

Some Strategies for Parents of young children returning to school following the Pandemic

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Basically you want to gradually expose your kids to all things school related. You can try;

- Start your normal morning routine a week before school starts
- Visit school before it starts
- Start using language such as “when you go to school” rather than “if you go to school”
- Use visual aids such as calendars to count down to school starting.
- If you know what safety procedures your school will be implementing discuss them a few times before school starts (ie you’ll still be doing lots of hand washing, your teacher will still be using the hand sanitiser,). Be especially mindful around any “kiss and go” arrangements as children may react strongly if they were expecting you to walk them to their door.

We can also start to prime our children emotionally

- give emotions names. These can be names such as “sad”, “angry” or “worried”. But they can also be descriptive words such as “shakey”, “fuzzy”, “spiny”, “gurgley”, “heavy”. To describe my trip to the shops I might say; “I was so excited to go, but then when I got there I felt surprised and disappointed because it wasn’t the same. I felt a bit fuzzy the whole time, a bit wibbly wobbly and I was happy to come home. But it was also really fun to drive somewhere new and see the autumn trees, that bit felt warm and nice”
- Check in with kids before school starts. Ask them what they’re looking forward to, what they think might be different, what they’re expecting. Validate any fears and correct any misconceptions.
- Problem solve with kids- if something is a particular worry, work with kids to help come up with a few solutions. Include kids in this problem solving.
- Use your own feelings as a model. A conversation with my son went like this;

Me: “we might start school again soon, how do you feel about that”

Will: “I might feel a bit nervous”

Me: “I’m starting to go back to work again soon and I’m feeling a bit nervous about seeing people again”

Will: "Like you're a bit nervous that they might have the cold, and you don't know, and then you'll get it"

Me: "Yep, exactly like that. But I've been thinking...I've thought of some stuff I can do that'll make me safe"

We then talked about various safety things like hand washing and social distancing. He could connect them to things he does at school and he left the conversation feeling less anxious.

- Stay calm ourselves.

This point will likely be the most difficult. Stay calm ourselves. To do this in a genuine way we need to focus on ourselves as parents. Think about what you're going to need to help support your child back to school. All this stuff takes both emotional energy and time. Think about your own resources and what you can give. If you can, build in buffers to help yourself. Recruit helpers where you can, lighten your load for a week or two in other areas of your life. Plan your own respite, even if its just sympathetic friends who can listen to you, or training your own internal voice to be compassionate to yourself.

- Communicate with your school

Normally I would say to parents that in cases of school reluctance you should plan and coordinate with your school. Perhaps for you this will be possible, but its also likely that our teachers will be managing the emotional load of many children. Email your teacher if you can but remember that they're going through a pandemic too and their work world has been totally flipped around. Take the return to school slowly. It will be an exploratory process where you, your child and likely their school all figures out what's happening together.