

HELPING CHILDREN MANAGE CHANGE

Managing the Return to Work: Coronavirus Pandemic

Change is hard for everyone, but can be especially challenging for children. Adults have the time and life experience to think through major changes and how they can be handled, while for children, it can feel like change is being imposed upon them. Coming on the heels of a long period of change, it is important for parents to be intentional as they help children when they return to work.

Preparing for the change

Map out the changes. What routines will be brand new? Which are a return to old routines? What is not changing? It is important to identify what should be familiar and unfamiliar with the new schedule so you can explain these changes clearly and concretely.

Give advanced warning of the changes. Walk them through what will be different for them and when it will begin. Explain why this change is taking place. Allow them to ask questions, but keep explanations appropriate to their age and developmental level.

Maintain consistency where you can. Routine and structure can help stave off anxiety for children. It can give them a sense of some control. Reviewing what will stay in place for them can serve as an important anchor point.

Focus on the positives of the change. Help them see what they can look forward to. If they will return to school or daycare, emphasize that they'll see their friends and teachers again. Remind them of the fun activities they'll be able to resume.

Brainstorm ways to maintain positive rituals. Consider how you can keep some of the routines you've developed that you and the children enjoyed about staying at home – family dinners, arts and crafts time, after-dinner walks. Can you maintain these in some form after you return to work?

Provide reassurance of safety. Kids are exposed to news coverage about the virus just as we are. They may have worries about you returning to the workplace and getting sick. Let them know what you will continue to do to stay safe and keep them safe.

Set expectations. For younger children, talk with them about what they will need to do to be ready and on time in the morning. Discuss your expectations around bed times too. Using a ten-minute warning (verbal, timer, alarm, etc.) to cue them that time is nearly up can make it easier for them to switch gears. If you can, practice "new" routines and schedules in advance to get them used to it before you "go live."

Address concerns or feelings. Expect some resistance to the change. Children may have grown to enjoy some aspects of staying at home during the pandemic – spending time with you regularly, more time for hobbies and games, etc. The end to this lifestyle may draw out a variety of feelings – sadness, anger, confusion, among others. Allow them to share their feelings. Let them know that whatever they're feeling is okay.

Be mindful of your child's personality and behavior patterns when making a plan. If they have anxious tendencies or existing mental health concerns, you may need to reach out to daycare or school personnel ahead of time to discuss your concerns and put a plan in place. If you see changes or reactions to the transition that concern you, and they go on for more than a couple of weeks, contact a mental health professional.

Enacting the change

Emphasize the need for safety measures to continue. Remind them to continue practicing healthy hygiene, like those listed in the box. Emphasize that even though some things seem like they are going “back to normal,” they still need to be careful and make sure they are taking care of themselves.

Have realistic expectations. It takes some time for children to fully acclimate to a new schedule, even if some aspects are a return to an earlier routine. Take their age and temperament into account. You may need to provide regular reminders of what they need to do next. Try to be patient if they forget or make a mistake. Gently redirect them towards the plan you put in place.

Help them manage and express their reactions. Know that you might see stress reactions in your children – physical complaints or sleep problems, moodiness or irritability, separation anxiety, withdrawal, and other signs. Depending on their age, they may not always be able to express them to you. Recognize the fears and challenges your child is facing. Be gently supportive and try to bring in that positive viewpoint wherever possible.

Model the behavior you want to see. Kids look to adults for cues on how they should think, feel, and react to a situation. Keep calm, confident, and positive. Show them how to use deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques to help calm anxiety. Respond to challenges with flexibility, modeling effective problem-solving of challenges. This not only helps show them how to cope with change more effectively, but it helps you, too!

Safety tips for children

- › Coach children to be cautious around anyone who is sick, coughing, or sneezing.
- › Remind them to cough or sneeze into a tissue and throw it into the trash, or into their elbow rather than their hand.
- › Teach them to wash their hands for 20 seconds with soap and water after they cough or sneeze, and before they eat.
- › Make handwashing into a game; sing a song they can remember and repeat when they are on their own.
- › Remind them not to touch their face, especially when they are at school or daycare with other children and adults.



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TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

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All change makes demands on us to cope and adapt. These added demands cause stress. Often the very things that could help us reduce stress get sidelined by it. We end up neglecting healthy, stress-reducing actions. Use this checklist to prioritize the self-care that can make you more stress-resistant during periods of transition.

Mindset

- Notice self-defeating self-talk: "I can't do this again." "I'll never get this new process." Watch for common themes.
- Use positive self-talk to remind yourself of strengths and abilities: "This is hard, but I'm strong. I can get through it."
- Set aside a limited time each day to review your worries and how to respond. Then let them go until the next day.
- Avoid turning to alcohol, drugs, or unhealthy behaviors as a way of coping.

Activity and rest

- Find time for some type of physical activity every day to tame stress and improve health and stamina.
- Try moderate to vigorous exercise sessions several times per week for an even greater impact on stress.
- Find an activity that you truly enjoy. Build it into your schedule to make it harder to dismiss.
- Be active early in the day (at least several hours before going to bed) to avoid insomnia and other sleep issues.
- Prioritize sleep. You should get enough to awake feeling well-rested and energized.
- Find one or more enjoyable ways to embrace relaxation of mind and body: walks, hobbies, meditation, etc.
- Remember that it's okay to simply do nothing sometimes.

Nutrition

- Be aware that stress can push you to reach for carbohydrates because they trigger comforting brain chemicals.
- Be ready for cravings; stock low-fat, complex carbs like air-popped popcorn or whole-wheat products.
- Plan ahead with meals and snacks to avoid making stress-induced decisions.
- Nurture yourself with non-food items when stressed. Identify things you enjoy that don't involve food to use instead.

Support

- Be open to turning to others for emotional and practical support, even virtually. It's not a weakness to reach out.
- Build a strong support system. Look for listeners, givers of honest feedback, and nurturers to build you up.
- Understand that mental health professionals can help you problem-solve and learn how to manage your stress.

Together, all the way.®



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