

# Tips for returning to school



As schools begin to open we may be feeling more anxious (both parents and children). Here's some ideas about how best to prepare.

1. **Be Calm:** Your child will take their lead from you and be reassured if you are steady and matter of fact. Make sure to access support for yourself too as you will be experiencing heightened levels of stress/anxiety at the return.
2. **Be Positive:** Remind them of all the ways they have learnt to keep themselves safe: washing hands, sneezing/coughing into their elbow, not hugging others, and staying in their own space
3. **Be Curious:** Listen and try not to dismiss or minimise their fears but validate how they are feeling. For example "It's completely fine to feel like that at the moment" or "If I was thinking those worrying thoughts, I would feel worried too" or "I can really understand why you would feel like that" or "You're right, it is a bit nerve-wracking on your first day back- same for me and work. I bet there are 15 other kids in your class feeling exactly the same". Anxiety is a normal response to a sense of threat, and it is important to normalise a child's reaction. These strategies will encourage your child to label and express their emotions, helping them to understand them better.
4. **Be Thankful:** Help your child to think of things they are looking forward to: being with their friends, seeing their teacher, favourite activities but be mindful some of these may not be immediately available to them given restrictions and guidelines. Talking about school in a positive way helps your child to feel less anxiety about going back.
5. **Be Supportive:** Younger children particularly may struggle with separation anxiety and may become tearful, clingy or act out. Reassure them that you will miss them too and think of them throughout the day. It might be helpful to draw a little heart on their wrist and one on yours too. You can call it the "hug button" and when they are missing you they can press the heart and know that you will be doing the same at home. Sometimes having a little object to remind them of you throughout the day helps but please check this with teachers/school first
6. **Be Prepared:** Support your child to be aware of changes that may have happened to their classroom environment since they were last there and rehearse any new routines that school may have shared. Rehearse and practice your "goodbye" routine and create a "hello" greeting for the end of the day for them to look forward to. Let your child's teacher know about the routine and work together on a clear system.



### **Specific advice**

#### **What to do if my child is articulating worries about returning to school due to safety concerns?**

Reassure your child that it is safe to go to school. Some parents may have said during learning from home that we were learning at home to keep safe. Some children may now worry about the safety of returning to school. To help your child feel safe, have a conversation with them explaining that:

1. The decision to return to school is based on medical advice
2. Children do not usually get very sick from Covid-19
3. Everyone at school is working hard to make sure that everyone is safe
4. Anyone who is unwell will stay at home
5. The government is keeping an eye on things- if it starts to be unsafe, decisions about what to do will be made
6. Reassure your child that it is normal to have mixed emotions such as excitement, relief, worry and anger
7. Discuss what they are looking forward to and what they are worrying about. If there is something specific that your child is worried about please let their teacher know so they can be supported while at school
8. Reinforce good hygiene practices

After school it will be important to:

- Talk to your child about their day, including what they enjoyed, what they felt worried about and what they are looking forward to tomorrow
- Schedule extra family time as your child is likely to have missed being at home with you
- Your child may feel more fatigued and will benefit from quiet activities to recharge

### **My children are returning on different days due to their school year. How can I support them?**

Younger children returning to school slightly earlier than other family members may make some students feel disappointed that their siblings are continuing with home learning or may feel disconnected from their family. You can help your child by:

1. Reassuring them that it is ok to feel disappointed
2. Explaining that all children will be returning to school soon
3. Allowing your child to pick a fun activity to complete when they get home from school so that they have something to look forward to
4. Avoid scheduling any 'fun' activities with other family members or friends whilst your child is at school

### **How can I best set up my child to return to school?**

Re-establish normal routines in the lead up to school. Consistency and routine help to reduce levels of distress and anxiety. Continue to maintain a healthy balance between school work and fun activities.

- The week before: Return children to their usual wake up and bedtime routines, as well as breakfast and morning snack and lunch break times
- The day before: involve your child in packing their bag and preparing their uniform- this leaves you with plenty of time to notice if anything is forgotten
- The morning of: allow more time than usual to get ready
- Planning ahead and getting them into a good routine saves mental energy and sets them in a positive mood to go to school and engage in learning
- Set up a clear drop off routine. Know where your child will need to be in advance (what gate etc), establish a goodbye routine (hug, kiss, high five), assure them that you/partner/caregiver will be there to pick them up at the end of the day, and leave calmly and promptly.

### **How can I gently address some of their worries?**

Continue to offer support and listen. Remind them of their resilience

Resilience is the ability to:

- Cope with uncertainty
- Resist adversity
- Recover successfully from difficult situations

When has your child shown resilience? Examples may include: Starting primary school or learning a new skill such as swimming. Remind your children about when they have coped well in uncertain times before and how they can learn to manage this new situation.

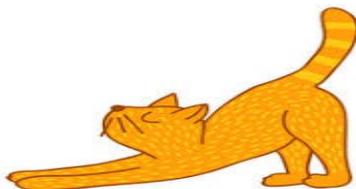
Consider what strategies you already have in your “toolbox” to help your child soothe/calm or reduce their distress. These may include:

- Doing things they enjoy e.g. reading, listening to music, watching a film, playing a board game
- Getting active: exercise can help us feel less anxious
- Talking to someone they trust
- Deep breathing exercises, yoga or relaxation exercises may be helpful if your child has used these strategies in the past.

Some muscle relaxation strategies ideas are shown below.



Squeeze a Lemon: Pretend you have a lemon in each hand. Squeeze it hard. Try to squeeze all the juice out! Feel the tightness in your hand and arm as you squeeze. Squeeze hard! Don't leave a single drop (Hold for 10 seconds). Now relax and let the lemon from your hand. See how much better your hands and arm feel when they are relaxed.



Stretch like a cat: Pretend you are a cat and you just woke up from a nap. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Now raise them way up high over your head. Stretch as high as you can. Keep stretching (hold for 10 seconds)! Hooray, you did it! Let your arms drop.



Hide in your shell: Pretend you are a turtle. Pull your head into your shell. Pull your shoulders up to your ears and push your head down to your shoulders. Hold it tight (hold for 10 seconds)! Hooray, you did it! You can come out now. Feel your shoulders relax.

## **I'm worried about my child's academic progress following learning from home.**

Understandably, some parents may have concerns that the period of online learning may have impacted upon their child's academic development. We have all had to adapt quickly to a new way of learning, with different schedules and routines, and a balancing act between parents assisting with online learning while also doing their own usual routines/work.

It is to be expected that some students learning may have plateaued or regressed slightly during this period, but that is not a reflection of the amount of effort a family puts into online learning. Rather, it is a reflection of the huge changes that have occurred over the past 2 years and the element of unpredictability and stress that comes with this. We know that when a student is stressed, anxious, or feeling unsafe their ability to learn is limited. Your role as parent/carers over the past two years has been invaluable in promoting resilience, making them feel safe, and showing adaptability to these new challenges. This has set your child up for the best possible return to school.

As school routines and norms return, your child is likely to re-engage with learning and academic pursuits as they begin to feel safe. This may take some time. The focus for the end of this year is on re-engaging with peers, teachers and investing in social and emotional development which helps children feel safe and ready to learn.

## **Where do I go if I'd like further support for my child or myself?**

If you are worried about your child at school, please contact your child's teacher to discuss your concerns. The school is ready and available to provide further support if needed.

Advice around managing multiple parenting concerns can be accessed at <https://raisingchildren.net.au/>

Family Connect and Support Service: This service links families with the most appropriate supports for each individual circumstance. 1800 066 757, 8:30am-5:30pm, Monday to Friday or [familyconnectandsupport@barnardos.org.au](mailto:familyconnectandsupport@barnardos.org.au)

Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511

- Help and advice for any mental health issue or concern as well as referrals for all ages
- 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Parent Line: 1300 1300 52

- Free telephone counselling and support network for parents and carers
- 9am-9pm, Monday to Friday; 4pm-9pm Saturday and Sunday

Lifeline: 13 11 14, 0477 131 114 (text), [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au) (online chat)

- 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Crisis support and intervention

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636 ([beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au))