

A Better School Start: 4 Tips

School and learning will be different this year. Both in person and virtual / online options will require new routines, expectations, and behaviors. This transition has been very difficult for many families. Supporting the social and emotional development, mental health, and resiliency of children is essential for learning to occur. Below are four general tips to help.

1. Talk About It

Check in with your child to see how he or she is feeling. **Ask calmly as an open-ended question “How are you feeling about this?”**. (This allows any feelings to come from your child; rather than assuming feelings, such as *Are you anxious? Are you frustrated?*). (Also see: <https://biglifejournal.com/blogs/blog/back-to-school-free-printable-care-package>).

Validate all feelings. All feelings are ok. They might be conflicting. That is also ok. Listen and allow a child to express feelings without dismissing or trying to “fix” negative feelings or to question positive feelings. Some children are doing well. Help children to find positive ways to express difficult emotions. (See: https://www.huffpost-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.huffpost.com/entry/help-kid-cope-back-to-school_l_5f329ca9c5b64cc99fde5586/amp).

2. Manage Worry and Expectations

Listen to concerns calmly. Show Empathy and Understanding. Acknowledge and accept feelings before offering reassurance. **Be careful not to make general reassurance statements** (e.g., “everything will be OK”, “you have nothing to worry about”). No one can predict the future or give this guarantee. These types of statements also minimize feelings and can make children feel their concerns are not valid.

Rather, focus on addressing **PRACTICAL vs HYPOTHETICAL WORRIES and what is in your control**. (If children are returning to school, it is ok to acknowledge risk, but discuss how schools are taking precautions and how students can minimize their risk (distancing, hand washing, masking)). Limit “what ifs” that focus on extreme negative (hypothetical) outcomes.

Practice Relaxation Strategies. Do diaphragmatic breathing. **Practice calm breathing with a mask on if a child is returning to school.** Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth with a longer exhale. (See <https://parentsupportduringcovid19.com> for more relaxation techniques including Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Guided Imagery and Grounding).

Try to STOP Technique: S (Scared) What is going on in your body? T (Thoughts) What are you thinking? O (Other thoughts) What is something else you can think? P (Praise & Plan) What is something nice to say to yourself? What can you do next time? What is good? What can you control? (<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/help-children-cope-with-back-to-school-anxiety>)

3. Problem Solve and Prepare

Discuss the plan for starting school. Encourage proactively talking about potential problems and issues. Identify what worked and what did not work well last spring (particularly if online learning was challenging). Ask, “*how can we make this a better experience?*”.

Problem solve together. Listen and consider all suggestions. Don’t immediately dismiss what is said. Offer your own practical suggestions for change. Evaluate and point out what is working and make changes as needed. Troubleshoot together. This will help children feel some control and practice coming up with ideas and changes to make learning work better. **Monitor stress (for you and your child).** Remember the big picture, children learn best when calm and emotionally regulated. This is an unusual time and everyone needs more compassion.

Role play or rehearse potentially stressful situations (e.g., what to say when someone gets too close at school, technology issues, how to express frustrations or ask for breaks). Practicing how to handle potentially difficult or upsetting situations will help you and your child stay calm. It will also build problem solving and emotion regulation skills so that everyone can better manage challenging moments. (See also: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/kids-covid-19/art-20482508>).

4. Set Your Child Up for Success

Schedule and Routines. Establish a schedule together for work and relaxation time. Schedules provides structure (with built in “down time”/free choice times). Create morning routine and bedtime routine. Keep these as consistent as possible. Consistency and predictability help reduce anxiety. Use visual schedules or checklists to promote independence.

Adequate sleep, good nutrition, and exercise daily are important for health and absolutely protective during stressful times. (See also: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/supporting-your-childs-mental-health-during-covid-19-school-return>).

Keep online activity safe. Make sure privacy settings are on. Use a common area or check in when you can. Encourage children to be kind and respectful to classmates and to tell you about any bullying or inappropriate contact or interactions. See **Tips and Scripts for Managing Screen Time When School Is Online** at <https://www.common sense media.org/blog/tips-and-scripts-for-managing-screen-time-when-school-is-online-0>.

Model Resiliency and Healthy Coping. Be careful what you say. How you talk about school sets the tone. Rather than complaining and venting *in front of your child*, acknowledge their feelings and help them look for some positive, alternative ways to view their situation. Use “**and**” rather than “**but**” to accept both thoughts (e.g., “you feel __because __, but you get to __”). Practice deep breathing to calm the nervous system and relaxation strategies daily. See <https://childmind.org/article/how-to-avoid-passing-anxiety-on-to-your-kids/>).

Remember how you handle your anxiety, your own stress, and how you act throughout the day will strongly influence how children react and think about their own situation. Take breaks when you are able, even short breaks to calm or self-care, so you can connect, be present, and enjoy positive moments with your child during each day. As much as possible, children need to feel safe, secure and positive about their current circumstance and the future. Even in a pandemic. Please seek support from schools, your pediatrician, or a therapist if you or your child are struggling or you need more strategies to manage anxiety or learning.

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