

Michelle Mitchell was a primary school teacher who works with young people to overcome challenges and stay connected to caring adults. She established a harm prevention charity, called Youth Excel.

This article is worth a read:

COVID-19 has impacted our children in diverse ways, not all of which have been negative. In fact, many of our tweens and teens have flourished at home, or in smaller (and more relaxed) class groups. They have had more time, less pressure and fewer peers to compete with. As all children return to school, they will experience yet another adjustment which will be more difficult for some than others.

There is always a natural shifting and sifting of relationships during transitions. Coming back from regular school holidays, graduating to the next year level or a movement to another school or high school are all transitions that our children have experienced before. However, the transition back from isolation will have some unique factors, and there are two types of COVID-19 specific friendship dynamics I want parents to be aware of:

Newly Found: Those children who have been attending school during this time have forged new relationships. Their besties haven't been present. They have had smaller class numbers, and they have had the opportunity to see other students in a "different light". These newly established bonds will soon be interrupted.

Power Groups: There has also been the arrival of the "power group". They are smaller groups of students who have forged a bond while away from school. On arrival back to school they are tighter than ever and have the inside knowledge of each other's COVID-19 time. Exclusivity is tough to crack into, and uncomfortable to be around.

How can we help our kids navigate the transition back?

It is worth suggesting that we are not returning to school "as we left it". Some things will be different than they were, including friendships. This may be tough for some of our children to accept and navigate. I have been explaining it like this, "The feeling of "normal" will come as we accept change and settle into a new rhythm." We are searching for a feeling more than we are searching for our past life.

Many young people will strongly desire to hang onto the life they remember. Unfortunately, that drives anxiety and self-protective behaviour. It is powerful to teach children to recognise signs of anxiety in themselves and others. Attempts to isolate, reject or dominate others need to be clearly

identified as being unhelpful. On the contrast, when people feel safe they don't feel the need to protect themselves at the expense of others.

Anxiety also drives rigid thinking that either describes classmates as "besties" or "enemies". One of the most powerful conversations we can have with our children is around "in-groups" and "out-groups". New circumstances have the potential to help us to get to know "out groups" and see beyond our usual borders.

The return back to school is also a great opportunity to re-set friendship groups and forge new ones. I hope to encourage young people to be flexible in both who they include and reach out to. I also hope they can return to school open hearted, looking for those who need including.

We will see greater anxiety, anger, frustration, withdrawal and sadness from young people during this transition time which could make for some explosive friendship moments. The last few months has taken an emotional toll on many, our tween and teens included. Some young people will be bringing heightened states of anxiety, loneliness and depression with them on their return.

Please don't negate how hard it is for young people to make this transition back to school. Now is a good time to arm shy or anxious kids with conversation starters for their first day back. COVID-19 is going to give every student common ground and a good starting point for discussions.

Encourage your young person to be the friend they desire in others. Times like build reputations, and make memories. Friends who are inclusive, kind and predictable will leave a lasting impression on each other. If I could encourage young people to do anything it would be to "think about tomorrow" and "be true to themselves and their character". Pushing and shoving don't get you to your end goal any quicker.

And finally, our kids may need to lean on our patience, foresight and strength until things find their natural rhythm again. That's what we are here for. Once again, home is designed to be the hero in their lives.