

Supporting Children Returning to School After The Lockdown

Uncertainty

This is a very uncertain time and although it would be great if we could make COVID disappear- we can't (not yet anyway). Children, like us adults, must learn to tolerate some uncertainty! This skill can help us to manage anxiety.

Normalising

It is also normal to feel very anxious about the changes. Change makes most people feel a bit strange and worried. Some people find this harder than others though.

Different experiences

It's important to remember that children have had hugely different experiences during lockdown. Some children who experience anxiety normally, may have found a break from going to school, a break from triggers for their anxiety. For them going back to school is going to be very anxiety provoking. There are other children who have had a great time with families and don't want to return to school. And then of course there are many children who have been in family situations with lots of arguing, and possibly violence and neglect who will find getting back to school a refuge. Do not assume that you know how children feel.

Modelling calmness

You may be worrying about sending your child back to school and may be wanting to keep your child at home for longer. All children are to return to school from 8th March, so be aware of how you model your own anxiety when speaking to your child about returning to school. Speak to your child when you feel calm yourself.

Listening and validating

Listen to your child. Hear what their concerns are. Acknowledge their feelings and let them know that you know it's tough for them

Limit news and address misinformation

If they are worried about getting unwell or making someone else unwell, agree to investigate some facts together. For example, you may look together at the facts in the news, but limit the amount viewed and address any misinformation the child has. You may want to look at what happened in previous illnesses in the past and how we got through it as a country.

Limit reassurance

Asking questions is helpful but giving excessive reassurance is not. It's very tempting to give lots of reassurance to your child, as it may relieve anxiety in the short term. In the long term it keeps it going. Instead listen and ask them what they think, and what they think will help.

Focus on possible strategies

Help children to focus on possible strategies. Ask them how they adapted to the lockdown. What helped? What might help them now adapt to going back to school?

There may be some things that immediately can be done to problem solve the concerns raised. For example, 'I am worried that my friends won't want to speak to me at school'. Agree an experiment to try this out before hand, such as try contacting a friend to speak or meet in advance of school starting.

Deferring worries

Children can also be encouraged to make a list of worries and have an agreed deferred time to worry about things on their list. For example, at 4pm spend 30 minutes worrying. This can help to contain worries, and often the worry feels less distressing at this deferred time.

Parents preparing children for the return- routines, reconnecting with friends etc.

Before returning to school, try and prepare children by getting them back into a routine. They will need to go to bed at a reasonable time, wake up early and learn to do the school walk/ cycle/ drive to school again. They could do some practice runs to school in the week or so beforehand. If they are not already doing so, help them to reconnect with friends to make the transition easier.

Preparing children for changes

It might be helpful for parents and teachers to prepare children ahead of school starting via school websites and newsletters and that school may feel different. They will have to wash their hands more, they may have less close contact with friends at school and stick to small groups of friends. All of this is to reduce risk of spreading COVID19.

After returning to school make new routines fun where possible

In school, be clear about the new routines so that children have some sense of control. Help to make routines fun for example singing songs to washing hands.

Listening to each other

Teachers should listen to children and not assume how they feel or what they have gone through. Help children to listen to each other too so they can process the huge changes. It is important to not ignore the changes that have occurred.

As above limit reassurance, encourage a growth mindset.

Help children to recognise that building tolerance of uncertainty can help them manage their anxiety and develop their growth mindset. It is like building up 'mind muscles'. Limit reassurance as this can maintain anxiety. Instead encourage children to ask questions, and support skills in problem solving so they can consider their own solutions.

Class Chatterbox

Each class has it's own Chatterbox to allow children to post worries in through the day. Each teacher will have a specified time as a class when worries can be thought about more.

Rewards

Use rewards in and out of school to help children manage their anxiety about getting to school and managing at school. This should be age appropriate and not too expensive.

Taking care of self and others

Encourage children to think about their own mental health including eating healthily, exercising, doing things they enjoy, spending time with others. In addition, practice being kind to self and others. Remember it took us time to adapt to the lockdown, and it will take time to adapt back. Go easy on yourself.