

Anticipating the Return to “Normal”: Transitions and Anxiety in Preschool-Aged Children

The coronavirus pandemic has brought uncertainty and new emotions into households all around the world. As we look towards the upcoming months and the possibility of schools reopening and stay-at-home orders being lifted, it’s important to be aware of the issues young children may have returning to their old routines and the ways that parents and teachers can help them.



Possible Emotional & Behavioral Responses

Anxiety Responses

- Anxiety in children can show itself in many different ways. Anxious responses in children may take the form of:
 - Reassurance seeking (“Are we going to be okay?”)
 - Separation anxiety/reluctance to being left alone in formerly comfortable places (school, daycare, alone with babysitter)
 - Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches)
 - Moodiness and irritability
 - Temper tantrums and meltdowns

- Regressions (issues with potty training, increased bedwetting, regression in previously mastered skills)
- Trouble sleeping

Trauma Responses

- In some cases, children may develop traumatic stress related to the pandemic. Fortunately, not every child who experiences a traumatic event will experience traumatic stress, but be aware of some of the signs and effects of traumatic stress in children, including:
 - Intense and ongoing emotional upset
 - Depressive symptoms and/or anxiety
 - Behavioral changes
 - Difficulty with self-regulation
 - Problems relating to others or forming attachments
 - Regression or loss of previously acquired skills
 - Nightmares
 - Difficulty sleeping and eating
 - Physical symptoms (aches and pains)

Feelings of Helplessness

- In a traumatic situation that is out of a child's control, preschool-age children will often develop a strong feeling of helplessness that typically results in many of the aforementioned effects (separation anxiety, regression in skills/potty training, sleep issues) in addition to:
 - Uncertainty if there is continued danger
 - General fear that extends into other areas of their life not related to the event
 - Engaging in traumatic play (a repetitive, less-imaginative form of play that may represent the child's focus on the traumatic event)
 - Difficulty expressing in words what is bothering them/what they are experiencing emotionally

How Can I Help?

For Parents

Helping Children Through Challenging Emotions

- For children who are too young to express their feelings and emotions through words, a feelings chart may be useful to gauge how they're doing.
- Acknowledge that it's okay to feel scared, angry, sad, hurt, etc., and that everyone feels those feelings sometimes.
- Respond with patience and understanding if your child gets upset, even seemingly out of the blue, with the knowledge that underlying fears or emotions may be causing distress.

- If you feel concerned that your child is significantly struggling, you can reach out to a children’s therapist or utilize websites such as [Child Mind Institute](#) that can connect you to a professional who can help.
- When children feel overwhelmed by anxiety, practicing mindfulness together may help.
 - Balloon breaths: Have them put their hands on their belly and imagine it’s a balloon. Taking deep breaths in inflates the balloon, and deep breaths out deflate the balloon. Have them repeat this until they’re feeling calmer.
 - Take a walk and focus on how the air feels, what the birds sound like, what the flowers and plants smell like, and the things you can see on your walk.

Helping Children with Separation Anxiety

Information from Aha! Parenting/Dr. Laura Markham: [Helping Your Toddler with Separation Anxiety](#)

- If going back to school/daycare is challenging for your child after the quarantine ends, there are several ways to help your child through separation anxiety.
 - Create or continue using a goodbye routine; something you do or say every time you drop them off (ex: “I love you, you love me, have a great day, I’ll pick you up at three!”, “See you later alligator! / In a while, crocodile!”)
 - Explain to your child in words what is going to happen (ex: “We’re going to put your backpack away, and your teacher will come say hi to you, and you’ll get to see your friends and play! I’m going to go to work, and you’re going to play and learn and have your lunch, and then I’ll come pick you up at (time)!”)
 - Resist the urge to slip away when your child doesn’t see, as a sudden disappearance may increase their anxiety. Instead, stick to a goodbye routine and walk out afterwards, resisting the urge to come back if you hear your child crying/upset.
 - Help your child locate something fun to do (ex: “Look at the playdoh!” “Ooh, your friends are playing with blocks!”), but joining in on the activity may lead your child to believe you can stay and play, so once they’re situated, wave goodbye/do your goodbye routine and leave.
 - Try to be as consistent as possible about the time you pick up your child.
 - Read books with your child about separation and return such as *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn and *Oh My Baby Little One* by Kathi Appelt.

General Tips

- Maintain regular family routines, and use a nighttime routine that incorporates some type of calming and comforting activity (reading a book, snuggling together, singing a lullaby, etc.)
- Provide verbal and physical reassurance.
- Encourage expression through play, re-enactment, storytelling, and talking it through.
- Allow short-term changes in sleep arrangements if your child’s sleep is disrupted.
- Avoid media exposure to the news.
- Above all, demonstrate patience, tolerance, and reassurance when children have difficult emotions, developmental regressions, and behavioral issues.

For Teachers

Helping Children Process in a Healthy Way

- Acknowledge the situation and give kids an opportunity to discuss their feelings and experiences while they were away from school.
- Give kids time to talk and listen; studies show that in these situations, a trusted adult being there to listen is more important than knowing the exact right thing to say. Providing a comfortable and safe environment where kids are allowed to be upset, scared and confused is the most valuable thing you can offer.
- Invite questions, but don't force them if the children don't voluntarily have any to ask. Provide developmentally appropriate answers that are as simple as possible.
- Address safety concerns by pointing out that everyone can keep themselves safe by washing their hands after using the bathroom, after playing outside, after coughing or sneezing, and before and after eating.
- Return to routine as soon as children have had time to process and express their feelings; routines are comforting to kids and this is a good way to model healthy resilience.
- If a child in the class has family or a loved one who's been sick or has passed away, understand that their behavior may be different than normal. Processing loss may take a long time, but you can help children find healthy ways to process their grief (writing stories or drawing pictures to memorialize the happy times they've shared with their loved one, etc.)
- Teach and model resilience; show your class that it's okay to feel sad, scared, upset, or confused, and that you can learn to move forward in a healthy way when something bad happened.
- If children act out in class, try to acknowledge and name the emotion they may be feeling (frustration, anger, sadness) so they can feel understood and work towards a healthier method of expressing this feeling.
- Provide positive attention; not only praise for desired behavior, but exhibiting kindness and warmth that is not necessarily earned.

Article Links

Child Mind Institute

- [Anxiety and Coping with Coronavirus](#)
- [How Trauma Effects Kids in School](#)
- [The Teacher's Role When Tragedy Strikes](#)
- [How Mindfulness Can Help During COVID-19](#)
- [What to Do \(And Not Do\) When Kids Are Anxious](#)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- [Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event](#)
- [Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with COVID-19](#)
- [Helping Children with Traumatic Separation or Traumatic Grief Related to COVID-19](#)