

BACK TO SCHOOL: 4 STEPS TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD

It is important to take enough time to prepare your child/young person for returning to school. **They take longer to process information and changes, accordingly following these steps over a few days before returning to school is preferred.** There are several examples of activities you can pick and choose from. You know your child best and will be able to adapt these steps and activities to meet their unique needs.

STEP 1: REFLECT

Like with any other significant life event, **our children and young people will need closure after being in lockdown for several weeks.** This can be facilitated by creating a fun and positive activity where your child can reflect on their time during lock down.

Examples of helpful questions:

- Why did we have to stay home?
- How did we keep ourselves healthy and safe?
- Who was part of my bubble? (They can include animals and younger children might want to include a favourite toy).
- How did I stay connected with people outside my bubble?
- What did I do during the day?
- Things I learned I can do well are...
- My favourite memories are...
- Things I enjoyed doing with my family and would like to do more are...
- Look at photos taken during lockdown... What was the best about lockdown?

Doing a reflection with children and young people works best if they can express themselves in a visual way. Some children might like writing the answers to these questions whereas others might prefer drawing. Your child can use the product they create to take to school if they want to share their experience.

Creative ways to answer the questions:

- Writing the answers using colourful pens and decorating the page afterwards.
- Drawing or painting the answers on sheets of paper and making a book.

- Making a collage, by looking for pictures that represent answers to the questions. Collages can either be hard copies where they find pictures in magazines to cut out and paste or it can be electronically where they create a collage in a word document using pictures from the internet.

STEP 2: DREAM

A positive way to help our children and young people prepare mentally that things will change and that they will go back to school, is by giving them the opportunity to think about what they are looking forward to once they go back to school. It helps to focus on identifying things that they weren't able to do during lock down.

Creative ways to share excitement:

- Make a wish jar. On a piece of paper you or your child can write down things they look forward to doing. The child might even want to draw, paint or find pictures that they want to use. They can add it to their jar and decorate the [wish jar](#).
- Make a fun checklist. If your child likes structure they can write and decorate a checklist of things they look forward to. This can also be done digitally.

STEP 3: PREPARE AND ENABLE

3.1 Routine

We have to remember that children and young people experience changes in routine more intensely than adults. This often communicates to them unpredictability which can lead to feelings of not being in control. The moment they do not feel in control, you might notice an increase in emotional meltdowns, anxiety and compensating behaviour like being argumentative or they might withdraw. **Not only do they need to be prepared for changes, but they need time to get used to the idea of change.**

Getting back to routine:

- Gradually start adjusting routines at home to mirror school day schedules i.e., earlier wake-up / going to bed times, morning routine before school such as getting ready and having breakfast.
- Include any preparation activities you had in the past like packing the school bag and laying out an outfit for the next day.

- Sneak in little reminders like having teatime and lunch breaks more or less the same time they would have at school. You can even prepare lunchboxes they can use during their breaks.

Note: Preparing your child for returning to a school routine will be completely dependent on what is doable in your household at the moment. For some parents talking with their children about the changes might be more realistic than actually incorporating them. In such cases sitting down with your child and doing a visual schedule will help them to prepare for the change in their routine that will soon follow. **Being prepared in a timely manner might not take away all uncertainty and strong reactions but it supports an easier transition.**

3.2 Expectations

Every child sees the world differently and it is valuable to find out what your child is expecting when they go back to school. Imagine your child has a pre-recorded video in their mind about going back to school. If they go back to school and reality does not fit their video, an already stressful event might become even more stressful. It is worth your while to find out what your child expects as this will provide an opportunity to talk about any uncertainties that they might have.

Creative ways to understand your child's thoughts:

- Let them tell you how they think a day will look like when they go back to school.
 - Younger children might find it helpful to play out their thoughts. You can ask them to make a story of going back to school using their favourite toys.
 - Older children can use make a list of what will be the same and what might be different. They can also have a column to write down things they are uncertain about
- Make a visual schedule / timeline for how a day might go and try and identify i) things that might be the same, ii) things that might be different and iii) things they will find out once they get back to school. An example of things that might be different includes seating arrangements, play time and learning activities.

Other helpful tips for exploring expectations:

- Don't worry if there is things you cannot answer. Part of preparing your child mentally is helping them understand that certain things will be figured out as we go along and that they will always have someone to help them through it or to support them in making a plan.

- Model thinking about expectations, not having all the answers, and that that is okay. For example, as you listen to their stories and help them think of scenarios say: *"I am not always sure about what exactly might happen and that is a normal part of life. We can't control everything but we can control how we respond. Sometimes when something happens that I didn't expect, I go and ask someone to help. Who can you ask for help? "*
- Liaise with your child's teacher around what the schedule might look like, what will be the same and what will be different. You can use this to guide your child with their stories and expectations.
- Should your child express feelings of fear or uncertainty, acknowledge those feelings: I can see/hear you are a bit worried/scared. That's OK. You can use you relax exercise and be brave. Give it a go. Your teachers are there to help you.

3.3 Practice

Once we have helped a child to clarify their thoughts and feelings around going back to school, we need to help them prepare for what they can actually do. At this stage we are moving from thoughts and feelings to actions. This provides a wonderful opportunity to plan and practice responses.

Useful things to practice:

- When might I feel overwhelmed and what should I do when I feel overwhelmed?
 - Example: calming exercise. [Videos of calming exercises](#)
 - Help them have a plan on who to ask for help or how to indicate to their teacher that they might need help.
 - You can liaise with the teacher for ideas on preparing for this as some classrooms have existing plans in place.
- What worked well in the past to help me learn and have a good day?
 - Ask your child what has helped them to have a good day at school before lockdown. Help them practice responses that have worked in the past by either letting them play it out with their favourite toys or by doing a roleplay with them.
 - If your child is unable to come up with ideas, liaise with his/her teacher about responses or strategies that you can practice.
- Did I learn any new skills that I want to try out at school?
 - You as a parent might have noticed that there are certain coping strategies that helped your child to have a good day or even engage in learning a bit longer. This is a good time to make your child aware of their success and help them decide which new coping strategies they can show their teacher when they get back to school. Remind your child to be brave, and have a go...
- How do I keep myself healthy and safe when I go back to school?

- Take time to go over hygiene practices and talk about what they need to do and when.
- It could be helpful to ask your child's teacher what the children will be expected to do at school to keep them safe and to prepare and practice that with your child.
- Use visuals: Create an action plan that visually represents things you have practiced.

STEP 4: CHECK IN

Above all it is important to assure your child that they are safe and supported. Checking in on their wellbeing is the first and most important thing you can do.

Returning back to school will be a process and will be different for each child. We have to remember that we haven't been faced with a situation like this. The latter implies that we have to expect the unexpected. We won't be able control everything but we can control how we support our children. Ongoing check-ins to revisit their thoughts, feelings and actions will be crucial.

Ways to check in with your child:

- Continue with family activities that you enjoyed during lockdown, such as going for a walk together, playing board games or building puzzles. This reinforces connection and allows opportunities to ask how things are going.
- Schedule one-on-one time with your child. This can involve joining them in their favourite activity, having a milkshake together.
- Schedule a "check-in opportunity" as a daily activity.

😊 Take care and stay
safe... and happy 😊