



Supporting Your Child Through Back to School

Through the COVID 19 pandemic, the past year and half has definitely been anything but typical, and this may have changed the way you and your child or youth approach returning to school. It is typical for children and youth to feel excited and worried about beginning a new school year; however, there may be higher than usual levels of stress and worry this year related to health precautions, academic expectations, and seeing friends again. You may notice that your child or youth may have emotional outbursts or difficulty sleeping, or may seem more withdrawn, restless, or irritable than usual. All of these feelings and emotions are natural responses to different experiences over these challenging times.

There are two main ways that parents and caregivers can help:

- **help your child find ways to cope when feeling stressed or anxious; and**
- **help reduce sources of stress when possible.**

Set time aside for your child to talk about returning to school. Check in regularly as their emotions, feelings, and questions will likely change from day to day and week to week. We all have questions about what to expect, and there may be some questions that we cannot answer yet. Be open and honest. *“I may not have all the answers, but I will do my best to help”*. Experiencing sadness, worry, or even anger are natural during these challenging times. **No matter what your child may be feeling, try to normalize their feelings and validate their emotions - let them know it is OKAY to feel this way.**

- **Listen to what they share:** *How are they feeling? What are they excited about, and what are they worried about?*
- **Follow their emotions:** *“What was that like for you?”; “How does that make you feel?”*
- They may also be worried about academic expectations, and they may be grieving many different losses over the past year and half (e.g., loss of time with friends, family celebrations, hobbies, and organized sports, etc.). **Validate feelings and experiences:** *“It makes sense you feel that way” “It has been hard being away from friends.”*
- **Look for their strengths:** *“You are kind.”; “You are brave.”*
- **REASSURE and instill hope:** *“I am here for you.”; “You got this!”; “You have done hard things before, and you can do this too.”*
- **Share some positive things about returning to school and talk about things that they are looking forward to the most.** It is also important to celebrate your child’s and family’s successes and achievements.

It is also important that you as a parent or caregiver take time for self care so you are able to support your child to the best of your ability. The past year and a half has presented us all with additional stress and new challenges.

Here are some ideas for reducing anxiety, building coping strategies, and helping us function at our best:

- **Mindfulness:** When you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, try to focus your attention on what's going on around you in the current moment and focus on one moment at a time. Try to resist the urge to plan for the next day or week or unknown future.
- **Mindful Breathing:** Taking deep, slow breaths (belly breathing) signals our body to release hormones that cue the brain and body to relax by slowing the heart rate and increasing focus. Breathing is a natural stress-reducer, and it can be used anytime - it is portable and always with you!
- **Get moving.** Physical activity helps to relax the muscles and relieve tension in the body. Since the body and mind are so closely linked, when your body feels better so, too, will your mind.
- **Establish a routine:** We all do best when there is some predictability and structure to our day. Work towards re-establishing a routine that is closer to the one you use during a typical school year (e.g., establish sleep routines and morning routines for preparing for school).

For many children and youth, anxious feelings will ease with the return to usual routines combined with other calming strategies they may already be using. However, if you're still feeling worried about your child's well-being, it may be time to reach out for more help. Gathering information about the details of their emotional or behavioural difficulties will be helpful. What is the timing and are these concerning behaviours happening more often? Are they more intense? Are they lasting longer? What strategies have been tried?

Recognizing when children and youth need help is a crucial skill to have as a parent or caregiver. There may be times when it can be overwhelming or frustrating to try to handle difficult behaviours or respond appropriately to emotions. Don't be afraid to find and ask for help—it can be a great benefit to both of you. Talk with the Principal or Guidance Counsellor to find out how to access school mental health services through your school Social Worker.

Additional resources are also available at:

- <https://www.hwdsb.on.ca/secondary/supports/mental-health-and-well-being/>
 - Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868 (free, 24/7)
 - School Mental Health Ontario <https://smho-smsso.ca/parents-and-families/>
 - Anxiety Canada: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/strategies-and-techniques/back-to-school-strategies/>
 - Urgent: COAST 905-972-8338 coasthamilton.ca; CRISIS: Call 911 or visit hospital emergency room
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