

Helping with Worry

Worry about Returning to School

Kids often have a hard time returning to school in the fall. They, along with the rest of us, struggle to get back into a regular routine. They'd typically rather have more free time than sit in their desks listening to teachers. This often makes for bumpy transitions back to school. Some kids have an additional layer of worry that creates complications when they face going back to school. Their worries might come from leaving their parents and/or home, from a fear of challenging interactions, or from not being able to understand their schoolwork. Our brains can come up with innumerable reasons why going back to school isn't safe even after a traditional summer break.

This fall our kids are facing coming back to school after five months away. Five months full of online learning, increased time with families, decreased time with friends, increased screen time, as well as exposure to national and international events that they might have seen on TV or heard their parents talk about that could raise worrying questions. They've had all these changes and, on top of all of that, they'll be coming back to a school that doesn't look completely familiar either. There will be safety precautions that students and staff will likely need to follow. As a result, many parents are wondering how they can best help support their child with the transition back to school in the fall.

Some ideas that might help:

- 1) **Find ways to stay connected:** If your child is worried about leaving you and/or your home give them something to remind them of you/home. Put something from home in their backpack (although it's important that it's something that it's OK to lose), write a quick note to put in their lunch, give them something of yours to hold on to (a necklace, a picture, a stone), let them know you'll be having the same snack as they are at their snack time etc.
- 2) **Make room for worry:** Adults often want to rush kids toward a happier state (e.g. "You don't need to worry about not being able to do the work. You'll be fine!!") It's natural not to like watching our kids struggle but they need room to talk about what's worrying them. (e.g. "It must be really

hard to be worried about work being too hard. I remember worrying about that when I was starting a new year. It's not a fun feeling.") You're not agreeing with what they're worrying about but you are giving them space to talk about the worry. Once they've had time to express their fear then they'll be ready to move toward talking about solutions if solutions are still necessary. (e.g. "Who would be around to help you if you do have struggles with your work?")

- 3) **Use a relaxed, interested tone of voice:** Adult worry often leaks into our voice when we talk about things that worry us. Making sure that you have a positive tone in your voice when you talk with your child about going back to school will help to alleviate worries your child might be having.
- 4) **Remind kids that worry is normal and help them regulate:** Our brains send out alarm signals when we're going to be doing something new or unusual. It's working hard to keep us safe. We can help our brains feel safe again by: taking 5 intentional breaths making sure to breathe out longer than we breathe in; notice 5 things you can see, 5 things you can hear, and 5 things you can feel touching your body (the chair beneath you, the shirt on your back etc.); imagine you're blowing bubbles so that you breathe in slowly and out slowly; do something physical that uses big muscle groups (a wall sit, carry something heavy, do some push-ups; tense your whole body and then relax your whole body.) These kinds of exercises help calm our brains and our bodies.
- 5) **Bring in other thoughts and feelings:** Help your child bring other thoughts and feelings to mind along with worry. Alarm likes to take our brains and bodies over because we need it to be in charge of our whole bodies if we're in trouble. If we're worried when we're actually safe though we can use other parts of our brains to intentionally think about things along with the things that are worrying us. We aren't trying to get rid of the worry thoughts, they're important and they deserve to be heard, but we can also think about other things in our lives that are working well. Sometimes it helps to write this out. You can start by putting the worry thoughts in the middle of the paper and then add other thoughts about things that are working well around it.

Aunt Gillian	Slime	Grandma	Grandpa
Reading	Painting	Animal Crossing	Dad
Mom	Chips	I'm going to get sick.	Friends
Wall climbing	Bike riding	Max the cat	