

How to Support a Mentally Healthy Back to School for Your Child

This past year has been anything but usual! We know that while many students and families are eager to return to a “more normal” school experience, some will be worried about starting back, and what this new school year will look like for them. Remember as parents/caregivers you know your child best!

Understanding stress

The last year has affected everyone in unique and varied ways. Many families have experienced financial, employment, social and health challenges. Some have experienced significant disruptions and losses. We have also all witnessed inequities, systemic prejudice and the impact of racism in our society during this time. Even as society returns to more normal social interactions with fewer restrictions, we are aware that different children will be approaching the new school year with many different feelings. Some children maybe excited, others are perhaps nervous and some children are still quite worried and anxious. All of these feelings and emotions are natural responses to what our children have experienced over the past 1½ years.

Anxiety can show up in different ways. Your child may tell you that they are feeling fearful or overwhelmed. Or you might notice things like frequent headaches, trouble sleeping, irritability or emotional outbursts. Your child might seem withdrawn, or overly tired or restless. Being watchful for signs of anxiety can help you to provide support early, before the problem worsens.

There are two main ways we can help young people who are experiencing stress:

- help them to find ways to cope with feelings of anxiety
- find ways to help reduce the stress itself

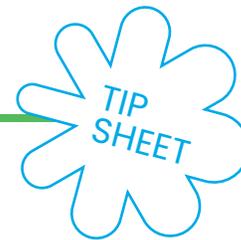
Not all stress can be avoided, but sometimes we can reduce it. Having tools and strategies ready to cope with stress is important, so that we and our children can be less negatively affected.

Ways to support your child as they head back to school

Take care of you, so you can be your best to support your children

This has been a very difficult time for everyone. It’s especially hard on parents and families who have been managing so many things these past several months. That includes supporting your children’s learning at home, often while trying to manage work demands, staying on top of household responsibilities, caring for elderly relatives, etc.





Try to take time each day to do something just for you that helps you to feel well and happy. You know best what that is. Taking care of your own health and well-being during uncertain and difficult times is a powerful tool to support your children.

To get you started, here are few ideas that parents and caregivers have told us can be helpful:

- Try to take time for the basics – choose foods that give you good energy, establish a sleep routine that leaves you feeling refreshed, and enjoy some fresh air and exercise.
- Pay attention to your own stress levels and notice when you are starting to feel overwhelmed. Use this as a cue to take a break. Take small breaks throughout the day to just “be,” or to engage in something you like to do.
- Take a few deep, slow breaths when you start to feel anxious or upset.
- Try just listening to your thoughts, and practice noticing them without judging or denying them. Even five minutes of this sort of quiet reflection can have a positive impact.
- Be compassionate with yourself. Give yourself a break; you’re doing the best you can.

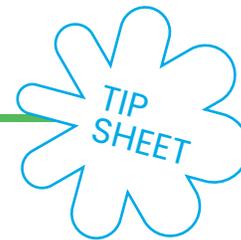
Talk to your child about the return to school

Take some time to think through what the return to school might look like for your child and talk to your child about what to expect. Children may feel nervous about returning to school for any number of reasons. It is important to allow space for them to express their concerns, and also to help them to remember the parts of school that they enjoy and are looking forward to the most.

Check in regularly with your child, as their emotions and feelings will likely change from day to day or week to week. You can normalize any fears as a response to the uncertainty, and can reassure them. Even though things are different, they can manage and there will be adults there to help.

It can be helpful to remind your child of the positives of going back to school, such as seeing their friends again. Perhaps make a list together about what they are excited about. Remind your child that when school starts they will be supported and safe, regardless of whether this return is full, virtual or a hybrid.





Pay attention to special transitions

The return to school has special meaning and challenges for those who are experiencing other big transitions this coming school year.

For example, our youngest learners who started kindergarten last year, will be having a different experience this year as they return to in person learning. Talk with them about what might be different, such as more opportunities to play with friends and different chances to ask questions about their learning.

Similarly, students starting high school, or moving to a new school, may be more nervous than normal because they have missed the usual transition experiences, like visiting the school in advance. Take up any opportunities from your board to do virtual or live start of school visits. For older children, look through the school or board website together, or review information sent home, to learn more. Reassure your child that there will be many caring adults at school to help them to navigate their new school.

Finally, some students will be returning to school for an extra year because their grade 12 was interrupted by the pandemic. If you have a child in this group, you know about the losses they have experienced and the changes to their plans. Your child may need a little extra reassurance and support, as they likely didn't plan on going back to school and may have a range of feelings about this unexpected return.

Start to introduce familiar routines

As summer draws to a close, you may wish to gradually start to move back to a schedule that is closer to the one you use during school time. This may mean going to bed a bit earlier, getting up earlier or eating at more regular times. You can begin to gather school supplies as you normally would.

For younger children, practicing school could be helpful. For example, do the walk to school together, or arrange visits with a small number of friends to get used to being with others.

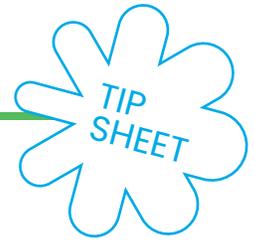
For older children, you can encourage them to identify what their routines could look like, and make a plan to get back to regular routines.

Conversation starters for the return to school

In discussions with your child, consider asking these questions:

- Who are you looking forward to connecting with this school year?
- What is one thing you're hoping to do during the school year?
- What are the strategies that really worked for you during remote learning? Are there things we can build on?
- How are you feeling about this school year?
- What's one thing you feel excited for?
- Is there anything you feel a bit worried about?
- How can I help you to feel comfortable about school?





How can I get more information?

- Check the school board’s website for up-to-date information on what to expect and any last-minute changes/ information.
- Follow the news and public health announcement and guidelines.
- Get ideas about self-care from our [Take Care of Yourself Tip Sheet](#).
- Try some [everyday mental health activities](#).

Visit the [COVID-19 / Return to school section](#) of our website for more information related to mental health and COVID-19.

Visit websites with more great information:

[Children’s Mental Health Ontario](#)

[Psychology Foundation of Canada](#)

[Anxiety Canada](#)

[Wellness Together Canada](#)

[COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#)

[Kids Help Phone](#)

[Parents For Diversity](#)

