Supporting Your Child's Mental Health as They Return to School During COVID-19

Source: Unicef

The coronavirus outbreak has caused major disruptions to daily life and children are feeling these changes deeply. While the return to school will be not only welcome but exciting for many students, others will be feeling anxious or frightened. Here are tips to help your children navigate some of the complicated emotions they may be facing with going back to school.

My child is scared to go back to school. How can I help him feel at ease?

Starting school or starting a new school year can be stressful at the best of times, let alone during a global pandemic. You can make him feel at ease by having an open conversation about what it is that's worrying him and letting him know that it's natural to feel anxious.

Children may feel nervous or reluctant to return to school, especially if they have been learning at home for months. Be honest – for example you could go through some of the changes they may expect at school, such as needing to wear forms of protective clothing like masks. Children may also find it difficult being physically distanced from friends and teachers while at school – you could encourage them to think about other ways to bond and stay connected.

Reassure children about safety measures in place to keep students and teachers healthy and remind children that they can also help prevent germs spreading by washing their hands with soap and coughing or sneezing into their elbow.

Remind children about the positives – that they will be able to see their friends and teachers (if they are physically returning to the classroom) and continue learning new things.

My child's school is recommending the wearing of protective clothing, which is making my child feel more nervous. What should I say to her?

Approach this conversation with empathy, saying that you know she is feeling anxious about coronavirus, but that it's healthy to talk about our worries and emotions. Children may also get upset or frustrated if they are finding it hard to wear masks, especially when running or playing. You can reassure your children that lots of adults are working hard to keep your family safe, but emphasize that it's important we all follow the recommended measures to take care of more vulnerable members of our community.

How can I encourage my child to follow precautions (such as frequent handwashing, physical distancing, etc.) at school without alarming her?

One of the best ways to keep children safe from COVID-19 and other diseases is to simply encourage regular handwashing. It doesn't need to be a scary conversation. Sing along with their favourite song or do a dance together to make learning fun. Make sure to teach them about how even though germs are invisible, they could still be there. When children understand why they need to wash their hands, they're likely to continue doing so.

You can also show children how to cover a cough or a sneeze with their elbow, and ask them to tell you if they start to feel like they have a fever, cough or are having difficulty breathing.

My child is not part of the same group as his close friends returning to school and is feeling even more isolated. How can he feel more connected to the classroom and his friends?

If your child's school starts to return gradually, your child may be anxious about being separated from his friends. Continue to reassure your child that schools will open again for everyone once it's safe. When the official reopening of schools is announced, help him get ready to return to school by sharing information on when and how this will happen.

Letting your kids know ahead of time that schools may need to close again will help them to be prepared for the period of adjustment ahead. It's also important to continue to remind them that learning can happen anywhere – at school and at home – and that they can also keep in touch with and support their friends online in the meantime

Safe and monitored use of online games, social media and video chat programmes can provide great opportunities for children to connect with, learn and play with their friends, parents and relatives while at home. You could also encourage your children to use their voices online to share their views and support those in need during this crisis.

You can encourage your children to take advantage of digital tools that get them up and moving, like online exercise videos for kids and video games that require physical movement. Remember to balance online recreation with offline activities, including time outside, if possible.

How can I gently check in to see how my child is coping?

It's important to be calm and proactive in your conversations with children – check in with them to see how they are doing. Their emotions will change regularly, and you need to show them that's okay.

Whether at school or at home, caregivers can engage children in creative activities, such as playing and drawing, to help them express and communicate any negative feelings they may be experiencing in a safe and supportive environment. This helps children find positive ways to express difficult feelings such as anger, fear or sadness.

As children often take their emotional cues from the key adults in their lives – including parents and teachers – it is important that adults manage their own emotions well and remain calm, listen to children's concerns, speak kindly and reassure them.

Is there anything I should look out for as my child starts back at school?

In addition to checking in on your child's physical health and learning when she goes back to school, you should also keep an eye out for signs of stress and anxiety. COVID-19 may be impacting your child's mental health, and it's important to demonstrate that it's normal and OK to feel overwhelmed at times. When in doubt, empathy and support are the way to go.

There have also been concerns that incidents of stigmatization and bullying may increase when children return to school, due to some of the misinformation around COVID-19. You should explain that the virus has nothing to do with what someone looks like, where they are from or what language they speak. If they have been called names or bullied at school, they should be encouraged to tell a trusted adult. Remind your children that everyone deserves to be safe at school and online. Bullying is always wrong, and we should each do our part to spread kindness and support each other.

My child is worried about bullying at school and online, how can I talk to them about it?

If your child is worried about bullying either in person or online, it's important to let them know that they are not alone, and they can always talk to you or another trusted adult. The more you talk to your children about bullying, the more comfortable they will be telling you if they see or experience it.

Check in with your children daily and ask about their time at school and their activities online, and also about their feelings. Some children may not express their emotions verbally, so you should also look out for any anxious or aggressive behaviour that may indicate something is wrong.

You should also engage your children in open and honest conversations about how to stay safe online. Have an honest dialogue with your children about who they communicate with and how. Make sure they understand the value of kind and supportive interactions and that mean, discriminatory or inappropriate contact is never acceptable.

If your children experience any of these, encourage them to tell you or a trusted adult immediately. Be alert if you notice your child becoming withdrawn or upset, or using their device more or less than usual, it could be a sign that they are being bullied online.