



How to help your child have a mentally healthy return to school

As students prepare to return to school, or to start a new school for the first time, they may experience a mix of emotions. It is normal for students, and their parents and caregivers to be both excited and nervous during this time of transition.

This resource was developed to assist parents/caregivers in navigating and supporting their child as they return to school. Often “back to school” occurs in the fall each year, but for some students, it may be after an extended absence or starting at a new school.

Note: While we use the term “child” throughout, we recognize that the child you are caring for may be a teenager or young adult.

Ways to support your child during the return to school

Remember the importance of your own wellness

Parents and caregivers often report that the return to school is a stressful time. While the routine and consistency of the school year is welcome, this comes with greater pressure to keep to a schedule and less relaxed time together as a family. Many parents and caregivers also feel worried about how things will go at school for their child, especially if school has not been a good experience for them or their children in the past. In the weeks leading into the transition, it is important to take some time each day to do something for yourself. Taking care of your own mental health and well-being is an important tool to support your child.

Here are a few helpful ideas from parents/caregivers across Ontario:

- Try to take time for the basics – find a sleep routine that leaves you feeling rested, get outside and move your body as much as possible.
- Take a few slow deep breaths when you start to feel anxious or stressed.
- Try just listening to your thoughts, and practice noticing them without judging or trying to get rid of them. Even five minutes of this type of quiet reflection can have a positive impact.
- Connect with a friend, family or community member who helps you feel supported.

Talk to your child about the return to school

Take some time to think through what back-to-school might look like for your child and talk to them about what to expect. It is important to make space for them to share their concerns, acknowledge their worries, and help them remember the parts of school that they enjoy/are excited about.



For some students, preparing them through play and stories can be helpful. Practicing school together in play and reading books together about school can help them understand what to expect.

For some students, talking about school is helpful. Below are some conversation starters that can be used:

- What do you like to learn about at school?
- What is one thing you're hoping to do during the school year?
- How are you feeling about this school year?
- What's one thing you feel excited about?
- Is there anything you feel worried about?
- How can I help you feel comfortable about school?

Start to introduce familiar routines

As you prepare for the return to school, you may wish to gradually start moving back to a schedule that is closer to the one you use during school time (e.g., going to bed earlier, getting up earlier, eating at more regular times). Involve your child(ren) by setting the schedule together and setting alarms and reminders to help them stick to it.

For some children, practicing could be helpful (e.g., walk to school together, plan a meet-up with other classmates before school starts, access online accounts and information).

For teens, you can encourage them to identify what their routines could look like and make a plan to get back to regular routines. Ask them where you can be helpful in supporting them with the plan.

If you have a child or teen who is travelling independently to school, you can support them in finding a safe route to school and/or finding bus routes and stops so they can feel confident once school begins.

Noticing and addressing stress related to the return to school

While some students will be eager to return to school, many will be nervous too. Some young people may feel very worried about starting back and about what the new school year will hold. Stress and worry can show up in different ways. Your child may tell you that they are feeling fearful or overwhelmed. You might notice things like frequent headaches, trouble sleeping or irritability. Your child might seem withdrawn, or overly tired or restless.

There are many ways you can help your child if they are experiencing stress or worry:

- Help your child to find ways to cope with feelings of worry (e.g. ask them what has worked for them in the past, try some [grounding or breathing techniques](#)).
- Help your child to find ways to reduce the stress itself (e.g., if they are worried about getting lost trying to find their classrooms at a new school, book a visit and learn the layout of the school).

Not all stress can be avoided, but sometimes, it can be reduced. It is important to have tools and strategies ready to cope with stress so that your child can enjoy the parts of school that make them feel happy, connected, and learning.

If you have questions or concerns, consider reaching out to your school. If your child is starting at a new school, call the school to connect with an appropriate staff member.

Visit these websites for more great information:

- <https://www.family.cmho.org/back-to-school-tips/>
- <https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/kids-help-phones-ultimate-back-school-guide/>

