

Preparing for your child's return to school



Schools have been closed for a long time, and during lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic, children have been told to stay at home, to socially distance, to wash their hands regularly and that it isn't safe for schools to be open. It is entirely understandable that they, and yourselves as parents, will have some fears and worries about their return to school. This leaflet is designed to provide you with tips and practical ways in which you can help to reduce your child's fears and ease their return to school.



Let them know you understand their fears and worries – let your child know that the mixed emotions they are feeling are natural and understandable.

Ask your child how they feel about returning to school and respond to what they say by:

- **Listening** to your child, and rather than telling them there is nothing for them to worry about, which simply dismisses their fears, let them know that you want to understand exactly what it is that they are worried or anxious about.

- **Ask open ended questions** – for example “I can see you are worried, and that's natural, but what exactly is it about returning to school that you are finding scary?” “What do you think we can do together to make things feel less scary?” “What would make going back to school easier for you?”
- **Reassure** them that lots of their friends will also be worried or nervous and this is natural and to be expected after such a long time away from school.

Explore and record your child's fears, but also include what they are excited about

– complete an activity together, maybe a mind map or a drawing, which records your child's fears and worries about returning to school, but also record what they have missed about not being at school and what they will be excited about doing when they return, for instance, seeing their friends/favourite teachers/favourite subject.



Try to let your child lead this, allow them plenty of time to think, go at their pace, and don't be tempted to make your own suggestions about what you think they may find worrying. Your fears, and what you feel may worry them most, may not be accurate. As parents you may have a different perspective and it's important to approach this from the perspective of your child. This approach makes them feel valued and let's them know you are really listening to them.

You may be able to answer some of your child's concerns straight away, if you can, do so, but explain to them what will happen rather than just telling them they don't need to worry about that. Their fears and worries are very real to them and should be acknowledged.



Find out as much information as possible from school – call or email your child’s school, log onto their website, find out what things will be like for them when they return – things will be different and the more information you can give to your child about this, the better. Examples of some of the questions you may want to ask are listed below:

- How many children will be in their class?
- Will they be working in ‘bubbles’ and what will this mean? How will this work?
- Will they be with some of their friends? If so, which ones?
- Which Teacher or Teachers will they have?
- What will happen at break and lunchtimes? Will they be allowed outside? Where will they eat lunch? Will break and lunch happen at the same time of day or has this changed?
- Which social distancing measures have school put in place and how will this work?
- How often will they get to wash their hands? What will happen if they want to use the toilet?
- What will the new school day/routine be like for your child? Will there still be assemblies/PE etc?

You may find that some of this information will answer some, if not most, of the fears and worries you and your child have uncovered together, during the activity mentioned above. Revisit that activity together and see how many of the fears or worries have now been answered and record this. Your child may want to draw a new mind-map or picture showing all the new information they have found out.

Establish a new routine – during lockdown it is normal and understandable for families to fall into a new routine as far as bedtime, getting up etc., is concerned. Children and young people may have been going to bed and getting up in the morning later than they used to before lockdown. It is important to begin to establish a new routine which is more suited to returning to school, in plenty of time – maybe a couple of weeks before their first day back. This will make the transition back to school easier for the whole family.



Discuss the new routine together as a family, explain why things need to change, and let your children or young people play a part in deciding what the new routine should look like. This will ensure they feel that this is happening with them not to them, which will help to encourage ‘buy in’ and co-operation. It may be enjoyable, and helpful, to make a routine schedule together and have this on show.

Getting back into this routine will take some time, and bedtimes should be changed gradually – possibly brought forward by around 15 minutes each night. Help them get a good night’s sleep by agreeing not to use laptops/phones or other tech for at least one hour before bedtime and include this in the routine schedule.

It could also take some time for children to settle back in at school and adjust to the new normal, and some children will experience ups and downs, try to provide support to them and don’t put too much pressure on yourself, or your child, if things don’t go as smoothly as you would like initially.

Help your child to be brave and face their fears!
In the same way that you recorded your child’s worries and excitement about returning to school, closer to their first day back, take time together to record/review the facts they now know about returning. This should help to refresh their memory and remind them what being back at school will be like. Be sure to include the positive things too – like which friends they will be with etc.



Here are some tips to help make their first day back as smooth as possible.

- Be organised – make sure they pack their school bag the night before including everything they need. First, they might like to make a list or maybe draw their school bag with the things they will need inside it.
- Make sure their school uniform is ready and encourage them to lay this out before they go to bed, ready for the morning.
- Remind them of their new school morning routine the night before, letting them know what time they will need to get up in the morning, and perhaps they could also choose their favourite breakfast?
- Make sure their packed lunch is ready – or perhaps they could make this themselves?
- Make sure you have plenty of time to get ready and leave out for school so that your morning isn't rushed, and they aren't late for school.
- Older children might be able to arrange to walk to school with friends.
- Younger children, and those who are going to school for the first time, may need to know who will pick them up at the end of their school day and what you will do together afterwards.

You can model brave behaviour for them by being upbeat and excited about their return. Let them know that all their friends will be feeling just as worried about returning, everyone will be feeling nervous. Remind them of the positives; the friends they are going to see, that they will see their favourite teacher etc. It may be nice to arrange to do something special together after school, if possible. Try to avoid asking them too many questions about how their day has been, allow them to share this with you in their own time.

Seek support if you feel you need it – for many children and families the transition back into school following such a long period of lockdown, possible isolation, and school closure, may not be easy. If your child finds going back to school difficult to cope with, or experiences difficulties whilst they are there, make sure that you speak with their school about this as soon as possible. This will give both you and your child's school the opportunity to work together to support your child further with the challenges they are experiencing.

If you feel concerned at any point about your child's mental health and you feel they may need professional help, speak to the school or your GP who will both be able to help you identify which next step is best for both your child, and yourselves as a family.