

## **Tips for Transition Back to School**

**Debra Reicher, PhD**

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## **Tips for Transitioning Back to School**

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Returning to school is one of the many concerns children and families are coping with during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children may live in a family where one or both parents have been laid off, fallen ill, or succumbed to COVID-19. Children from minority backgrounds may be learning to cope, or more fully comprehend, the reason for racism and its broad-reaching impacts on everything from health to bullying. Everything from health, safety, and socioeconomic factors impact school readiness. It is important to remember that children are quite resilient and able to recover, even in the face of significant distress.

The following tips may be useful in easing the transition process in localities where schools re-open:

### **KNOW WHAT STRESSORS THE CHILD HAS EXPERIENCED SINCE BEING OUT OF SCHOOL**

- Prior to the first day of in-person learning, it is essential to remember the great disparity in terms of what children and their families are facing. While some children are grieving the loss of a parent, others may be enjoying increased quality time at home. Some children are experiencing and suffering great financial loss and may be hungry and lacking in school supplies. Reports show that there is currently an increase in children's exposure to domestic violence. As well, some children lack supervision, as their parents went back to work to keep the family afloat. It is important that schools try to systematically survey families to gather such information. School psychologists and counselors may be included in these surveys as those children with preexisting psychiatric disorders or challenging family dynamics are at higher risk for poor adjustment.

### **MANAGE THE ANXIETY OF THE STAFF**

- The attitude and tone of our communication with children is as important as the message conveyed. It is essential that adult anxiety and frustration with the reopening of school be carefully monitored as children will respond to this. Adults' ability to cope with uncertainty directly impacts children's ability to cope. Practice self-care and communicate frustration to other adults when there are no children around.

### **ADJUST YOUR APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL OF THE CHILD**

- The developmental level and chronological age of the child is important to consider. With younger children, concrete and simple explanations are preferred. Avoid abstract language and over-explaining. Listen carefully to the child's specific concerns and tailor your response to it. Focus on what we are doing to stay safe. Provide pictures to help children and their families see the important people, understand the routine, and properly plan prior to starting school.
- Establishing a new and predictable routine will help mitigate anxiety. Prepare children for the new rules regarding social distancing, masks, and hand washing by providing detailed written and visual information. Send photographs and/or provide a video tour of the way the school will look. Include pictures of the hallways, the classrooms (desks far apart, dividers), etc. Explain the procedures at school such as temperature checks and cleansing. Elaborate the procedure for push-ins such as PE and the likelihood of lunch being eaten in the classroom.

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- Have teachers meet students virtually prior to opening or meeting in person, if possible. Younger children benefit from short, individual, and personalized meetings with teachers, where feasible. This provides an opportunity for teachers to introduce themselves without a mask. This can be done in small groups for older children. School personnel can make large, laminated ID badges (5 by 7) with close facial photos. There may be FDA-approved, clear facial masks available online which will help in the reading of facial expressions.

### **DAY-TO-DAY CLASSROOM GUIDANCE**

- Make the first few weeks welcoming and rewarding. Be creative in enlisting children's' participation in decorating rooms, creatively social distancing, etc. Children feel an increased sense of self-control when involved.
- As the intermixing of children will be minimum, be thoughtful in the grouping of students. Consider cohorts, cliques, interpersonal dynamics, and parent input/feedback.
- Make COVID-19 part of the educational curriculum, integrate activities, such as how germs spread for younger children and science lessons on microscopic organisms for older children.
- Consider implementing mindfulness activities once or more per day. Mindfulness encourages people to be in the present and can provide grounding and focus.
- Have a segment of the day to discuss positives. Thanking a peer or teacher, positive coping skills, and enjoyable activities can be discussed to encourage a positive mindset.

### **MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS**

- Make the mental health needs of children a priority. A child who is anxious or distressed cannot learn. Administrators need to support this and not prioritize academics or push educators to catch up kids immediately.
- Children do better with crises when given a place to express feelings. Listen empathically and non-judgmentally. Remind children that things will eventually return to normal, but in the meantime, this is the new normal, and our concern is THIS WEEK.
- Enlist the mental health professionals in the school to help identify children struggling to adjust. Post-traumatic stress signs include intrusive, unwanted thoughts or images, strong negative feelings, excessive anxiety, behavioral regression, sleep difficulties, separation anxiety, attention difficulties, somatic concerns and arousal, and reactivity symptoms such as startling easily. While most children are likely to adjust to the changes, it is essential to quickly identify those who are struggling, so that proper support and referrals can be made.