

Supporting children's return to school during COVID-19

EMERGING MINDS

The return to school in 2022 is set to occur within the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While the start of the school year can be a time of excitement and anxiousness, uncertainty during times of transition can be unsettling, both for children and the adults who support them.

Across the country, education settings are navigating how to operate and provide a safe environment for children and educators. The broader community is also continuing to adapt to rapid changes and expectations brought about by the Omicron variant.

It is natural for children, parents/caregivers and families to feel a heightened sense of anxiety during these times. While sustained periods of uncertainty can have longer term mental health impacts, there are actions you can take to support children's wellbeing. Parents/caregivers, educators and extended family can play an important role in helping children manage the feelings that come during times of uncertainty and reduce future risk of mental health concerns.

Ways to help children

- **How you feel matters.** Children use the people around them to judge how safe situations are – when you feel safe and calm, so do your children. Being a calm presence in uncertain times is hard, but understanding your emotions and how they might be seen by your child is a great first step. If you are calm, you are showing your child you are there for them; they can rely on you to listen and to help them understand their emotions, thoughts and behaviour. If you are struggling, seek information and support from reliable sources, such as the [Raising Children Network](#) and [Emerging Minds](#).



- **Talking to children** in a calm, considered and matter of fact way, and providing them with information that they can understand, in a way that suits their age and interests, is important. It is also OK to tell children that you don't have all the answers, but that there are ways to ask for help or information from others when needed. Making space to have these conversations and letting children know that tricky things can be discussed is helpful.
- **Reassure** your child it's okay (in fact, it's normal) to feel worried or 'different' during these times.
- **Naming your child's experience** can help them to understand and process their emotions – even if their language skills are still developing, or they're non-verbal. Take time to **notice** and **describe** the thoughts, feelings and sensations you think they may be experiencing, based on your observations.
- **Remind** children of times when they have managed difficult experiences/transitions in the past – times when they have used their strengths, skills and knowledge to help them.
- **Involve children in problem-solving.** Having conversations with children and inviting them to come up with ideas to solve problems is empowering. For example, if children are feeling nervous about their first day of school, ask what they think will help them to feel OK.

- **Give children opportunities** to make choices and to be in control at times. It might be choosing what t-shirt they want to wear, the filling in their sandwich, or taking charge of a new job around the house. It also helps to share the things they can do to keep themselves and those around them safe.
- **Don't just say everything is OK if it's not.** Being told things are 'fine' when their own physical and emotional experiences are telling them otherwise can affect a child's sense of trust. During times of uncertainty, explain how the people around you are working hard to keep everyone safe and make sure school can start soon.
- **Celebrate transitions.** Taking time to celebrate significant transitions and successes, big or small can help families focus on positives amid the enormous challenges of an ongoing pandemic. Having an element of fun can support everyone's wellbeing.
- **Reach out to educators.** If you are worried about your child during uncertain times, reach out to their educators to let them know about your concerns, and organise a time to talk and make a support plan together.
- **Acknowledge the situation** and talk with your child about what is happening, in a way that is appropriate for their age. These fact sheets offer tips to help you talk to your [baby](#), [toddler](#), [primary school-aged child](#) or [teen](#) about 'tough times' and adversity. It's OK to admit that you don't know what might happen next, but let your child know you'll be there to support them through it.
- **Foster new and old relationships.** Friendships with peers can go a long way to help children during transitions and times of uncertainty. Supportive relationships with other parents can also support children's wellbeing.
- **Be prepared for vaccination conversations.** For many children, going back to school in 2022 will involve their first COVID-19 vaccination in the weeks before school starts or early in the first school term. The topic of vaccinations is likely to come up in children's conversations at school, so it can be helpful to get ahead and have a conversation with your child before school starts – particularly if your child is still waiting for their vaccination appointment. These conversations are an opportunity to provide information which can reassure children, and to answer any questions or concerns they have before they're raised with peers. It's also an opportunity to provide children with the facts around COVID-19 vaccines and health risks, to help protect them against any misinformation or disinformation they may come across. If parents are unsure of how to talk to their child about COVID-19 vaccinations,

there are some helpful tips available through the [Australian Government Department of Health](#).

- **Plan for unexpected times at home.** It can be helpful to plan for times that children cannot attend their education setting unexpectedly and at short notice – for example, if they are identified as a COVID close contact. This can help both parents and children to feel prepared and therefore calm and in control, which can in turn impact positively on children when unexpected events disrupt their routines. Being prepared can also include having realistic expectations of yourself at times where you're confined to your home spaces with children and young people.



Examples of ways to talk with your children about returning to school

Phrases that reflect children's experiences, acknowledge and validate their emotions:

'It's okay to feel nervous about the first day of school.'

'I understand that you feel disappointed that school isn't starting when we expected it to. I know that you were really looking forward to seeing your friends.'

'I can see that you're feeling very unsure about doing school from home. It's your first time learning from home, and first times can often feel like this.'

'I hear from what you are telling me that not being able to play with your older friends at school is upsetting, and you're feeling left out of their games. There are many things we have to do because of COVID that are very difficult.'

'A lot has changed at school since you were last there. It's frustrating that you can't go to your favourite areas of the playground now. I understand.'

'It sounds like you might be feeling a few different emotions about going back to school. That's very normal – there will be many kids who feel both worried and excited, just like you.'

Phrases that encourage help-seeking, help-receiving and problem-solving:

'Who do you think you could ask if you are not sure about where something is at preschool?'

'If you aren't feeling okay at school – let's think of three people you could go to for help.'

'I'm not sure either about what will be happening on the first day back. I'm wondering who we could ask?'

'Remember when you didn't know where you were supposed to play when it was raining at school? You asked one of your friends.'

'I can see that you're really upset about not being able to go to school today. What can we do together that will help?'

'I understand this is really hard for you. Is there something I can do to help? Would you like to have a cuddle/hold my hand/sit with me/read with me?'

Phrases that remind children of previous successful transitions and their strengths:

'Remember last year, when we were doing school from home? It took us quite a while to settle into that because it was new and we weren't expecting it, but we figured it out after a little while and it worked out okay, didn't it?'

'Remember when you started preschool? At first, you weren't sure about leaving Mummy, but then the teacher helped you and you made some great friends on your own. You're really great at making friends.'

This resource was developed in collaboration with Dr Kathryn Hopps. Kathryn is an Adjunct Research Associate at Charles Sturt University where her research focus is on transition to school. You can follow Kathryn's work at [@drkhopps](https://twitter.com/drkhopps).