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# HELPING YOUR CHILD EASE BACK INTO SCHOOL

(A PARENT'S GUIDE)



Ah, the post-Christmas season! It's a time filled with a mix of emotions, both for parents and our kids. The holiday cheer has dwindled, and the reality of returning to school sets in. For many kids, this transition can be tricky. They've spent a significant chunk of time basking in the festive glow, possibly staying up late, and enjoying a break from the daily grind of school. Getting back into the school routine can be a challenge, and that's where we, as parents, step in.

As a parent, your role in easing this transition is crucial. It's not about doing everything for your children but guiding and supporting them to find their footing. This blog post gives you some practical ways to support your child or young person in returning to school after the Christmas break. Let's break it down by age groups: 4-7 years, 8-13 years, and 14-18 years.

### Managing Anxiety About Returning to School:

Managing anxieties for children and young people as they return to school after the Christmas break is crucial for several interconnected reasons. The transition from a relaxed holiday atmosphere back to the structured environment of school represents a significant adjustment, requiring children to readapt to early wake-up times, academic responsibilities, and social dynamics. This period can be challenging, and anxieties, if not properly managed, can adversely affect a child's academic performance by impacting their ability to concentrate and learn effectively. Furthermore, social integration plays a critical role during this time. After a break, anxieties related to fitting in, dealing with peer pressure, or facing bullying might arise. Effective management of these anxieties is essential for children to reintegrate socially and feel secure in their school environment.

Moreover, the emotional well-being of children is paramount. Unaddressed anxieties can escalate into more serious mental health issues, making early identification and management crucial. This period also presents an opportunity for children to develop coping skills for managing anxieties related to transitions, fostering resilience and adaptability for future challenges.

Additionally, the impact of a child's anxiety extends beyond the individual, affecting family dynamics. Managing these anxieties can contribute to a more peaceful and supportive home environment. Lastly, it's important to consider the physical aspects; chronic anxiety can manifest in physical symptoms like headaches and sleep disturbances, so addressing these anxieties also supports the child's overall physical health. In summary, recognising and addressing anxieties associated with returning to school helps ensure children and young people have a positive, productive, and healthy start to their new term.

#### Ages 4-7 Years:

Younger children may feel anxious about leaving the comfort of home and returning to school. Here's what you can do:

- Story Time: Read books about school experiences. This can help them visualise and understand what to expect.
- Play School: Engage in role-playing where you play the teacher and they're the student. This can make school seem more familiar and less intimidating.
- Let children put on their school uniform and school shoes to increase familiarity.

#### Ages 8-13 Years:

Children in this age group might worry about academics or social dynamics. To help, you can:

- Open Conversations: Encourage them to express their feelings. Ask specific but open-ended questions like, "What are you most excited about for school?"
- Visit the School: If possible, visit the school the day before they return. Drive the same way you would go on their usual school day. If they're catching a bus, drive or walk to the bus stop. If this isn't practical, look online at pictures of their school. Familiarising them with the environment can ease their nerves.
- Let children pack or re-pack their school bags.

### Ages 14–18 Years:

Teenagers might stress over academic pressures or social situations. Assist them by:

- **Goal Setting:** Discuss their goals for the upcoming term. This can shift their focus from anxiety to ambition.
- **Peer Support:** Encourage them to connect with friends who will be in the same classes or activities. Maybe suggest they make contact with one or two good friends and arrange to meet them at the school gate so they can walk in together.

### Ensuring a Good Night's Sleep:

Ensuring that children and young people get a good night's sleep just before returning to school is crucial for several reasons, all of which contribute to their overall well-being and ability to function effectively in a school environment. Adequate sleep is vital for cognitive processes; it helps in consolidating memories, processing new information, and preparing the brain for learning. A well-rested child is more likely to be attentive, have better concentration, and exhibit improved problem-solving abilities, which are essential for academic success. Moreover, sleep significantly influences mood and emotional regulation. Well-rested children tend to have better emotional control, are less irritable, and can cope more effectively with the stresses and challenges of the school day. This aspect of sleep is particularly important in the context of readjusting to school routines after a break.

Sleep has a direct impact on physical health. It plays a critical role in immune function, growth, and overall physical development. Insufficient sleep can lead to physical tiredness, reduced energy levels, and a decreased ability to fight off infections and other bugs going around. Furthermore, establishing a regular sleep pattern helps in setting a routine, which is beneficial for children in transitioning from the unstructured time of holidays back to the structured environment of school. A good night's sleep just before returning to school can thus serve as a reset, helping children to realign with the school schedule and ensuring they are physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared to start the new term effectively.

### Ages 4-7 Years:

At this age, a bedtime routine is vital. Here's how to establish one:

- **Consistent Bedtime:** Set a fixed bedtime and stick to it. A warm bath and a bedtime story can signal it's time to wind down.
- **Comforting Environment:** Ensure their room is cozy, quiet, and conducive to sleep.

### Ages 8-13 Years:

Pre-teens need quality sleep to function at their best. Help them by:

- **Tech-Free Zone:** Implement a rule where electronic devices are turned off an hour before bedtime.
- **Relaxation Techniques:** Teach them simple relaxation exercises like deep breathing to help them fall asleep.

### Ages 14-18 Years:

Teenagers often struggle with sleep due to various distractions. Encourage better sleep habits by:

- **Boundaries:** Encourage them to finish homework or screen time earlier in the evening.
- **Create a Sleep-Friendly Environment:** Maybe allow them to personalise their bedroom to make it more relaxing.

### Establishing a Routine:

Establishing a good routine as children return to school is vital for their development and well-being. After the relaxed holiday period, a structured routine provides predictability and security, reducing anxiety and stress by setting clear expectations. It also enhances academic performance, as consistent routines foster effective study habits and time management, allowing children to balance homework, activities, and relaxation. Importantly, routines encourage consistent sleep patterns, crucial for cognitive functioning and focus in school. Additionally, adhering to a routine teaches children responsibility and discipline, essential life skills that promote autonomy and independence. This structured approach not only benefits the child's personal

growth but also positively impacts family dynamics, fostering a harmonious environment and enabling quality family time. In essence, a well-established routine supports the academic, emotional, and social development of children, forming a foundation for their future success.

#### Ages 4–7 Years:

For younger kids, routine provides a sense of security. Establish a routine by:

- Visual Schedules: Use pictures to illustrate their daily routine, like brushing teeth, getting dressed, breakfast time, etc
- Involvement in Planning: Let them choose their outfit for the next day or help pack their lunch.

#### Ages 8–13 Years:

As kids grow, they can handle more responsibilities. Foster this by:

- Checklists: Create a checklist for morning and evening routines. This can include homework time, chores, preparation for the next day, and any extra-curricular activities.
- Time Management Skills: Introduce them to basic time management tools like calendars or simple planners.

#### Ages 14–18 Years:

Teenagers should be more independent in their routines. Support them by:

- Self-Management: Encourage them to set their own alarms and be responsible for their own time management. Maybe have your own alarm there as a backup, at least for the first week or two.
- Realistic Scheduling: Help them create a realistic schedule that includes schoolwork, study, extracurricular activities, chores and downtime.

#### Managing Emotions:

The transition back to school can be a period of heightened emotions, ranging from excitement and happiness to anxiety and fear. For many children, this transition involves readjusting to structured routines, re-engaging with academic challenges, and navigating complex social dynamics. Proper





emotional management helps children process these feelings, leading to a smoother transition and a more positive school experience. When children are equipped to handle their emotions effectively, they are more likely to engage constructively in the classroom, maintain better relationships with peers and teachers, and exhibit a greater willingness to participate in school activities.

Moreover, understanding and managing emotions is a key aspect of emotional intelligence, which is essential for personal development and future success. It helps children develop resilience, cope with challenges, and build self-confidence. This emotional skill set is not only beneficial in the school setting but is also critical for their mental and emotional health in the long run. Hence, by supporting children and young people in managing their emotions during the transition back to school, we foster their academic success, social integration, and overall emotional growth.

#### Ages 4-7 Years:

Young kids often struggle to express their emotions. Help them by:

- Emotion Cards: Use cards with different emotions on them to help them identify and talk about their feelings.
- Lead by Example: Show them healthy ways to express emotions like talking about your feelings and what you do to manage them effectively.

#### Ages 8-13 Years:

At this age, peer relationships start to have a significant impact. Assist them by:

- Dialogue about Feelings: Have regular check-ins about their emotions and teach them empathy and kindness towards others, and compassion for themselves.
- Role-Playing: Use role-playing to help them navigate tricky social situations they might encounter.
- Hold space: Don't give them the answers unless they directly ask for one. Let them brainstorm, even if their solutions sound silly (to you). It won't be silly to them.

### Ages 14–18 Years:

Teenagers often face a rollercoaster of emotions. Guide them through:

- Open Communication: Foster an environment where they feel comfortable sharing their feelings and frustrations without judgment.
- Don't be a fixer: Let them talk; don't solve their problems for them. Often, teens don't want (or need) answers. They just need to vent.
- Stress Management Techniques: Introduce them to stress management techniques like journaling or meditation. Bonus points if they can do this without tech!

### Establishing Expectations:

Establishing (and managing) expectations for children and young people as they return to school is vital for their emotional and psychological well-being. Transitioning back to school often involves anticipation and apprehension, and unrealistic expectations about academic performance and social interactions can lead to disappointment and stress. By guiding children to set realistic and achievable goals, they can experience a sense of accomplishment and avoid undue pressure. This approach helps in reducing anxiety related to performance and social dynamics, as children learn that it's normal to take time to adjust and that setbacks are part of the learning process.

Moreover, clear and manageable expectations encourage a positive attitude towards school, viewing challenges as opportunities for growth. Effectively managing expectations is thus key to ensuring a smooth transition back to school, fostering children's confidence, resilience, and a balanced perspective.

### Ages 4–7 Years:

Set clear, simple expectations for younger children. This includes:

- Simple Rules: Such as listening to the teacher, playing nicely with others, and doing homework.
- Reward Systems: Use a sticker chart to reward them for following rules and meeting expectations.



### Ages 8-13 Years:

For pre-teens, expectations can be more detailed. This involves:

- Discussion on Responsibilities: Talk about their responsibilities at school and at home.
- Consequences: Establish clear consequences for not meeting expectations and be consistent in enforcing them. Consistency means both over time and between each parent.

### Ages 14-18 Years:

Teenagers should be treated more like adults. Set expectations by:

- Negotiated Agreements: Discuss and agree upon expectations and consequences as a team. Make sure everyone's on the same page.
- Self-Responsibility: Encourage them to take responsibility for their actions and the outcomes. This might also include managing their disappointments and frustrations.

Transitioning back to school after the Christmas break is a significant adjustment for kids and teens. As parents, your role is to support and guide them through this phase, striking a balance between providing guidance and allowing them to take charge. Different ages need distinct approaches, but the objective is the same: to cultivate independence, resilience, and a positive attitude towards school and learning.

It's more about being present for them, recognising their needs, and adjusting your support as they grow, rather than having a perfect strategy.

Remember, each child is unique, so customise your approach to their individual needs.

Wishing you a happy return to the 2024 school year.