

**Prepare Yourself for Your Return to School**

**Helping Students Feel More Emotionally Settled in Your Classroom:**

**Creating a Greater Sense of Reassurance and Security**

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# Prepare Yourself for Your Return to School

## Helping Students Feel More Emotionally Settled in Your Classroom:

### Creating a Greater Sense of Reassurance and Security

The start of the school year will certainly not be like the start of other school years. Everyone is concerned about the amount of time students have been away from the routines and the academic rigors of school, just as we are concerned about the amount of stress they have absorbed from the pandemic experience. An "ease in" period is warranted at the start of school, with a pace that gives everyone a chance to recognize the familiar context and familiar routine as the school day gets re-established. As familiar routines unfold, they will bring a sense of calm, and with that, an increased openness to the experience and to learning.

Many students will return to school and easily adapt by falling back on previous experience and by focusing on the benefits of being back together. Furthermore, many students will remember how much their teachers cared during the pandemic, how much their teachers tried to help them. In addition, they will appreciate the change of scene, the increased ability to focus at school without the distractions of home, along with the increased opportunity to see friends.

For many students, school will be a respite, compared to the challenges at home, and the day will offer more opportunity for reward than what they are accustomed to at home. Being with friends is rewarding. Relationships are rewarding, which is why teacher attention and feeling cared for by a teacher is rewarding. Success is rewarding, accomplishment is rewarding, feeling capable is rewarding, and feeling calm without worry is rewarding. As we ease students into the school year, let's remember to engage them in the reward value of school.

Some students will be slower to adapt, with a greater focus on their worries and fears related to the pandemic. For all students, but particularly for these students, teachers should be prepared with a range of options for bringing reassurance and security into their classrooms. The options below, just like the options in [Mitigate the Adverse Emotional Impact of Teaching During the Pandemic](#), are meant to be options, not directives and not all necessarily added to the teacher's plan. Options should be chosen based on how well they fit what teachers are comfortable doing and how much they feel they need to do with their population. Further consultation and support from the clinical services in the district can be offered to clarify, instruct, or develop any of these options, at the discretion of the teacher.

#### **A. Reassurance and security based on hygiene and cleanliness habits**

Design a hygiene and cleanliness routine—to limit the passing of germs and to provide children (and adults) with a sense of security as well as a measure of control. The

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routine can provide reassurance even as we know that infection prevention is not fool proof. Greater confidence can be created by empowering students to take a positive action to do what they can to ensure an infection-free learning environment.

Post the routine and use it to redirect about what to do, so it becomes a habit and so students can remind each other rather than complain, ridicule and accuse about what is not being done. Teaching and the use of routines are always more effective when they focus on what to do instead of what not to do. Here is an example. The health department will certainly provide additional guidelines that will help you make your own routine. Use a visual (the posted routine), state the requirements or expectations, not a list of violations to avoid or "what not to do", and direct (remind and correct) students by using the precise language from the expectations.

a) Everyone washes their hands in the morning, and before snack as well as after using the bathroom, before lunch and coming in from recess.

b) Desk surfaces, door knobs and computer keyboards are wiped down twice a day. This can be a community service job or a "reset to cleanliness" routine.

c) Hand sanitizer is used after using a tissue

## **B. Reassurance and security derived from organization and calm.**

Staff should present themselves as calm and knowledgeable and capable of creating routines for anything that raises anxiety. Remember, routines are a primary mechanism for soothing anxiety and stress. We can't prevent problems, but we can always create routines that solve problems.

Staff should frequently reset themselves for calm (see Mitigate the Adverse Emotional Impact of Teaching During the Pandemic). Our stress is contagious, easily detected by some children and then added to the stress level they already have. At the same time, calm can be absorbed by students who are around people who are calm and display calm (voice tone, pacing of activity, body language, gestures, calming language, reflective listening, etc.).

Staff should present a neat and orderly classroom appearance. The appearance of order has a calming effect on the brain.

Implement resets for student calm and focus periodically throughout the day, using breathing, stretching and quiet music. Create a routine for this (visually supported) to enable consistency and repetition.

Staff should strive to achieve a high level of attunement (see articles in the reference list for what that protocol looks like). Students relax, focus and feel more secure in the presence of an attuned adult and they become more insecure and anxious in the presence of an adult who is clearly not attuned.

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### **C. Reassurance and security derived from routine and predictability**

Run the day through a series of connected routines. Many new guidelines will make school feel different, but make every attempt to limit the random chaos that sometimes happens in classrooms at the start of the year by preparing to spend an abundance of time on routines. Routine creates predictability in the day and it calms the nervous systems of children as well as adults. Students will welcome the predictability in the day and they will stay more settled as the day unfolds in a familiar way.

Set up routines for academic learning processes (e.g., a routine for centers) that show what will happen and how it will happen.

Set up routines for nonacademic activity, such as transitioning in from recess, completing class jobs, etc.

Set up routines for incidental activity, such as using the bathroom, walking in the halls, etc.

Reinforce adherence to the routines. Redirect by using the specifics of the routine. Create visual representations of routines and use these to prompt and remind and redirect.

### **D. Reassurance and security based on accurate information**

Make children aware of the efforts to clean and sanitize the school and the classrooms.

Reassure children that they are safe by giving them the facts about the control of the virus (e.g., people who don't feel well are going to be tested and kept away from others. . .most children get well on their own by resting at home. . .people who return to school are no longer at risk for infecting others).

Make children and families aware of the health protocol if anyone in the family has concerning symptoms.

Remind students that if anyone becomes ill with the virus, the doctors know how to treat it.

### **E. Reassurance and security from community**

Create a classroom community based on prosocial values. Everyone feels more calm and less stressed in a classroom community where people are kind, polite, caring, helpful, patient, cooperative and respectful; where they compliment and encourage each other and celebrate each other's successes. The stress level will be lower in this class and the students will feel more comfortable and relaxed. However, creating this type of classroom community takes sophisticated classroom management skills based on a variety of supports for positive behavior.

## **F. Reassurance and security about friends and academic progress**

Students left school without any chance to say good bye or get closure. They made new friends that they have not been able to see. Some have expressed that they wonder if their friends still remember them. Many students are wondering how they will catch up with what they've missed, how they will handle the next grade in school when they didn't learn as much as they expected to from the previous grade. Parents are wondering the same thing, so we know that these parent concerns have raised anxiety with the students.

Think about what you could do now to reassure students. Create a way for the class to socially connect and catch up with each other, perhaps a newsletter update based on a survey or set of questions that each student is expected to respond to. This could be a way of reintroducing students to each other, so no one enters school in the fall with the feeling like they may have been forgotten by their classmates.

Explain to students what the pace will look like in the beginning, how everyone will spend some time working on routines and figuring out where they have developed academic gaps. Reassure all your students that no one will be left behind, everyone will have a chance to catch up and it won't be done at the expense of burdening students with a reckless pace or the pressure to complete a year and a half of school in one year's time.