

# TOP PARENTING TIPS FOR SCHOOL LIFE DURING COVID-19

With schools opening and closing in line with COVID-19 restrictions and local guidelines, some children may be finding school difficult. They may feel anxious or reluctant about going to school in person, mixed with other feelings such as excitement if they have had time away. Others may have concerns about 'virtual' learning from home, such as falling behind in their work, or losing touch with their friends. Parents may also have a range of feelings, or even mixed emotions, about their children's schooling. For example, they may be happy to see their child return to friends and teachers while being concerned about new guidelines. Whether children are back at school full time, part time, or learning at home, there are many competing demands to balance.

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## **Help your child make good choices**

Schools have different requirements in their efforts to provide environments that are as safe as possible for students, teachers, and staff. Your child may have different emotions around these requirements (e.g. worry about their safety, frustration with the new rules). While it is important to listen and validate these emotions, it is also important to reinforce the school rules. If your child is going back to school in person, make sure that you understand the school's requirements and explain them to your child. You may also consider further measures to promote your child's safety. They may need reminders and practice about washing their hands, wearing a mask, maintaining physical distancing, and managing any peer pressure not to do these things. If your child is learning from home, help them set up a good learning space (e.g. minimize distractions, organize school books and materials) and manage their daily routine to include times of study and regular breaks.

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## **Take care of yourself the best you can**

Deal with any concerns you may have about your child's schooling by taking actions that give you a better sense of personal control. Stay in contact with your child's school so you feel connected and know what is going on. Stress management skills such as mindfulness and/or deep breathing can also help reduce stress. If you focus on your own wellbeing (e.g. exercise daily, eat well, get enough sleep, avoid using alcohol or drugs to lessen stress), you can stay healthy and be available for your child. It is helpful to plan ahead to allow breaks in your schedule for yourself, and also to support your child's needs during the day.

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## **Make sure your child knows you are ready to talk**

Children need to be able to talk to their parents about their concerns and have their questions answered. This is especially true if your child is worried about being at school or doing their schoolwork. Let them know you are always there for them and try to make yourself available when they want to talk. If it's not possible right then (e.g. if you are working), make a time to talk as soon as you can.

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## **Show you are listening**

When your child wants to talk, stop what you are doing and listen carefully. Avoid telling your child how they should feel, such as *That's silly. You shouldn't be scared about that.* Let them know it is OK to be worried. Talking or drawing can help children express what they are thinking and feeling. Ask them about how they are feeling and what is on their mind. This will give you a chance to better understand anything they may be confused or worried about.

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## **Be truthful in answering children's questions**

Find out what your child knows about the issue before answering their questions. Keep answers simple and honest. Get information from trusted sources like your child's school or official health websites rather than social media.

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## **Maintain everyday school routines**

In an uncertain situation, maintaining routines is helpful in providing a sense of predictability. Involve your child in working out their school routine — even if this involves returning to an old, pre-COVID routine. For example, your child might write out a daily timetable that includes the time they need to wake up to get ready for school, and a time for homework. Or they might write a list of the things they need to do in the morning to get ready for school. For younger children, you might create a picture schedule together, either drawing or finding images to show the routine for the day.

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## Take notice of behavior you like

Be on the lookout for any behavior that reflects optimism or preparations for going back to school or managing schooling from home. Use plenty of praise and positive attention to encourage the behaviors you like and want to see repeated. Let them know you are pleased by telling them what they have just done — *I know you're a bit nervous about going to school and I really admire the way you're focusing on the good things like seeing your friends. That's a great attitude!* or *I really like the way you're managing your study space at home. You're keeping everything really well organized.*

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## Help children learn to tolerate uncertainty

The COVID-19 crisis has created uncertainty for everyone. Parents need to find a way to accept uncertainty and show this through their actions and words. It's OK to say, *I don't know. Let's find out what we can.* Swapping between learning from home and returning to school in person represents more uncertainty. Unexpected technology challenges can be frustrating for all involved. With older children, you can encourage them to check in with their teachers about managing their workload and preparing for assignments if they are worried about falling behind. When schools are open, no one can know whether they may perhaps need to close again for a short or longer time. It's good to remember that teachers and school staff are likely to be managing more stress as well, and we can model how to be understanding of others as well as taking care of ourselves. Big changes and uncertainty in children's lives can be hard, but they are also an opportunity for developing emotional resilience. This will be useful in the future as children navigate the inevitable ups and downs of life.

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## Reach out and stay connected

Children will feel happier and more confident if they feel supported in their relationships. Make sure you keep up your use of phones, online communication (e.g. video conferencing), and social media to keep in touch with family, friends, and neighbors. It is particularly important that children feel like they are connected to their friends and peers.

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## Keep up quality family time

Your child may have enjoyed having so much time with their family while everyone was staying at home and may be worried this will stop with the busy return to school commitments. Try to carry on the positive things like making sure you have time to talk, play and do activities together, like going for walks, working on projects and cooking as a family. We can all take some positives out of this uncertain and challenging time.

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