



Getting Kids Ready for School after Lockdown

Lockdown has been a strange time for everyone and returning to a 'more normal existence' will be a huge relief for many. However there will be some children and adults who may feel anxious about leaving their 'bubble' or struggle to get back into a routine. These tips may help to reduce anxiety and ease the return to the classroom.

CALM AND CERTAINTY IS THE WAY. Our (adult) behaviour and response to uncertain situations is very important. Children are looking to us for a sense that things are OK. If we look and act as though we are doing OK, and alongside them come up with a plan going forward, then this will aid them. If you are stressed or worried about what is going on then you would do well to follow these guidelines as well as your kids.

The ideas below may require a little adjustment depending on age or temperament of your child. You know them best. Talk with your child about each of these and try to **give them some control** over how each might look. Negotiate, but have your bottom line.

Don't try to change too many things, too much, too quickly. Tackle one or two of the changes below and alter them a bit at a time in the lead up to a return to school. E.g. If they are waking at 10am now then slowly return to their old school wake time over several days.

Stress and anxiety is all about uncertainty and not knowing ("what if..."). **THE ANTIDOTE TO UNCERTAINTY IS... CERTAINTY.** As such, in preparation for a return to school (which is likely a source of uncertainty to your child) focus on **maximising routine and structure** in your child's life. This is about getting them back into the old routines that previously worked, plus maybe adding some new ones that might further reduce their stress/anxiety.

Core aspects of structure and routine to work on:



SLEEP Get back into a set sleep routine everyday e.g. teeth, book, bed. The main thing is ensuring the **wake up time is the same every day** (this anchors the sleep/wake cycle). Also, **no** devices in bedroom from an hour prior bedtime, and no naps during the day.

MEALS Having consistent meal times is helpful. Start to return to original school day meal times for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Eat as a family at the table.



EXERCISE AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITY. Exercise is brilliant at reducing stress and anxiety, especially in green spaces. Try to get them (and you) outdoors for more than 30min every day. It will reduce stress and improve sleep as well.

FAMILY TIME / SOCIAL TIME Try to go back to, or start some new social routines e.g. regular game nights, walks, baking together, eating dinner at the table together, 'daddy-daughter time', 'mum-son time', and so on.



SCREENS (!) Negotiate clear limits and times (e.g. none in bedroom after dinner) and agree on rules to monitor what your child is doing (e.g. agree to occasionally look at browsing history or texts).

ROUTINE 'TO DO' LISTS Create a morning routine list, or things to check off when home from school or tidying their room. Use other privileges as incentives, e.g. "When you have done your morning to do list, you can have your phone/TV time".





REINFORCE HOUSE RULES Now is a great time to re-negotiate and discuss the general house rules in a family meeting (e.g. chores, no hitting, devices out in living room by a set time), which have immediate pre-discussed natural incentives and consequences (e.g. if device not out by set time, then lose device use for one day).

Strategies to reduce Worry and Anxiety around returning to school:

- **Reduce uncertainty.** Find out from school exactly what things will look like (Arrival times? Class bubbles? Break times? Social distancing and cleaning rules?) Talk your child through this, from getting up through to coming home. The more they know, the easier it will be.
- **Normalise anxious feelings.** Ask how they are feeling about going back. What are their concerns? Find out and answer these with clear, short, and simple information. Empathise with them (“I understand that you are worried”) and normalise the situation (“I would imagine that everyone will be a bit nervous about going back.”)
- **Ask questions that lead them to reflect on past success in coping.** “How nervous were you when you first started school?” “How did you cope with that?”. The key message is “This is the same, but a little different”.
- **Practice/prepare your response for a difficult situation on the first day back.** Remain calm, provide brief empathy (“I can see you are feeling worried”), give a gentle push “You have a plan, you will be fine,” and then use distraction and remind them of rewards (see below).
- **Remind them that there are a number of things they can do to control the situation and protect themselves.** E.g. keep social distancing, wash hands, cough/sneeze into their elbow.
- **Distraction can remove anxiety’s traction.** Have their first day set up with a plan that keeps their minds busy. Perhaps a mix of things to do (e.g. get up, eat, uniform) with some fun things once each step is done e.g. TV, or on the way to school distract with singing, or quiz.
- **Motivation.** Children very often require a push/nudge when feeling anxious. Set up some rewards for getting through the first day’s plan, e.g. special snacks for school, special desert or movie night if stick to plan.

Other strategies to help manage Worry and Anxiety (long term):

- **Encourage self-coping skills.** Get your child to do more things for themselves, e.g. making toast/meals, walking to school, catching a bus. The path of least resistance of doing it for them may be easier, but in the long run does not lead to resilience. Encourage activities that increase their independence and confidence away from home e.g. sports, jobs, etc.
- **Problem solving.** There are many excellent websites that illustrate this simple but very helpful strategy that greatly aids kids to cope with new and unexpected situations. Learn it together as a family and model it for them in everyday situations.
- **Model and practice mindfulness and relaxation techniques,** e.g. breathing (through nose), grounding/calming techniques, and coping statements. Many good internet sites explain these such as: <https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-for-children-kids-activities/>
- **Increase face to face socialisation.** Get them off their devices and encourage face-to-face contact with friends, playing sports, or doing things together as a family e.g. game nights.
- **Exercise, exercise, exercise!** As mentioned before, exercise outdoors in the sun and green spaces is one of the most well-researched antidotes for stress.