

PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR YOUR RETURN TO WORK

Emerging from the Pandemic: Managing the Transition

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. Given the many changes we've recently had to navigate, it's especially important to be sensitive and supportive during the back-to-work transition.

Discuss changes in advance. Walk your child through what will be different and when it will begin. What routines will be brand new? Which are a return to old routines? Map it out clearly and concretely. Also talk about what is not changing. This can serve as an important emotional anchor point.

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. Discuss homework and chores. If you can, practice "new" schedules in advance to get them used to it before you "go live."

Maintain consistency where you can. Routine and structure can help stave off anxiety for children. It can give them a sense of some control and predictability when going through yet another change.

Point out 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.

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.

Brainstorm ways to maintain positive rituals.

It's reassuring for a child to feel that they're not losing something of value in the change. It's also empowering to have a voice in that conversation. Talk together as a family about how you can keep some of the routines you've developed that you all enjoyed, such as family dinners, arts and crafts time, nature walks, and so on.

Help them manage and express their reactions. The disruption of change and end to a lifestyle they've come to enjoy may draw out a variety of feelings – sadness, anger, confusion, among others. Depending on their age, they may not always be able to express them. You may see stress reactions, such as physical complaints, sleep problems, moodiness, separation anxiety, and other signs. Recognize the fears and challenges your child is facing. Let them know that whatever they're feeling is okay. Be gently supportive and try to bring in that positive viewpoint wherever possible.

Be a role model for healthy coping. Kids look to adults for cues on how they should think, feel, and react to a situation. It's okay to share your feelings, but try to keep calm, confident, and positive. Show them how to use deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques to help calm anxiety. Model effective problem-solving.

Be mindful of your child's personality. If they have anxious tendencies or existing mental health concerns, you may need to reach out to their daycare or school ahead of time to discuss your concerns and put a plan in place. If you see reactions that concern you, and they go on for more than a couple of weeks, contact a mental health professional. Your EAP can help.

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