

Supporting your child as they return to primary school after lockdown

Dr Erin Mackenzie



While many children are excited about returning to school after an extended period of learning from home, others may be anxious or worried about returning to school. The return to school will also represent a significant change to the routines that families have established during lockdown. Here are some strategies for supporting children in primary school as they return to school.

Getting back into the school routine

During lockdown, many children (and adults) have established routines that are quite different to their usual routine. For example, your child may be staying up and waking later, and may be engaging in more screen time than usual. To help smooth the transition back to school routines, it can help to start making small tweaks before their first day back at school. Children are also more likely to feel a sense of control and be empowered if parents negotiate routines and screen times with them. If these routines can't be negotiated (we all know school starts at a certain time!), taking the time to explain why their new routine needs to be established can help.

It is quite possible that your child will be more tired than usual once they return to school. This is perfectly normal as they readjust to being away from home, interacting with their friends, and engaging in face-to-face learning. You may notice that they have bigger emotional responses, or are less tolerant than usual. You can support your child to adapt to their new routine by ensuring that they get plenty of rest, and consider incorporating some relaxation techniques into their bedtime routine.

Acknowledging your child's concerns

Some children may be worried about returning to school, for a number of reasons. If your child is concerned about returning to school, it is important to acknowledge and validate their feelings. You can point out that their concerns are understandable, and that many children may be feeling the same way. At the same time, remaining calm and focusing on the positive aspects of returning to school can help to relieve some of their concerns. Prompt your child to tell you about some of the things that they enjoy most about school, or about some of the funny or exciting things that they have done at school prior to lockdown.

If your child raises concerns about whether they will be safe returning to school, it is useful to provide simple and factual information about COVID-19 while balancing this with reassurances that the adults around them are there to help them stay healthy. You can also talk to your child about the importance of focusing on what we can control, rather than worrying about things that are outside our control.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine have some useful tools available for parents to help their child cope with the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://www.nap.edu/resource/other/dbasse/wellbeing-tools/interactive/tools-for-children.html> Importantly, if your child is displaying concerning levels of anxiety, their school or GP can help to connect them with a suitably qualified professional.



What will school look like?

While schools are currently working on the procedures and strategies that will be in place when students return, the reality is that school will be a little different to what your child was used to before lockdown. At this stage, we know the following:

- Teachers will be wearing masks, and children will be encouraged to do so.
- Year or stage groups will also be separated to minimise contact on the playground. This may mean that recess and lunch times are staggered and different to usual.
- There will be no assemblies, excursions, community events, or inter-school sports.
- It is likely that parents will not be able to enter the school grounds to drop children off in the morning, which may represent a different drop off process for younger children in particular.

It is a good idea to discuss these arrangements with your child prior to returning to school so that they feel more comfortable about these changes. In doing so, explain that these measures will be in place to help keep them safe, and highlight the positive aspects of going back to school (such as seeing their friends). Each school will have their own arrangements in place, so ensure that you carefully read any communication from your child's school and reach out to them if you or your child have any questions.

Managing your own responses

As a parent, it is understandable that you may feel anxious or concerned about your child returning to school at this time. However, children take cues from their parents about how they should respond to situations. Be mindful about your own emotions and try to model a calm and relaxed approach to returning to school.

On the first day back...

Leave plenty of time to get ready in the morning so that you have a buffer of time to chat about any last minute concerns without the additional stress of time pressure. Reinforce the positive messages you have discussed previously, such as seeing their friends and teachers at school. If your child displays some resistance to separating from you while dropping them off to school, remain calm, remind them about your pick up arrangements after school, and reassure them that they are ok. When your child gets home, make sure that you ask them about their day – what they enjoyed, what they are looking forward to about the next day, and whether they are worried about anything. Try to schedule a fun and relaxing activity to do together if possible. Children often find it easier to open up while doing an activity, and will value the opportunity to connect with you.

Returning to school after lockdown is exciting for most children, and they are likely to manage the transition well. For some, however, anxiety about returning may be an issue. If you are concerned about your child's behaviour or response to returning to school, your child's school or GP can help connect them with additional support. Other resources that may help if you are worried include Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800) and Beyond Blue.

