

## Returning to school during COVID-19



Back to school is a time when parents and students are gearing up for the new year with both excitement and apprehension.

The typical first days usually involve some feelings of nervousness as students begin to think about academic expectations, new teachers, new friends, and maybe even a new school.

But this year is exceptional, with many emerging questions and uncertainties due to COVID-19.

School divisions have responded to Manitoba Education guidelines and are communicating their re-opening plans to their school communities. Reactions to these plans may vary depending on a family and child's circumstances.

While some expectations have changed, other factors can remain consistent – including our response to stress, the importance of reassurance, the relationship with your child, the benefit of sharing information, and the significance of well-being.

### RESPONSE TO STRESS

Worrying about our children comes with parenting. Sometimes, we may even feel our children's stress as the new school year approaches. Our task is to help our children manage stress rather than to remove their worries.

This is not to suggest that when challenges present, we just say, "It is what it is" and push on with life. That is difficult for any of us to do. Yet, we can't just wish the stress and worry away either.

So, we develop strategies to manage stress and build our resilience. As stated by Wilson and Lyons in their book *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents*, "We build independence and the strength of courage by learning to tolerate uncertainty, to problem solve effectively, to step into uncomfortable situations, and to manage both risk and failure. Every child or teen, anxious or not, will benefit from these skills."

### REASSURE

Reassure children by reflecting on your own reactions and leading by example. It is important for adults to understand how their reactions and responses may impact the experiences of a child.

The first step is monitoring your own response to the situation. You may ask yourself, "Is fear driving my bus?"

This may help you understand the motivation behind your decision making. It is essential we identify and accept our own set of triggers – we all have them.

The key is to acknowledge how we respond and then to reframe with healthy coping strategies (self-regulation). Self-regulation is applying skills for calming the body, expressing emotions appropriately, and managing thoughts to problem-solve effectively.

Children need their parents and other adults to offer reassurance through a calm and stable environment. It is often the little things we do that register with children and reassure them. Through these little things, we can reduce worries and anxieties and build confidence.

## RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Stay connected with your children and provide encouragement. Give your children an opportunity to talk about going back to school and listen to their concerns. Listening carefully to their perspective builds strong relationships.

We seek connection. According to research from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child, "The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult."

We want our children to be able to cope with change, learn from setbacks, and work through difficult challenges.

"I think I can. I think I can. I think I can." These words from the book *The Little Engine That Could* are what parents and caregivers desire for their children: to believe in one's self and to keep trying.

This requires self-efficacy, which is the ability to persevere and to believe that one's efforts make a difference. We can help children develop self-efficacy by connecting with them and supporting their strengths as they return to in-class learning. As we listen and provide encouragement, we in turn build their resilience as they face the uncertainties of the coming school year.

## REVIEW EXPECTATIONS AND ROUTINES

Talk with your children. While this year may come with some different challenges, children generally have some hesitation when it comes to starting school.

Keeping the tone positive will be helpful for children as they transition to new learning experiences. Having discussions about expectations and routines is another way to help prepare your child for going back to school.

Review resources such as [A Guide for Parents, Caregivers and Students](#) and check school websites for specific information.

Discuss school routines and expectations such as lunch protocols, social distancing practices, wearing masks, use of lockers and cubbies, and staggered break times.

Establish and practice routines prior to going back to school. For example, morning and bedtime routines, good hygiene protocols, wearing masks, and incorporating social distancing protocols. These practices will help to normalize the new school expectations and routines your child will experience.

Let your child know that other students are nervous about going back to school. Reassure your child there will be caring adults in the school to help resolve situations and you will be there, too. It's okay to have some worries.

Reach out to professionals such as school counsellors and administrators and/or healthcare professionals for help with physical and mental well-being questions.

Providing your child with basic information on routines and expectations builds their understanding and sense of empowerment.

## REFLECT AND REFOCUS

Reflect on your expectations for the new school year and refocus as needed. Emotional and physical well-being will also be of particular importance.

In his book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff with Your Family*, Richard Carlson notes that, "Expectations are a part of life and seem to be ingrained into our thinking. However, if you can lessen your expectations (even a little bit) about how things are supposed to be... you'll be on your way to a calmer and much happier life."

Adaptation to differing expectations requires reflection, focus and patience. Schools have a plan for responding to learning gaps that may have occurred during the remote learning phase. Even so, some students may experience difficulties with academic and social expectations.

If a change in personal or academic progress is noted, speak with your child. If you have continued concerns, speak with the teachers, counsellors, and/or your health care professionals. Focusing on the whole child helps develop a healthy life balance.

These are certainly changing times. Moving forward will require flexibility and some creativity on the parts of parents, caregivers and school leaders. Each of us plays an important role in assisting our children in navigating changes as they return to school. As parents and caregivers, we are doing our best to help our children.

By focusing on relationships, reassuring our children, reviewing expectations, and reflecting and focusing on wellness, we can collectively promote a positive school experience that will continue to support the development of our children.

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## RESOURCES

### Parents and caregivers:

- *Raising Human Beings: Creating A Collaborative Partnership with Your Child* by Ross Greene
- *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children* by Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons
- *No More Meltdowns* by Jed Baker
- *The Power of Showing Up: How Parental Presence Shapes Who Our Kids Become and How Their Brains Get Wired* by Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
- *Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids and Their Parents* by Eline Snel
- *Self-Regulation and Mindfulness* by Varleisha D. Gibbs
- Carol Dweck's TED talk (10-minute video, Growth Mindset)

### Adolescents:

- *How Do You Doodle* by Elise Gravel
- *Talk to the Book* by Jess Castle
- *Stress Can Really Get on Your Nerves* by Trevor Romain & Elizabeth Verdick
- *Get Organized Without Losing It* by Janet Fox
- *A Little Spot of Anxiety: A Story About Calming Your Worries* by Diane Alber
- *My Anxious Mind: A Teens Guide to Managing Anxiety and Panic* by Michael Tompkins and Katherine Martinez.
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* by Sean Covey

### Children:

- *What to Do When you Worry Too Much* by Dawn Huebner
- *Me and My Feelings: A Kids' Guide to Understanding and Expressing Themselves* by Vanessa Green Allen
- *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst
- *What to Do When You are Scared and Worried: A Guide for Kids* by James Crist
- *Help Your Dragon Deal with Anxiety: Train Your Dragon to Overcome Anxiety* by Steve Herman

