Going back to school after lockdown

The idea of going back to school after being in lockdown can be difficult to get used to, especially after staying at home and being away from other people for an extended period. It may be anxiety-inducing for your child for various reasons, from fears surrounding COVID-19 to re-adjusting to having lessons again. This guide focuses on how you can help your child manage their concerns about going back to school and better prepare them to adjust back to having school.

What practical steps can my child take?

1. **Set a routine - getting used to school hours**

As many classes are currently being held online and at home, it can be easy to forget what it was like to get ready for school. Here are some tips on getting back into that routine:

- **Getting up at the time they normally would on school days.** Waking up close to the time your child normally would on school days can help to adjust their body clock to school hours. Having a routine of getting out of bed, brushing teeth, and having breakfast as they usually would, can help prepare them for the start of the day as well.
- **Practise putting on the school uniform or packing your schoolbag.** Encouraging your child to try these once in a while can help them get used to the idea of going back to school, and put into practice what they would normally do to prepare for their school days.
- As much as you can, encourage your child to **have virtual lessons during the usual school hours**. This can get them used to lesson hours and ease them back into the structure of a regular school day.
    - **Remember to take breaks whenever needed!** Too much screen time can be taxing, especially with the increased screen time from virtual lessons. Be sure to encourage them to take some time away from the computer whenever they notice that they are feeling tired or have difficulty concentrating.
- It is also important to **get enough sleep and feel rested**. Having a regular sleep schedule and maintaining a consistent bedtime routine can help to get up in the mornings with enough energy for the day ahead. For school-aged children, 9 to 11 hours of sleep is a healthy amount to aim for.

2. Setting the scene

Creating a suitable learning environment at home can not only optimise learning, but also help your child get used to what lessons are usually like in school before returning.

- Encourage having virtual lessons and doing schoolwork at a **desk or table** if the lesson calls for it. Try to get them to **prepare the materials** they would normally take to school as well, such as books, stationery and paper, or art materials. This can help re-familiarise them with what their lessons are usually like in school!
- If possible, have them have their lessons or school related work at a designated place **outside of the bedroom or playroom**. Setting boundaries between schoolwork and leisure/rest time can make it easier to get back into school.
- **Try to make sure there are few distractions as possible** (e.g. phones) around while your child is having lessons. For instance, create a quiet environment, perhaps with the exception of your presence to assist them with any trouble or technological difficulties they might have during online lessons.

3. Getting used to the daily travel to school

After staying at home and being out of school for an extended period of time, the idea of travelling to school and even stepping outside of the house can be a difficult and anxiety-inducing task for your child. It can therefore be helpful to help them get used to this as well.

- **Try taking regular walks to school** with your child as a form of exercise and to get some fresh air.
- If this is too challenging or overwhelming at first, start by taking short walks outside in the direction of travel to school until your child feels more comfortable.
- While outside, try to encourage them to notice their surroundings. What can they can *see, hear, or smell* around them? Encouraging them to notice these things and even point them out can make the walks more enjoyable, and also help keep them from dwelling on anxieties or apprehensions about going to school.

Coping with feelings of anxiety

As it is such an uncertain time, it is understandable to feel some anxiety and have anxious thoughts about going back to school. These anxious thoughts might surround fears surrounding safety and contamination during COVID-19, difficulties re-adjusting to face-to-face lessons, or meeting friends and classmates.

Anxiety can lead to a number of bodily symptoms:

- Difficulties thinking clearly
- Not wanting to go to places with many people
- Not wanting to do things they usually enjoy
- Changes in appetite
- Difficulties relaxing
- Sleeping difficulties
- Heart racing
- Feeling sweaty or shaky
- Feeling tired all the time
- Headaches or stomach pains

If you notice your child having any of the above difficulties, this might be a sign that they are feeling anxious. Respond in a supportive way and explain to them that these are normal reactions to have. Take time to listen to their concerns, comfort them and provide affection, as well as reassure them that they are doing well. Encourage them to express their feelings with you about any concerns they might have about going back to school or the COVID-19.

How can I help my child manage anxious thoughts?

These anxious thoughts and feelings can be difficult for your child to deal with. When your child has negative thoughts about things that could happen in the future, such as those mentioned above, this process is called **worrying**. Worrying can be helpful as it helps to keep us safe from danger. However, when there is no control over what could happen in the future, worrying can be unhelpful and increase feelings of anxiety. Further, trying to stop or supress such worries and trying hard *not* to think of them can actually have the opposite effect!

www.copingwithcoronavirus.co.uk

All our self-help guides are based on well-evidenced psychological models from the family of Cognitive Behavioural Therapies
Written by a group of trainee clinical psychologists from University College London (currently working with in the NHS)
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1. Worry Time

Setting **worry time** is a way to reduce the amount of time that we spend worrying by delaying these worries or anxious thoughts. Our guide here provides more information on the nature of worry and the worry time technique. Here is how you can try worry time with your child:

- Help your child set **around 15-20 minutes a day of worry time**, in which they are allowed to worry or think about their anxious thoughts. Get them to write all of their worries down on paper.
    - One fun and creative way to do this is creating a **Worry Jar,** which is a place for your child to store their worries. The idea of putting their worries away into this jar might even provide some comfort for your child. Have some fun and get creative when decorating the worry jar - get your child to fold the worries they have written down and put them in.
- Have worry time at the **same time every day**. Pick a time together with your child that works best for them. It is advised to have worry time later in the day so there are things they have to worry about, but not too late that it would affect their sleep.
    - When worry time begins, get your child to open the worry jar and worry as much as they want about worries they have already put into in the jar, or add any new worries to the jar that they want to.
- At the end of worry time, try to engage in an activity **to move their attention away from their worries**. For instance, watch a TV programme, play a game, or read a book.
- Try to encourage them to **delay their worries at times other than worry time**. If your child expresses feeling anxious or worried about something in the day, encourage them to write the thought down and save that worry for worry time. Then, get them to engage in a relaxing or enjoyable activity to move their attention away from the worry.
- Your child may understandably not be familiar with or understand the process of worry time. Guide them throughout the process and do it together with them until or unless they are be able and would like to practise this on their own.
- Eventually, your child may tell you they no longer worry about things they have put in the jar, and may even not feel the need to have worry time on some days - celebrate these successes with your child, and provide lots of encouragement and praise!

2. Positive self-talk

Positive self-talk is a way people can encourage themselves when feeling anxious or doubtful. Practising this together with your child and modelling this at home can be a way for them to soothe their anxious thoughts and worries, together with worry time.

- Notice when your child is having negative thoughts or worries.
- When they express having such thoughts, try to find out and understand what's wrong, and reassure them that you are there to provide support.
- Then, encourage them to choose a positive statement to say to themselves. Some examples include:
  - Things will be okay
  - I am not alone
  - I can get through this
  - I can do this
- Or, come up with a few statements together! Practising this can help your child reassure themselves whenever they are having an anxious thoughts, even when you are not around.

Staying safe from contamination

It is important for you and your child to keep safe during this time, and for them to also continue engaging in safe practices when they do go back to school. Here are some reminders and tips on practicing keeping safe at home and when they go back to school / spend more time outdoors.

1. Teach and model good hygiene practices at home
    - Wash your hands with soap and water frequently such as before meals/snacks and when returning inside after being outdoors. This website provides a guide and infographic on handwashing for kids that you can use at home.
    - Use an alcohol-based sanitizer if soap is not available
    - Cough or sneeze into a tissue
    - Avoid touching your face, eyes, nose, or mouth
    - Avoid sharing food, drinks, or utensils with others

2. **Practice social distancing together with your child**
   - When outdoors, practice social distancing with your child by keeping 2 metres away from other people.
   - Encourage them to keep practising this when they start going back to school, for instance on their daily walk or travel to school.

3. **Be aware of your child's health**
   - If they are feeling unwell, ask them to stay at home to rest and recover.
   - Provide information to your child in a reassuring way, for instance when explaining to your child why they need to stay at home.
   - You can refer to the NHS website for more specific guidance on the coronavirus in children.

4. **Provide age-appropriate information**
   - Be aware of the kind of information your child is receiving, and be mindful of information that may be false. When talking to your child, try to double-check how accurate that information is and if the information comes from a valid source.
   - Tailor this information in a way your child can understand, and speak in a calm manner, offering comfort when needed.
   - Kidshealth.org offers some tips and practical advice on talking to your children about the coronavirus and safe practices.

References

[1]https://www.drstephaniemargolese.com/the-worry-jar-technique-help-your-child-overcome-worries-and-anxiety
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