

## **COVID-19: Assisting Students in Transitioning from Home Schooling back to School**

Having spent increased time at home, the transition from home back to school may result in feelings of anxiety and uncertainty for children. This article has helpful tips and strategies for parents and teachers to help mitigate children's anxiety during this time.

### **Separation Anxiety**

Some students may have enjoyed their time at home and increased time with caregivers, and hence may be feeling some anxiety transitioning back to school and being away from caregivers. Signs of separation anxiety may look like:

- Severe emotional distress (anxiety, depression, temper tantrums) about attending school. This is likely to display as physical symptoms e.g. stomach pain, nausea, unexplained headaches or fatigue.
- Constant, excessive worry about losing the caregiver (e.g caregiver becoming sick or injured).
- The child often tries to persuade parents to allow him or her to stay home, because it is safe and secure. This may lead to school refusal in the future.

Some strategies parents can use to help the child include:

- Have a 'short but sweet' goodbye ritual, such as a quick wave from the car, or a hug before saying goodbye. Prolonging saying goodbye may unnecessarily increase the child's anxiety.
- Monitor your own reactions when saying goodbye. If you are showing your own anxiety or sadness, your child is more likely to be distressed themselves. Remaining calm will help the child to realise that this is a normal part of life.
- Discuss with your child about what aspects they liked about being at home, such as increased quality time, and how you can maintain these whilst transitioning back to school. For instance, 'I really enjoyed spending more time together too, let's do that when you come back home after school today'.

Strategies for teachers to use include:

- Help the child recognise something fun they can do when they first arrive at school. This may include having a 'buddy' waiting for them when they arrive, and playing a favourite game before starting school.
- If children are seeking reassurance e.g. 'when do I get to go back home', it is ok to reassure the child one time, however reassuring multiple times may increase anxiety.
- Help children feel prepared by outlining what they can expect from the school day. Include fun activities they can look forward to.
- Include relaxation activities such as deep breathing or mindfulness meditation as an in class activity. This will overall help reduce stress and anxiety in the classroom, and help improve focus and attention.

### **Anxiety about Transitioning back to School**

Some children may feel anxious about the ‘staggered’ transition from home to school. This is likely to impact what children normally expect at school, such as disruption to friendship groups and continuation of online learning.

Some suggested strategies to help students prepare for back to school include:

- Inform students about what transition will look like at school. This may include a schedule of expected activities. Outlining what will be similar to school in the past, and what may be different, will help children feel prepared.
- Children are likely to be separated from their usual groups of friends during this transition stage, and children may be anxious they will have ‘no one to play with’. Parents and teachers can encourage children to view this as a unique opportunity to make new friends. Teachers can help facilitate social interactions by introducing a collective game for everyone, such as soccer or setting up a quiet space for children to read or play board games together.
- Gently remind children that this transition period is only temporary, and that school will eventually return to what they are used to.

### **Anxiety about Health and Safety**

Some children’s anxiety may result from fears about safety and keeping well while at school. It is normal for children to ask questions about the coronavirus e.g. What will happen if I get sick? What if Mum and Dad get sick? But if these questions lead to increasing distress or impact their ability to be at school, it may indicate a problem with anxiety. This may look like:

- Thinking the worst will happen, also known as ‘catastrophising’ e.g. ‘What if all my family get sick and die, I will be all alone’
- Heightened fear about their health when coming to school or in public places. The child may show anxiety, temper tantrums, crying.

Strategies to help alleviate children’s fears about health include:

- Education about coronavirus, that is age appropriate, can help clear up misinformation or misunderstandings children may have.
- Be careful in using language such as ‘staying safe’. This may inadvertently increase a child’s anxiety, as it implies there is something dangerous.
- Remind students that the best way they can keep healthy is to wash their hands for 20 seconds, and try to maintain distancing between peers.

If you believe your child’s anxiety is starting to impact their ability to live life, it may be indicative of an underlying problem with anxiety, and may be worth engaging in further support with your school counsellor or GP.