

# Back to school during COVID-19: Helping with children's anxiety

*Children vary in their general level of anxiety and in how well they cope with changes. With the impact of COVID-19 on the start of the school year, many children are experiencing higher levels of worry and distress.*

This information sheet presents some strategies to help you identify your child's level of anxiety, and support their mental health as they prepare to return to school in person. (For strategies to support you as a parent at this stressful time, see the information sheet "[Back to school during COVID-19: Tips for parents' well-being.](#)")

## Identifying your child's anxiety level

### Check in to see how your child is doing

Consider having an open-ended conversation with your child about what school-related issues concern them. The issues might range from health risks of the pandemic to having a new teacher, increases in homework, extracurricular activities and making new friends.

Let them speak without interrupting, listen carefully and acknowledge their feelings. Simply having you listen can help them feel more secure, understood and connected. It can also lead into discussing strategies to handle their worries and concerns.

### Consider your child's developmental stage

Children of different ages and developmental stages vary in how they process information, think about cause and effect, and express their fears and worries. For example, young children may be less able to express their

worries in words – but they may show signs of feeling anxious through their behaviour, including difficulty sleeping, stomach aches or headaches, and being more clingy or irritable.



This information sheet is not intended to be a resource for people who require screening for COVID-19 or who are experiencing a mental health crisis. If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, please call 911 immediately or go to your nearest emergency department.

For more information, visit [www.camh.ca/covid19](http://www.camh.ca/covid19)

# Ways to help with children's anxiety about going back to school

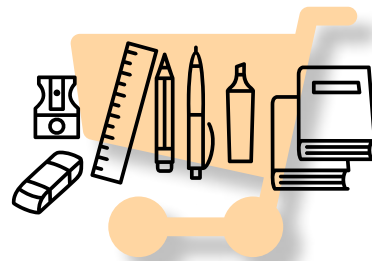
## Structure and routines

For most children, going back to school will mean adjusting to a more structured schedule. You can prepare your child by gradually shifting to a routine that is closer to the school day.

For instance, if they have been getting up later than usual, gradually move their wake-up time and bedtime earlier. This will help their sleep schedule adjust to match the school day. You can also schedule other activities, like family meals,

chores, reading and screen time, to help your child readjust to a daily routine. Start a few weeks before school begins so you can increase structure gradually.

Your family may also have routines or rituals to prepare for back-to-school, such as buying school supplies or clothes. If you make these regular back-to-school steps creative or fun in some way, it may be reassuring for your kids and help them prepare mentally for school.



## Praise and special time

Positive parenting strategies, such as praise and spending time focused on doing activities with your child, are a powerful way to prepare your child to cope with stressful situations.

*Praise* is most effective when you give it right after children behave positively, and when it is specific. For example, "I like the way you got ready for bed tonight without me reminding you" is more specific than simply saying "Good job!" Choose a small number of behaviours you would like your child to develop, and focus on praising these.

*Special time* means spending a small amount of time (maybe 15 minutes a day) doing an activity your child enjoys. Let them choose the activity you will do together – although hands-on activities allow for more connection than playing video games or watching TV. During this time, your only goal is to spend time with your child and enjoy an activity together – avoid asking questions, bringing up difficult topics or correcting their behaviour.

## Validation

When your child expresses feelings, either in words or with their actions, show them you are listening and that you understand. You can show you are listening by telling them, “I know this is hard” or “I can see you’re

really worried about . . . .” Listening to and accepting children’s feelings does not mean that you must accept all the behaviours that go along with them.

## Communication and problem solving

Let your child know that you value their point of view by engaging them in solving problems. How you do this will depend on their age. For young children, offer two or three options for them to choose from. For older children, you can have a more open-ended discussion. It is helpful to open the discussion in a neutral way and to ask them what they think the problem is.

Once you understand their concerns, you can work together to brainstorm a list of

possible solutions. Consider all suggestions at this point, even ones you may think are silly or would not work. Once you have a list of potential solutions, talk with your child about the pros and cons of each one, and choose a solution that works for both of you. Keep the brainstorming list, as you may need to try another option if the first solution doesn’t work. Encourage your child’s efforts by praising them for trying, even if the solution isn’t successful the first time.

## Think about what has helped in the past

Think about your child’s previous transitions to school. What has helped make these changes successful? What did you learn

from these experiences? How can you apply that learning to the current situation?

