



REDUCING BACK-TO-SCHOOL ANXIETY FOR CHILDREN

The Bottom Line

Many children experience increased anxiety over the return to school. Children may struggle with anxiety. If they are required to wear a mask, struggles may stem from trauma or a sensory disability. Taking a gradual approach with positive support and structure will help reduce back-to-school anxiety, learning gaps, and mask anxiety.

Back-to-School Anxiety

Children and youth have been experiencing increased anxiety since COVID-19 began. Upon the return to school, many children will be experiencing new or increased social anxiety with others, separation anxiety with family, and anxiety regarding their health and safety as for some, school is thought of as an unsafe place to be.

Moreover, some children have suffered during the COVID-19 lockdown from retraumatization, maltreatment, hunger, trauma-layering, etc. Other children have not suffered during the COVID-19 lockdown, and may have actually suffered more at school due to bullying or intense academic pressure. Many if not most children will be experiencing a learning gap; however, COVID-19 has exacerbated potential learning gaps for already vulnerable and marginalized children. Given this, the behaviours and emotional responses may be different for each child.

Possible Responses

Strategies General to Service Providers, Teachers, and Caregivers

- Prepare in advance to witness signs of stress in children. This may include regressions in behaviour, such as temper tantrums and/or bed/pants wetting.
- Try not to overemphasize the potential dangers to children. While still adhering to all safety precautions, attempt to make the experience as normal as possible with routine and structure.
- Model optimism and healthy coping mechanisms. This is beneficial for the person expressing optimism and supports children to self-regulate.

Possible Responses (Continued)

- Continue open, honest, direct, and realistic conversations with children about returning to school during COVID-19. Avoid instilling any excessive fear.
- Avoid asking children what they are anxious about, but rather ask what is on their minds.
- Listen, validate feelings, and empathize. Simultaneously, maintain a positive outlook and remind them of safety precautions that will be put in place to keep them healthy and what they can do to keep themselves safe.
- With many extracurricular activities being cancelled, support the child in finding new talents and interests they can participate in to boost self-esteem.
- Do not give up after the first week. Continue check-ins, routines, and plan activities to look forward to. Take a gradual approach to introducing children back to school.

Strategies Specific to Caregivers

- Gradually return to normal sleep schedules where children receive lots of rest.
- Prepare plans for meals and snacks, childcare, and potential time off work ahead of time. This will reduce caregiver anxiety and free up time to focus on any problems that may arise during the first week of school.
- Maintain excitement about back-to-school activities that children normally look forward to, such as back-to-school shopping and seeing their friends again.
- Unless you are concerned for your child's health or safety, do not give in to pleas to stay home from school. Support the child to feel safe and in control in any way they need, but maintain that going to school is a reasonable request. Allowing the child to stay home may only confirm that school is unsafe and increase anxiety.

Strategies Specific to Teachers and Other School Service Providers

- Strive to support the individual academic, social, and emotional needs of each child based on their circumstances, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Recognize when academic, social, and emotional issues may require advanced intervention and professional support and act accordingly.
- Praise children for being courageous and for any effort put into academics, regardless of whether success has yet to occur.
- Be patient and understanding with children who are learning to consistently wear a mask.
- Strive to understand the social, economic, and emotional impacts of the pandemic as determinants of new and/or less than desirable behaviours and reactions.

Mask Anxiety

Many children, youth, and adults experience severe anxiety and panic attacks while wearing a mask. This may be due to misinformation that wearing a mask restricts breathing or increases CO₂ consumption, causing anxiety over health. This may also be due to the experience of severe trauma that involved restrictions in breathing, including sexual assault. Children and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may struggle wearing a face covering and may experience increased barriers to communication when the facial expressions of others are hard to read. People with hearing impairments who rely on reading lips when others do not know sign language also experience barriers to communication where mask wearing is mandatory.

With mandatory mask wearing being advised, some caregivers, teachers, school staff, service providers, and students may experience difficulty adjusting to any type of face covering. Gradually adapting to wearing a mask will require patience and positive support from those around the person experiencing difficulty as well as the person adjusting towards themselves.

Possible Responses: Becoming Comfortable With Face Coverings

- Begin slowly and make small steps towards wearing a face covering.
- If anxiety is provoked from false information, read articles or watch videos with healthcare officials wearing multiple masks showing how they are able to breathe and their blood oxygen levels remain the same.
- Practice slower and deeper breathing. Wearing a mask may unintentionally activate shallow breathing, which may induce anxiety. Breathing deeply will feel more comfortable with the mask on and reduce symptoms of anxiety.
- Practice wearing a face mask at home for the feeling of comfortability and safety. Gradually introduce mask wearing in low stress public environments for short periods of time to experience success in public mask wearing.
- Find a face covering that works best. This may be a mask with different fabric or straps, or a different type of face covering such as a scarf, face shield, or handkerchief.
- Designing one's own mask may make wearing a mask feel more special and less frightening.

Possible Responses (Continued)

- Lightly spray a fabric scent such as lavender onto the covering 20 minutes before use. Ensure the scent strength is enough to provide feelings of relaxation without being too overpowering.
- Chew gum or suck on a candy for distraction and improved smell underneath the mask.
- The use of transparent face masks allows the mouth to be visible so others can read lips and facial expressions.
- The use of these may be especially beneficial in classrooms or environments consisting of individuals who are differently abled. Specific to children, demonstrate mask wearing on a beloved person or object, such as a stuffed animal, doll, or role model family member.



For original sources and documents, please visit: www.childtraumaresearch.ca