social media.

Stick to the facts in a reassuring manner.

Demonstrate an Optimistic Outlook

Set the tone. Children absorb their parent's anxiety, so demonstrate optimism and confidence for your children.

Model a growth mindset by recognizing that we all have the capacity to change, grow, and develop. When children see growth mindsets in action around them, they are much more likely to internalize and apply this way of thinking for themselves.

Reframing events and circumstances into a more favorable view goes a long way in promoting a more hopeful outlook. It is not always easy to do, but it is mentally healthier for us to look at all we have learned and overcome from the past year, rather than focus on all that we may have lost.

Let your children know that it is natural to be a little nervous anytime we start something new, but that they will be fine once they become familiar with their classmates, teachers, and school routines.

Model Positive Coping and Problem-Solving Skills

Children naturally learn through observing others in their environment. Demonstrate coping and problem-solving behavior whenever you can. While children learn through observing actions, they need to observe the language in use too. A great way to do this is to verbalize the steps you are taking to handle a problem of your own...and when a problem is still not easily fixed, let them see how you respond to that disappointment in a healthy way.

If the first few days upon returning to school are a little challenging, try not to over react. Young children in particular may experience separation anxiety or shyness initially, but teachers are trained to help them adjust. Reassure your children that you love them, will think of them during the day, and will be back. Remain calm and positive.

Reinforce Children's Ability to Cope

Talk with your children about ways to manage a difficult situation on their own. Work through examples of challenges faced during prior school years and how your children met them.

When your child gets stuck using the same strategy that is not working, encourage them to ask themselves, "What is a different way I could try this? How else could this be done?"

Encourage your children to tell you, a teacher, or another trusted adult at school if a problem persists. Asking for help is another way of growing and adding new ideas to one's personal toolbox.

Remain Flexible

There is one thing that is certain...not everything is going to go as planned. Prepare your children for this. Let them know that things may change, but you will be there to provide them information as you have it and support along the way.

Establish Your New Routine

Establishing a predictable, consistent routine is a way to feel some certainty during uncertain times. It can make us feel more secure and in control. Start small with a daily "to do" list or expand upon what you may have already put into place. Just do your best to be consistent.

Reestablish Connections

Find ways to get your children reacquainted with peers they may not have interacted with in some time.

Arrange a time for your children to get together with some of their classmates, virtually or safely in person, before in-person learning starts to help them re-establish positive social relationships.

Make Self-Care a Priority

To be available and ready to support their children, parents need to take time to care for themselves. Find activities that promote positive stress management.

Although it is normal and expected that your children will be experiencing a greater amount of anxiety during this time of transition, it can be helpful to reassure them that anxiety is an adaptive measure to help protect ourselves against perceived danger. It helps us make good decisions and remember to do things such as washing our hands, wearing a mask, and being conscious of maintaining social distance to help keep all of us healthy.