

Back to School in Uncertain Times:

Helping Children Through Transitions

IMPORTANT TO KEEP IN MIND

- Only you are the best person to know what you and your family needs
- Do not judge other people's reactions because you do not know their circumstances
- The most important thing for your child is physical and psychological safety – *you and how you show up are a big part of that*

CHILDREN ARE LEARNING UNDER PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE LOAD

Students are trying to learn while:

- Possibility of alerts and sudden disruptions
- Experiencing a loss of routine and predictability
- Ongoing exposure to adult fear and uncertainty
- Reduced social interaction/sports
- Adapting to changes in testing
- Fearing for their prospects because of the disruptions
- Having a nervous system that is not fully developed

COMMON EMOTIONS IN CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS DURING CHANGE AND TRANSITIONS

- Persistent, irrational, worry & fear that interferes with daily routines
- Presents as:

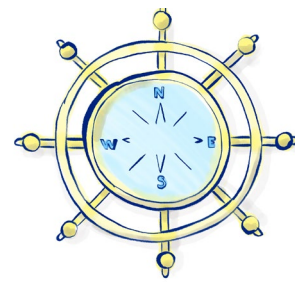
Physical: Somatic symptoms, such as headaches, abdominal complaints, muscle tension, sleepy during the day

Affect: Agitation, crying, irritability, anger outburst, extreme fear of situation that causes anxiety, on edge

Behavior: Tantrums, activity avoidance, meltdowns, school refusal, restlessness, and difficulty in sleeping, repetitive behaviors (ex. washing of hands, avoiding stepping on cracks), high expectations, perfectionism

REDEFINE LEARNING GOALS DURING THE TRANSITION

- Expect variability in every child's capacity, engagement, and emotional regulation
- **Learning in times of uncertainty and transition= sustainable learning, not peak academic performance**



This is not a normal return to school. If capacity is reduced, expectations must adjust.



Cognition: Attention difficulties, poor focus/ concentration, learning difficulties

Dependence: On parents and adults

Social: Withdrawn, disengaged, overwhelmed

Combination of excessive anxiety and disruption in daily routines indicate a serious issue.



YOUR REGULATION IS THE INTERVENTION

- Trauma is not what happens to you, it is what is not processed, metabolized, not held
- What your child experiences is shaped by how you respond
- Your child's resilience is shaped by:
 - How you respond in the moment
 - How you recover after
 - The environment you create around them
- A dysregulated parent cannot co-regulate a child

REGULATE YOURSELF FIRST

- Children read tone more than words
- Slow your breathing
- Lower your voice
- Limit how much news is consumed in front of them
- If your body is calmer, theirs will be too

WHAT TO SAY TO CHILDREN

- "School is open and safe."
- "You will follow the instructions just like a fire drill and practice the breathing that we have worked on together."
- "If your body feels tight or worried, you can slow it down with your breathing."
- "This feels hard, and you can do hard things."
- "If there is an alert your teacher will know what to do."
- "The people responsible for safety know what to do. If we ever need to do anything differently, I'll guide us."
- "My job and the school's job is to keep you safe. Your job is to be a kid."

***Your tone, pace, voice in how you communicate these messages will be important ***

Regulation is not taught through words. It is transmitted through the body, relationship, and environment.



MANAGE YOUR OWN EMOTIONS

- Have your own adult support network to talk through your anxiety/ concerns (not in front of the children).
- Prepare a Plan A, B, C
 - Prepare for 'the other' scenarios so you are not frazzled when it happens
- Do not add any new stressors for the first 2 weeks
- Trust the structure around you – schools are open because it's now considered safe to do so. If anything changes you will be informed.
- Manage your own anxiety about the risks involved, because anxiety is contagious.



CREATE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- Prioritize your relationship with your child. Create space to for their questions and concerns.
- Establish a routine, rhythm, and ritual for the school days and the coming weeks.
- Expect first few weeks of adjustment will bring different emotions for different children.

TEACH CHILDREN WAYS TO COPE WITH ANXIETY

- 4-7-8 breathing. Smell a flower, blow a candle
- 5 finger starfish breathing meditation
- Visualize "safe place"
- Draw a shield to protect
- Externalize the anxiety by giving it a name
- Trash negative thinking
- Transitional object

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY ABOUT RETURNING TO SCHOOL

- Learn about the school's safety and response procedures and protocols, and share with your child
- Explain how you/school will give them what they need to stay safe
- Let them know how you will let them know you are ok

Procedure for:

- Regular class day
- PE
- Lunch time
- Water break
- Recess
- Bathroom break
- Nurse's office/isolation room
- When they feel sick at school

There is a mind-body connection:

- **Diet:** eliminate sugar or caffeinated drinks
- **Movement:** 30 minutes per day
- **Sleep:** 9 – 12 hours (blue light screen protectors)



CONSIDERATIONS FOR THIS WEEKEND BEFORE GOING TO SCHOOL

- Return children to their wake up / bedtime routines
- Practice breathing and grounding
- Involve your child in packing their bag and preparing their uniform

The morning of:

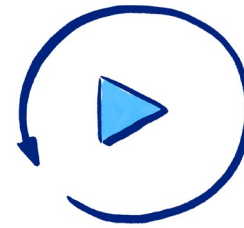
- Allow way more time than usual to get ready/ drop off
- Keep conversation light
- Do some breathing and grounding exercises
- Assure them that they are in safe hands with the school

Prepare their school supplies:

- Checklist of protocol before leaving and upon returning home
- A comfort item
- Method of communicating with them during school hours

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FIRST 2 WEEKS OF SCHOOL

- Stay connected with the school counselor and teacher
- You may need to adjust your schedule- communicate with your workplace
- Be patient with the school and have realistic expectations of everyone, including yourself
- Pay attention to your child's mental health – intensity, frequency, duration of symptoms



KEY TAKEAWAYS

During transitions, children need:

- A regulated adult
- Predictability
- Simple, honest information
- Physical closeness
- Repeated reassurance