

# Your child returning to school

## Wellbeing Tip Sheet for Parents

When children have had a break from school they may experience a range of feelings about returning. Some children may feel anxious, nervous, scared, others may feel excited and delighted, some children may feel a mix of these feelings. This tip sheet is to support you in talking and engaging with your children about returning to school and also to support your own self-care.

### 1. All feelings are ok

Supporting your children to return to school following a break can often be a little stressful for parents. Giving your child the opportunity to talk about their feelings will really support them to manage their emotions and behaviours. Remember, all feelings are OK.

#### Space and opportunity to express feelings.

Give your child the space to talk about their feelings through words, pictures or play. You can make it a fun and playful experience by using puppets, emotion cards or imaginary play. You may choose to set aside one to one time to talk with your child about how they are feeling depending on their age, while some children find informal chats helpful too such as when washing up or out on a drive.

#### Validate your child's feelings

Reflecting the feeling back to your child will let them know that you have really heard what they are saying and help them make sense of their feelings. "You are telling me that you're feeling a little worried about going back to school". It is important that your child understands that their feelings are heard and accepted. Let your child know that you know what they are worried about and that you will be there to support them as they settle back in. Perhaps remind your child about what will be the same at school and highlight how well they coped previously.

#### Ask your child where do they feel the feeling in their body?

Your child's feelings may show through in their body, such as butterflies in their tummy, little aches, difficulty sleeping etc. By naming the connection between body experience and feelings this helps your child understand themselves and their reactions to feelings. Letting your child know that you understand this can be helpful for a child.

#### Use play or art to express feelings

Where your child does not have the language to express their feelings, simply allowing them to play or draw can support them to work through these feelings. With you, the parent or guardian, being present and putting words to this, you are letting them know that you are supporting them to understand their feelings.

### Mind Yourself

As important as it is to give your children the space to talk about their feelings to you, you might also be feeling a mixture of emotions thinking about your children returning to school. It is important that you understand that it's ok to have mixed emotions and you know that all feelings are important in their own right. As we often encourage children to name their emotions out loud and know how this can really help them cope better, this is just as true for parents. Some parents might find this difficult to do and so you can try this in a variety of ways;

- Quietly reflect on your feelings yourself and think about where you are feeling them in your body
- Write down your feelings in a notebook
- Share your feelings with a family member or friend

## 2. Routines are important

As you prepare your child for their return to school remember routines can be a good way to support with this transition. Routines make children feel safe and so simply putting a routine in place can often help the whole family get along better.

### Get an early night

Bedtime may have looked a little different recently for many reasons. Now is the time to return to a bed time routine which sets everyone up for the next day. We know when children get a good night's sleep they are in better form, are more alert and able to concentrate on their day. This is the same for adults!

### Get up and dressed in the mornings

Practice waking up earlier and getting washed and dressed and supporting or encouraging your children to do the same. You might want to eat breakfast together or get some exercise as a family to start your day.

### Wind down in the evenings

Having an evening/bed time routine is key to how the next day will turn out. You might suggest that the TV and phones get turned off at a certain time, there is time for a bath or a shower, that children read or you read a story for them. You could consider doing some gentle breathing or relaxation exercises to help calm everyone's bodies and prepare for a good night's sleep.

### Plan the routine for when school begins

Once you know when your child will return to school, now is the time to introduce the topic of school routines again, planning and

talking to your children about what this might look like, and your expectations. Getting their input will support everything to run a little smoother when it happens. Ensure they will have all they need for their return and check with them what food they want to have in the lunch box each day, allow them to support you with the shopping lists.

### Get a visual planner

Dust off the daily/weekly planner or calendar if it hasn't been used as much in the past while. These help you and your children to visually see what the day will look like. Don't forget to include wind down activities for the evening and family time in your calendars. Children often cope better when they know what to expect from their day.

### Returning to School

It is completely understandable that parents might have lots of concerns for their children returning to childcare/school following a break or absence. It is important that you discuss any of your concerns with your child's childcare/ school provider. Remember you know what works best for your child and so communicating this and feeling comfortable about the return will allow you to plan your home life/day accordingly and support your child to prepare for this transition.



# 3. How to support your child if they become overwhelmed

Returning to school following a break or absence can be daunting and children may become overwhelmed at times. As a parent you want to protect your children from any discomfort and ensure that they are safe when you are not with them. By preparing your child for their return to school you are supporting them to cope with the challenges they might face.

## Talk to your child

It is important you're encouraging your child to talk about their worries and concerns. Can you together figure out what exactly might be overwhelming them? This can be done through conversation, art/drawing, or play, you know what will work best for your child.

## Keeping your connection

Your child may find this transition difficult, as may you. Using a 'transitional object' can support your child to feel connected to you when they are not with you. This could be a special stone you pick together, a photo of the two of you, a small teddy they can keep in their bag or a little note from you in their lunch box.

## Always reassure

How anxious your child feels will depend on their temperament and you and your family's particular circumstance. Reassure

them that you are there for them to listen to their worries and concerns. Talk to your child's teacher about some strategies that you know calm and support your child

## Set a good example

When trying to establish a cultural of talking about feelings and connection with the heart, body, mind, it is important that you set this example by your actions too. Talk about your feelings as appropriate, name what you do when you are feeling sad or worried to make yourself feel better e.g. When I feel worried I talk to my best friend, I do a short meditation and go for a walk.

## Don't forget to breathe

If you are feeling overwhelmed as a parent, take a moment in your day to mind yourself, take a big deep breathe in for 4 and breathe out for 6, do this three times. Reach out to others for support.

# 4. Our minds and bodies are connected

We know children, like adults, feel fear and worry in their bodies. As a parent, you can help your child understand this and help calm them. Emotional regulation and grounding techniques such as feeling your feet on the ground, support us to be able to communicate effectively. As a parent it is important for you to feel grounded before you respond to your children. You are your child's anchor.

Make breathing activities a part of the morning and afternoon routine- you can playfully suggest this by using flowers, bubbles, their hand or a picture of a rainbow.

Short bursts of exercise can be really beneficial. Jumping jacks, wall pushes, tensing all muscles in the body - holding then releasing.

Try these activities with your child and you will reap the benefits too. Remember adults hold fear and worry in our bodies too, and as a parent it is important to role model these behaviours in order to demonstrate their usefulness. The Heart Body Mind section of the Barnardos website

has lots of activities for the whole family to practice this connection between the heart, body and mind. Try some, and crown your child a Heart, Body, Mind Champion!

Remember – if you are parenting with your partner, it's important to be patient with one another. Acknowledge how you both deal with situations, and allow for potential differences. It's important to work together and talk about how you will approach and resolve any tensions.



## 5. Try to stay positive

It can be hard when things are uncertain or things have changed to have a positive attitude, however positive talk can really frame our mind-set and create a calmer, more peaceful home environment.

### Treating problems with kindness

Your children may come to you with problems or worries during this time. Support them to self-regulate themselves (using breathing/relaxation techniques), listen to them, validate their feelings in what to do next. Remember you may not have all the answers but you can reassure your child that you are there for them and will support them no matter what. Be kind to yourself.

### Start the day with a positive affirmation

You could create individual affirmations and family affirmations to support everyone to have a positive day e.g. "Today I will be happy and kind to others", "Today I will be brave and strong", "Today I will learn something new".

### Communicate and Connect

Keep communication channels open with your child, check in with them each day, and be open to hearing what goes well and what they are finding hard. Make family time a priority at the weekends especially. Be creative at home-setting up a movie night as if it was like going to the cinema, pop up a tent in the living room and camp out for the night, or have family pizzeria night, create your own pizzas with family favourite toppings. Make connection a priority at weekends!

## Remember

As a parent, you may sometimes feel as though things are out of control - so control the controllables. If you consistently return to a connection between your heart, body and mind you will find your calm. You need to find this in order to support your children to find theirs.

Always remember you are strong, you are confident and you are capable.