

## 9 Practical Ways to Support Anxious Kids Return to School

Education, Mental Health

by Collett Smart



The relaxing and lifting of restrictions in schools makes it sound like we're on our way back to normal, yet 'normal' is a long way off. And our children know it.

If you chatted to a group of 6 teens and asked, "How did you find life in lockdown?", you would likely get 6 different answers. Some kids thrived – more down time, more outdoor activity, more able to work independently, more family connection, less noise, less distraction, less COVID infection to worry about, less playground bullying.

Others struggled – less face-to-face connection, less part-time work, less sport, more distraction, more of a struggle to work independently, more exposure to family issues, more online bullying.

Equally, if you asked, "How are you feeling about the return to school?", you would get 6 different answers. My tween was busting to get back to school. Others, not so much.

We need to be particularly aware of students who have anxiety or have struggled with school refusal in the past. These young people will be more anxious about returning to school in the coming weeks.

Returning to public transport or the school premises itself might be stressful, if young people are worried about contracting the virus. In this time, it could be the separation from the safety of home and their trusted adults that is at the core of school anxiety.

### First Steps

Begin by assuming they may be struggling and then proceed with gentleness and compassion.

A UNICEF survey of Australian high schoolers found that less than half say they are coping well. In April, boys (52%) were found to be coping slightly better than girls (38%), but it would be good to remember that boys often don't tell us they are struggling. As someone on my Facebook page said – They show us.

UNICEF expects these figures to worsen by June. June is when most students are expected to be back in classrooms.

*"Australia's young people have been cut off from social support networks, must complete major education milestones online, and are also impacted by job losses, either themselves or their parents and carers. All of this is taking a toll on their mental health and their hope for the future."* UNICEF Australia

The response of schools and parents can make all the difference in maintaining our children's mental wellbeing going forward. Having them get back to school is going to be really important, but their return needs to be managed sensitively.

### Don't worry about learning right now

Learning is easier when kids feel safe. Learning is difficult when your tween's brain is emotionally overloaded and preoccupied with fears. If we work to create a sense of rest and peace, then the learning will eventually come.

### Some anxiety is normal

It is normal for young people to have fears about the danger and threat of a virus. Remind your child that it is their brain's way of encouraging them to do things that look after their own and others' health (like maintaining good hygiene and an appropriate physical distance).

### Observe

Some young people don't have the words to let you know how they are feeling, so we have to be attuned to subtle changes. You know your child best and will know when your own tweens and teens deviate from their usual patterns.

Then, be on the look out for physical signs or behaviours that are out of the ordinary.

### Signs your Child is Anxious about Returning to School

#### Physical signs

- Stomach aches, headaches, saying they feel sick
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in sleep habits (sleeping more or less, struggling to fall asleep or wake up)

#### Behavioural signs

- Avoiding or refusing to do things they would usually do (connect with others, chores, exercise etc.)
- Withdrawal from friends or family
- Seeking constant reassurance from a parent
- Trying to get a parent to do something for them that they should be able to do themselves
- Getting easily upset over seemingly small matters
- Lashing out, easily angered or displaying more irritability
- Becoming easily frustrated with things
- Displaying avoidance of certain places – buses, areas at school or school itself (once school starts)

### 9 Ways to Support Kids who are Anxious about School

#### 1. Connect

Many parents ask me how they can get their teen to open up and talk. The answer lies in your connection with them. Just enjoy being with your child, doing day-to-day tasks or a few fun activities. Sometimes side-by-side, without eye contact works well. Tune in when your teen begins to talk and express their thoughts.

Connection soothes stressed brains and provides a sense of a secure attachment, which is important for healthy emotional well-being.

#### 2. Listen

- **Allow emotional expression.** Emotional health requires emotional expression. It helps your child to have someone who will listen to them.
- Remind your tween that you are **safe** for them to vent to. Their home is the safe space to express their feelings.
- Give them **enough time** to express their feelings.
- **Acknowledge** the frustration, fear or sadness they are experiencing – without giving answers.
- Encourage your teen to **name their emotion** (as sometimes they don't understand why they lashed out at the dog).

#### 3. Emotional support ideas

- **Make space for tears and frustration** – Tears can be helpful in releasing stress or anxiety.
- **Limit worry time** to a specific time of day where they can spend 10-15 minutes spilling out the worries, sadness or frustrations that their mind got stuck on during the day. (Talk, draw, journal or use a **worry app** or worry box to place written worries into.) When the time is up, the box/app/book gets closed and put away. This gives your child reassurance and validation that their thoughts matter, but also that they don't have to listen to their brain's fears all the time.
- Use an **Emotion Thermometer** to help your tween communicate the level of their feelings.
- **Focus on courage.** Help your teen to think about times they were courageous or dealt with their worry effectively. Ask, "How could you use any of those strategies again?" (Also see Thought Challenging)



#### 4. Thought challenging

- This involves **challenging the, 'what ifs'**. For example, take a negative or unhelpful thought that triggers anxiety and flip it into a thought that is more helpful and builds courage. Such as, "What if I go to school and my friends have forgotten me?", could flip to, "What if I go to school and have fun connecting with my friends again?".
- During 'worry time' ask how they might change worried thinking into more **realistic thinking** by asking, "What are the facts?", "What could I do to cope with X when I get worried?"

#### 5. In Conversation

- **Keep your voice calm.** Think of it like taking your child through a fire drill. You need to communicate potentially alarming information in a factual, non-alarming, matter-of-fact way.
- **Don't sugarcoat.** Keep explanations **factual but age appropriate**, but don't try to minimise their fears. This will help young people to understand what is going on and cope better.
- **Don't minimise** their fears – Children mistrust us when we simply say, "Oh, everything is going to be okay", because they know you can't guarantee this. You could say, "My job is to look after you. What can I do to support/help you in this?"
- **Avoid excessive reassurance.** Again, statements like, "Don't worry" or "You will be okay" are unhelpful. Try asking questions that draw on the Emotional Support Ideas discussed above. Like, "Is there something you can do at school that will help you reach out for support?"
- For anxious kids, talk through and then **help them plan their own steps** of getting back into the school routine.
- **Show support for the school and teachers in front of your child** – express the positives in the changes their school has made. It is important that your tween trusts their teacher when they return. (If you are working through concerns with the school, direct your concerns to the appropriate adults there.)
- **Model** how to deal with stressful situations in a calm manner.
- Please seek **mental health support** if re-entry into school and life is making your child extremely anxious.

#### 6. Small steps

**Start with small steps.** Perhaps focus on a plan for the first week's routine – waking up, eating and going to bed at regular times. Online schooling has helped some with this already.

#### 7. Physical strategies

Some might need these strategies for a while, even once school starts.

- **Teach belly breathing** at a time your child is calm. This is a relaxation response. When their fight-or-flight response kicks in, deep breathing helps dial it down.
- **Massage** and safe touch also help calm our children.
- **Physical activity** improves mental health.
- Include lots of **breaks and relaxing activities** that foster a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment in your child. (Insist on less homework initially, as some children will need down time after school for a while).



#### 8. Encourage Social engagement

Ease soon into social activities for non-social and neurodiverse kids. Go slowly and don't expect too much too soon. Talk to the school about reduced hours initially, as some children will need time to build up to being in noisy, visually stimulating and crowded rooms/playgrounds again.

#### 9. Dream a little

Begin a vision board or a vision journal. Either as a family or with a teen who enjoys this type of activity. Otherwise let everyone have a chance to dream at the dinner table – about activities they would like to do and places they would like to go, in the next year or two. This brings a sense of Hope.

### One Last Thought

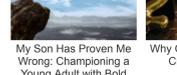
Once school starts full time, let your child have some quiet space after school. Be ready with a favourite drink, a warm bath or something that your child finds soothing. Use tangible strategies to communicate home as a place of rest and recovery.

Collett

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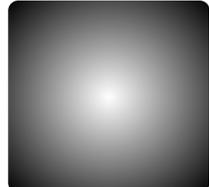
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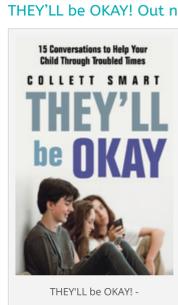
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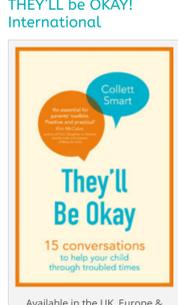
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### About the Author



My name is Collett Smart. I am a psychologist, qualified teacher, speaker and internationally published author. I have 25 years' experience working with young people and their families, in private and public schools, as well as in private practice. I am also 'Mum' to 3 children (12, 17 & 19 years old). It's great to have you here!

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