

The Two Way Street

Dear Parents/Carers,

Thank you for your support over the last few months, helping us ease the children back into school life. We are so proud of how well they have adapted and settled straight back in to new routines.

We are sure that you are also looking forward to the summer break (and hoping for plenty of sunshine!) but we are aware that returning to school in September, particularly during such an uncertain time, may seem daunting for some. After being off school for so long, it is only natural that many young people will be worried about returning to school.

Here are some tips from [youngminds.org.uk](https://www.youngminds.org.uk) on how you can support your child to transition back to school life:

1. Talk to your child about how they are feeling about going back to school and try not to make assumptions. Ask them if they are worried or feel scared about anything, but also if they are excited about or looking forward to something. No matter how your child feels, let them know that it is completely normal to feel a mixture of emotions and that everyone will be in the same boat.
2. Provide your child with as much information about their new routine and school day as you can. This will help them to prepare for any changes that have been made to the timings of their day, the layout of their classroom, their peer groups and playtimes. For younger children, it can be really helpful for them to visualise these changes - so we will do our best to support with this.
3. Reassure your child. During the lockdown we have been told to stay at home, remain socially distant from others and wash our hands regularly. This means children may find it difficult to go back to school because it will be a huge change from what they have been asked to do throughout the pandemic. Talk with your child about ways they can stay safe at school, such as washing their hands before and after eating, and reassure them that we are putting measures in place to keep them safe.
4. Re-establish a routine to help ease into school life. During lockdown or over the holidays, it is understandable that your family's routine may have changed. Children are likely to have been waking up later or going to bed later. To help them get ready

for school, try to gradually get them back into their usual morning and bedtime routines as they get closer to their return date.

5. Don't put pressure on yourself. The transition back into school is likely to take some time. Lots of children will experience ups and downs. Try your best to support, reassure and comfort them, without putting pressure on yourself to make sure their homework is done immediately, or they settle into a new routine straightaway.
6. Think ahead. As well as reflecting on what has happened during the past few weeks, it is important to help children develop hope and a sense of excitement for the future. At a time like this, it can be hard to feel positive, but identifying the things that they can look forward to will help them to realise that the current situation won't last forever and their feelings will change. We are looking forward to lots of exciting things coming up in the next school year!
7. Seek support if you need it. Transitioning back to school after this year is no easy task. Should you find that your child struggles to get back into school or experiences difficulties while they're here. If this is the case, then as always just reach out to us so we can work together to best support your child. If you are concerned about your child's mental health and you think they need professional support, speak to us or even your GP about the best next step.

Practical Tips

Worry box and time

Have a worry box and post worries in this through the day. You can agree a deferred time to talk through their worries. This can help contain worries.



Modelling Calmness

You will probably have your own worries about your child going back to school. Try to be aware of how you model your own anxiety when speaking to your child about returning to school. Speak to your child when you feel calm yourself.



Focus on possible strategies

Help children to focus on possible strategies. Ask them how they changed to the lockdown. What helped? What might help them now adapt to going back to school?

Try and problem solve concerns that can be resolved now e.g. contacting a friend if your child is worried that their friends won't speak to them at school.



Rewards

Use rewards in and out of school to help children manage their anxiety about getting to school and managing at school. This should be age appropriate and not too expensive.

Uncertainty & Change

Uncertainty

This is a very uncertain time and we can't make COVID disappear (not yet anyway). Children, like us adults, must learn to tolerate some uncertainty. This skill can help us to manage anxiety.



Normalising

It is also normal to feel very anxious about the changes. Change makes most people feel a bit worried. Some people find this harder than others though.

Limit reassurance to encourage a growth mindset.

Help children to recognise that building tolerance of uncertainty can help them manage their anxiety and develop their growth mindset. It is like building up 'mind muscles'. Limit reassurance as this can maintain anxiety. Instead encourage children to ask questions, and support skills in problem solving so they can consider their own solutions.

Preparing children for changes

It might be helpful for parents and teachers to prepare children ahead of school starting that school may feel different (e.g. through newsletters). Classes may be smaller, they may have to wash their hands more, they may have less close contact with friends at school and stick to small groups of friends. All of this is to help keep them safe.



Listening

Listening and validating

Listen to your child. Hear what their concerns are. Acknowledge their feelings and let them know that you know it's tough for them

We don't have all the answers

It's ok to not have the answers. In fact, it's better not to pretend that you know. We don't know. It's possible we may move back to school, then to lockdown, and back. This could go on for a while



Listening to each other

Teachers should listen to children and not assume how they feel or what they have gone through.



Help children to listen to each other too so they can process the huge changes. It is important to not ignore the changes that have occurred.

Preparing for Return

Parents preparing children for the return

Before returning to school, try and prepare children by getting them back into a routine. E.g. establishing bedtime/morning routines. They could do some practice runs to school beforehand. If they are not already doing so, help them to reconnect with friends to make the transition easier. They can meet with one friend in a park or via zoom etc.



More contact before schools re-open for teachers and families

Encourage children to share their work with school and teachers may arrange phone calls with families if possible, especially where anxieties are known. Some primary schools have Mental Health Support Teams or counsellors and it may help to run anxiety groups or transition groups for anxious children or their parents before returning to school.

After returning to school make new routines fun where possible

In school, be clear about the new routines so that children have some sense of control. Help to make routines fun for example singing songs to washing hands

It's natural for your child to feel sad, worried, cross or overexcited about going back to school and reconnecting with their classmates and teacher, and this could affect their behaviour, for example with tears or angry outbursts.

If your child is struggling with big feelings, try to stay calm and name their emotions out loud so they know you're listening: for example, 'I can see that you're feeling angry at the moment.'

Learning to be an active listener without imposing any judgements or trying to 'fix' the problem is a real skill and will be hugely beneficial to your child both now and into the future.

Top tips for being an active listener

At this time of uncertainty, it's important to be a good listener to your child so they feel they can talk to you about their feelings. Try these steps to becoming an active listener.

1. Turn devices off to show that you're listening.
2. Squat down to the same level as your child and maintain eye contact. Be aware, though, that older children and teenagers often don't like eye contact.
3. Smile and use a gentle tone of voice.

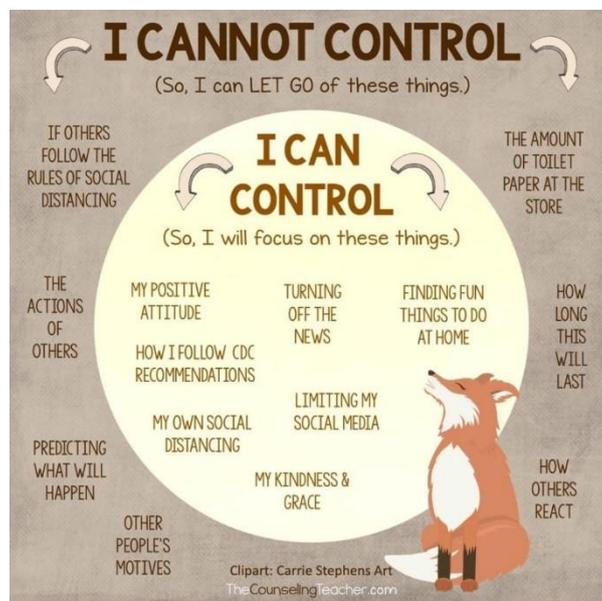
4. Try to avoid impatient body language like eye rolling, foot tapping or sighing. This can discourage children from talking.
5. Put your own thoughts and feelings to one side.
6. Allow your child space to talk without interrupting or contradicting them.
7. Don't be afraid of silence if your child is using it to reflect and think, but step in if the silence feels uncomfortable.

Find encouraging things to say, like 'Tell me more,' 'And then?' and 'Go on, what else?'

Looking After Your Own Wellbeing

While supporting your child, it's so important to remember to look after your own mental health and ask for help from your support network or services when needed.

The NHS website (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/>) has some good resources and clear links.



As always, please let us know if you feel that you or your child needs any support from us here at St John's and we will always do our best to help.

Have a wonderful summer break and we look forward to seeing you in September!



If you have any comments, concerns or questions - why don't you email us at:

office@st-johns.walsall.sch.uk

...or call 01543 452197

