

RETURNING TO SCHOOL DURING COVID-19: TIPS FOR PARENTS



Introduction

The past couple months have brought many challenges and/or surprising benefits to many families.

Now that September is here and school is going to start, you may have yet another challenge to overcome.

Whatever situation you are finding yourself in for the fall – [going to school](#), [virtual at home](#), or [homeschooling](#), we are hoping to support you in which ever scenario you find yourselves in.

The first section is broken down into age groups/grade with some easy tips and tricks to help you and help you prepare your child feel ready as can be to face September with confidence.

The final pages contains some general information for all caregivers.

1-3 YEARS OLD

Daycare



At this age, children have little to no impulse control, or ability to consistently understand the rules. They cannot self-regulate and they need you to help them manage their big feelings!

Activities to bring you closer together:

Create a time capsule of what they loved doing with you over the time of closures.

Create a new time capsule that they can fill with the new memories they will make when they come back from day care.



What does the science say?

At this age children need an adult brain to co-regulate.

At 1-2 years old:

- not yet able to consistently understand when something is forbidden or manage impulsive behaviours
- max. attention span of about 2 to 6 minutes

At 3 years old:

- can sometimes understand when something is forbidden and can sometimes manage impulsive behaviours
- max. attention span of about 8 to 10 minutes



TIPS TO HELP PREPARE FOR:

GOING TO SCHOOL

- Help your child(ren) to re-familiarise themselves to the school routine.
- It can be helpful to go through the daily motions/routines five days before the start of school.

HOMESCHOOLING

- Create a visual chart that outlines the sections of the day:
 - *e.g. Wake, breakfast, outdoor time, snack, free play, lunch, nap, snack, outdoor free play/craft, reading/electronic time, dinner, clean up, bedtime routine etc.*
- Let them have control where possible:
 - *e.g. They get to push the button on the timers for transitions, they get to choose between two veggies to put on their plate etc.*

4–8 YEARS OLD

JK – Grade 3



At this age, children will be able to remember the rules and control their impulses most of the time, however, that is when they are regulated. If in a dysregulated state, they still need your help to manage big feelings and cannot self-regulate.

Activities to do together:

Keep track of the time visually:

- *Create a visual chain link*
- *Mark down the days with a calendar*
- *Place five apples on a ledge and let them take one away at the end of each day etc.*

Draw out the worries or feelings on a paper.

Create sock puppets for each worry or feeling.

Place an item by the front door that they will come home to that symbolizes the special time you will have together when they return from daycare or school.

Talk about what you will do together in detail, when they come home during the ride to school/daycare or the night before.



What does the science say?

At this age children will still need an adult brain to co-regulate more intense feelings.

At 4 years old:

- can mostly understand when something is forbidden and can mostly manage impulsive behaviours
- max. attention span of about 8 to 12 minutes

At 6-8 years old:

- will still need an adult brain to start co-regulation
- max. attention span of about 12 to 24 minutes



TIPS TO HELP PREPARE FOR:

GOING TO SCHOOL

- Help your child to know what to expect:
 - Ask the teacher if it is possible to send you a picture of the classroom or of themselves wearing a mask.
 - If possible, go to the school grounds ahead of time to show them the door they will use, where they will line up and where they will be picked up.
- Offer reassurance:

"In five days, we will be able to leave the house again. It is safe outside now. You will go back to school like we used to do."

"We've spent a lot of time together at home, so its okay to have big feelings about going back"

"We will always carve in special mama time as soon as you get home. What would be fun to play together when that happens?"

VIRTUAL AT HOME

- Create a space for at home learning.
- Create a routine they can see visually so they know what to expect.
- Give them control when possible for transitions.

HOMESCHOOLING

- Pick a home-school curriculum that you find interesting and matches your abilities. When you are excited about it, they will be too.
- Offer reassurance:

"It must be tough to have to do work together now, because we've been mostly playing all summer, because I'm your mom/dad, not your teacher and because work just isn't as much fun as so many other things in the house."
- Provide practical support may also be needed:
 - e.g. set clear blocks of time for school work followed by breaks for play and connection as well as outdoor learning times (where safe to do so)

9–13 YEARS OLD

Grade 4–8



At this age, your child may be exhibiting more independence, however, they might need some help with regulating big emotions. Listening and validating can go a long way.

Activities to bring you closer together:

Write a letter together of all the things you have come to know about yourselves as individuals and as a family.

Share this with the teacher if you are comfortable.



What does the science say?

At this age youth may occasionally need an adult to support with regulating their emotions.

At 10 and up:

- are able to use their pre-frontal cortex when regulated, but it is important that they are validated first
- max. attention span of about 20 to 30 minutes



TIPS TO HELP PREPARE FOR:

GOING TO SCHOOL

- Practice all safety procedures well before school starts daily. Make it part of your daily routine.
 - e.g. *practice how to put on masks properly on their own, wear masks inside the car, wear them inside the house playing, wear them while colouring etc.*
- Talk about their thoughts and feelings on returning to school. Validate them and support them.
- Confidently share with them your reasons to sending them back to school.

VIRTUAL AT HOME

- Set up a space where they are designated for school work.
- Create a routine for the day visually for them so they know what to expect.
- Still set the expectation to change into day clothes for school times.

HOMESCHOOLING

- Create a routine for the day visually they can see so they know what to expect.
- Pick a homeschooling curriculum that you find interesting and are excited about.
- Incorporate fun and movement into activities or create opportunities for these in between subjects.

14–17 YEARS OLD

Grade 9–12



At this age, it's reasonable to expect teens to self-regulate, however, if they need support in noticing when they are dysregulated, they might need you to step in. It is also important that consistency and boundaries are set.

Activities to bring you closer together:

One on one conversations about the following:

- what did you learn about your teen in terms of their needs, dreams, values, expertise?
- what did you learn about how you support your teen best?
- what surprised you to learn about your survival instincts?



What does the science say?

At this age, teens are able to self-regulate, although their pre-frontal cortex, integral for decision making, language, processing etc. is still in development (and won't be fully developed until about 25)

At 14 and up:

- Self regulation may be established.
- Support in noticing when dysregulated
- Consistency and effective boundaries are important for these brains



TIPS TO HELP PREPARE FOR:

GOING TO SCHOOL

- Go over what they can expect, what they are worried about, and support and validate them.
- Be consistent in messaging and setting boundaries.

VIRTUAL AT HOME

- Set clear boundaries and expectations.
- Set a place for non-school essential electronics (as if in a class room).
- Create a space for school work.
- Create a routine that includes wake up times, break times, and wearing school clothes for school times.

GENERAL INFORMATION FOR ALL CAREGIVERS

You Know Your Family Best: Remember that this was likely not an easy decision for you and your family. You have good reasons for which path you are finding yourself on because you know your family and their needs the best at this time. As we continue to learn more information, it's okay to reassess and change your mind if needed.

Support for Caregivers: It is also important that you yourself as the caregiver are feeling supported as well. Who can you speak with or vent to during this potentially challenging time? What do you need during this time? How have you been able to manage so far?

Your Confidence and Attitude is Contagious: Remember that your attitude towards September will determine their outlook as well. It's okay to vent to your friends, family and partner privately, just be careful what you say or what arguments you have in front of your child. They will pick up on it and hold on to it and you may see it as more resistance to wanting to participate in September, whatever that may look like for your family. When you show your united confidence in the plan and in them, through actions and words, they will feel more ready to go back.

What is in Your Control?: In the face of uncertainty, consider what is in your control, and what is not in your control and then make judgement calls based on what is in your control. For example, could you look into if there is an option to visit the school before school starts or request the teacher email a picture of themselves wearing a mask and/or what the classroom will look?



Routine and Predictability: Routine is important when preparing for September. When we have a routine, things feel more predictable and less anxiety-provoking. Start practicing a routine before school starts to give them a chance to physically experience what September will look and feel like. Here are some examples of what you can practice:

- Wake and bed times are at the same times -- sleep is so important for proper functioning and being able to experience and manage big emotions;
- Breakfast/morning routine as if it is already September;
- When and where you are going to put on your masks; and
- Safety guidelines outlined by the school (e.g. washing hands, checking temperatures, standing on marked areas for social distancing)

What You Might Notice in Your Child/Teen's Behaviour: There are going to be lots of emotions and reactions to the upcoming transition for learning in September, whether it's at home, virtual, or in a school. As a caregiver, you might notice your child/teen showing some:

- **Resistance** (i.e. crying, delay tactics at bed time, getting irritable, stomach aches, refusal to go), or
- **Fear/Shock** (i.e. expressing worries, overly quiet or out of character active) and/or Separation anxiety (i.e. Clinging to caregiver more, or Acting more helpless).

Remember - these are **all typical and understandable responses given the situation!** Your child/teen needs extra support from you to feel safe and supported, which you can provide through being **Clear, Calm, and Consistent** and **Give Everyone Extra Time**, which will be further explained more below.

Clear, Calm and Consistent: Even though this might be a confusing time, it is important that you provide Clear, Calm, and Consistent messaging to your child/teen:

- **Clear** means keeping expectations and boundaries simple.
- **Calm** means that you are able to stay calm and regulated yourself before supporting your child/teen. Once you are calm, you can then genuinely validate their experience.
- **Consistent** means that you stick with the clear and loving boundaries you have set which is important for a predictability. Using these 3 C's can be particularly helpful when transitioning between activities and practicing new routines, like returning to school.

Give Everyone Extra Time: Give yourself extra time especially before leaving the house and drop off time, to anticipate the possibility of these valid reactions and be able to spend the time to validate their experience to make them feel safe to proceed!

The Importance of Validation: It can be challenging to witness your child struggling or in pain and often we want to take those hard feelings away with messages of positivity. Unfortunately, sometimes in our effort to make it better, we might inadvertently be invalidating the real feelings kids are experiencing, which can lead to the hard emotions feeling even bigger. Miller and LaFrance (2020) suggested, "...putting their concerns into words—even if you don't agree—can show you take them seriously and can help bring them to a place of increased calm."

Here are some potential messages to **avoid** saying (even when they are well-intended!):

- "Of course you are going to school. You have to."
- "Oh c'mon, it will be fun!"
- "It's all in your head, it's not going to be that bad."
- "We've had to deal with worse things."
- "You don't have to worry about that."
- "Everything will be fine."

Here are some potential messages and activities to try instead to help **validate their emotions**:

- "I don't blame you for not wanting to go to school, because there's going to be a new process, and because you've been so cozy at home all summer, and because you're not sure if the other kids will follow the new rules." Miller & LaFrance, August 2020
- "You've made it through some tough firsts before, and I know you can do this too."
- Help your child focus on a game to play together as you walk to school or giving a ride to a teen for whom taking transit on the first day would just push the anxiety level through the roof. The specifics will always depend on you and your child.



Conclusion

Finally, and most importantly, we need to be kind to ourselves and each other through this time. We are all navigating new territory as best as we can.

If the first week is tough, don't give up! Don't let the child's distress direct/guide the family plan if you still believe in the plan set out. This will take some time.

It's important to remember the following:

You have found yourself *homeschooling*. That must have been hard to come to. You are an amazing parent doing what works right now for your situation.

You have found yourself *sending your kids to school*. That must have been hard to come to. You are an amazing parent doing what works right now for your situation.

You have found yourself doing a *combination of online and homeschool/physical school*. That must have been hard to come to. You are an amazing parent doing what works right now for your situation.

Additional Info & Resources

Information for this resource retrieved from:

Miller & LaFrance, August 2020

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-say-kids/202008/back-school-during-covid-19?fbclid=IwAR2iRG-ZOM9kPqOmMh3JQD600WhUGIE12IYxbF3tKJyu3XBqetPFSFTmdq8>

@biglittlefeelings on Instagram

Information compiled by staff from:



In April 2020 Adventure Place, The Etobicoke Children's Centre, Griffin Centre and Skylark Children Youth & Families amalgamated to form Lumenus Community Services.

The vision of Lumenus is to provide excellent, accessible and integrated mental health, developmental and community services where every client has the opportunity to be seen, be heard and to be well. Where there are gaps we will create seamless connections – where there are obstacles or barriers, we will improve access. Where there is worry, there will be hope. We will do this in collaboration with our clients and partners. That is the bright future of Lumenus – where every client has the opportunity to be seen, be heard and to be well.

To access services, please visit any of the websites of our four divisions:



Adventure Place: <http://adventureplace.ca/>



The Etobicoke Children's Centre: <http://www.etobicokechildren.com/>



Griffin Centre: <http://www.griffin-centre.org/>



Skylark: <https://www.skylarkyouth.org/>