



SUPPORTING YOUTH GOING BACK TO SCHOOL DURING COVID-19

Returning to school after summer break is always an adjustment, but this year marks a return unlike any other. After more than a year of physical distancing, virtual learning, home schooling, and modified schedules, students of all ages may be experiencing heightened anxiety and uncertainty about the school year ahead.

Consider the following tips to help support the mental wellness of the young people in your life as they settle into the new school year.

1 Approach the topic casually

For some youth, the new school year will be cause for excitement and relief, but for others it will be a source of intense anxiety. When asking how a young person is feeling about the return, consider **starting the conversation while participating in another activity** to help curb awkwardness and encourage candor.

“Side by side” conversations while playing a game or cooking can be adapted for young people of all ages, allowing some breathing space when tackling tough topics.

It’s important to find out how youth are feeling about the transition, but they’re less likely to engage if they are put on the spot or made to feel uncomfortable.

2 Listen without judgment

You may be surprised to hear some of the concerns young people are feeling about settling into the school year. Try listening to their thoughts, feelings, and concerns without judgment.

Look at the world through their eyes and try to remember when you were their age.

This self-reflection will help you relate to how the person is feeling.

While it can be tempting to compare how you might react to the same situation, it’s essential that you show compassion and understanding. Instead of diminishing a fear you see as exaggerated, for example, offer validation. Acknowledging a young person’s fears can go a long way toward allaying them.

3 Remind youth it’s OK to feel uneasy

If you’re hearing a lot of apprehension about returning to school, **remind them that fear and anxiety are normal responses to change**. Sometimes, youth perceive that they are the only ones who feel a certain way. That’s normal. They don’t have yet the perspective that comes with being older or have comparable experiences to draw from. So it’s important to let them know they are not alone and many others share similar feelings.

4 Look for changes in mood or behaviour

Everyone has a baseline set of attitudes, moods, behaviours, social tendencies, etc. Watch for deviations from the norm in any of these areas, as they may be a sign of declining mental health.

For example

- If a typically outgoing young person who does well in school starts to become more withdrawn, shy, or pay less attention to their schoolwork.
- It could mean they are having trouble coping – either with the return to school or with something else.
- For smaller children, these changes might include disturbed sleep, refusing food, extra difficulty separating from a parent, or more frequent outbursts.

5 Keep the conversation going

It may take time to build up the trust a young person needs to open up. By revisiting the topic from time to time – without being too pushy – you’re sending the message that you care and you’re available to listen. Checking in regularly will also allow you more opportunities to explore and identify any changes in mood or behaviour you may have noticed. **Take part in fun activities to strengthen your relationship with the youth in your life, and build a trusting, safe place for them to turn to when feeling stressed, anxious, or nervous.**

6 Reinforce resilience

It’s important to remind young people of all the things they have overcome. While COVID-19 has disrupted the last year and a half of their education, social lives, and everyday routines, they have made it to this point by adapting as needed. Help them change negative or unhelpful thoughts into more positive, helpful ones by asking them about their successes and how they have coped. **By reinforcing their resilience, you can help instil confidence in their ability to face whatever challenges lie ahead.**

7 Be vulnerable

While comparing an adult’s situation to a young person’s has limitations, it can be useful to occasionally open up about your own concerns – without putting pressure on the young person to provide solutions. **Offer thoughts on your own situation and the techniques you’ve found to reduce anxiety.**

Something as simple as

- “I was feeling a little anxious about discussions around returning to the office, so I took a walk at lunch to clear my head.”

This can demonstrate how to manage stress without sounding like a lecture. Modelling the use of relaxation skills like deep breathing during challenging situations may also be helpful.

8 Take a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) course or sign up for a Strongest Families program

If you’re interested in learning more about supporting mental health for the youth in your life, consider signing up for [MHFA Supporting Youth Virtual](#). The newly updated course will teach you how to recognize the signs of declining mental well-being and engage in conversations about those observations. You’ll also learn how to assist in mental health or substance use crises, seek outside supports, and care for yourself in the process.

In many provinces and territories, Strongest Families Institute programs are freely available (and for Canadian military and Veterans’ families, all resources are free).

See www.strongestfamilies.com for details about where services are available. Send a message through the Contact Us page or (if you don’t see your region listed) call **1-866-470-7111**. You can also go to your provincial or territorial government website to see which services are available.

More about Strongest Families Institute

For 10 years, the [Strongest Families anxiety programs](#) for ages 6-17+ have been equipping children, youth, and families with evidence-based skills to overcome, control, and cope with anxiety and depression symptoms. Clients are guided by their personal coach to overcome anxiety related to school, social situations, peer acceptance, separation from loved ones, specific phobias, and many other common challenges.

All program materials (available in English and French) **are free**, and the website offers many helpful videos and client stories. Telephone coaches are diversity trained and supportive, providing a safe, non-judgmental space while customizing care to meet clients’ specific needs and situations. Outcomes have been reported as “life-changing” for most who complete the programs.

For more information, visit www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/covid19



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