

Supporting Children to Return to School

As we start to return to school after this isolation period, our thoughts move to how to support our tamariki to transition back into the school environment. After a significant event, it is natural that tamariki and whānau might feel anxious about the return to school. Outlined below are some practical strategies that can support the transition back into the school environment.

When you're talking to your child

- Have a clear idea of what school will look like for your child, on their return to school. If there are any changes to school life such as physical distancing strategies, restricted play areas, different staff members in their learning space, let them know about these changes. If your child is prepared with this information and know there will be changes, then this will not be a surprise for them. Having a clear plan will make your child feel safe.
- Try to avoid saying things like 'it will be okay' or 'it will be fine' as this can make children feel more anxious if they already feel nervous or worried. Instead show your child that you understand, for example, you could say, 'I can see you're worried about going to school. I know it's hard, but I know you can do it. Your teacher and I will help you'.
- Set the expectation that your child will go to school. Use clear, calm statements, using the word 'when' rather than 'if'. For example, you can say, 'When you're at school tomorrow ...' instead of 'If you make it to school tomorrow ...'
- Talk about what needs to happen to help your child feel safe and comfortable at school. Use a problem-solving approach. That is, help your child work out what the problem is, brainstorm solutions, and choose a solution to put into action. Role-play the solutions with your child so that they feel confident in using the strategies you have come up with.
- Talk to your child about who they feel are their trusted or key people at school. If possible, you could connect with these people before your child returns to school, via email and re-establish this school connection. You might send these key people a photo or story about something positive your tamariki have done over the isolation period.
- Focus on the positive aspects – ask your child to list the three things that they are most excited about on the first day back at school. Set them a goal of noticing three positive things over the school day that they can share with you once they are home again.

When you're at home with your child

- Stay calm. If your child sees that you're worried, stressed or frustrated, it can make your child's anxiety worse. By staying calm, you model a positive way of handling the situation.
- Plan for a calm start to the day by establishing good morning and evening routines. For example, get uniforms, lunches and school bags ready the night before and get your child to have a shower or bath in the evening. Get your child to play an active role in packing their school bag, making their lunches or choosing their snacks for school.
- If you can get your child to engage with at least some of the home schooling activities set out by your school, this will help support the connection between school and home.

- Alternatively, you may get your child to draw pictures, take photos or create artwork to take to school, to show their teacher on their return. This creates a positive focus and connection with the idea of transitioning back into school.
- Try to maintain a reasonable sleep and wake cycle over the isolation period. It is very hard to help your child get to school if she's sleepy during the day and awake at night. If your sleep routine has slipped over the time at home, then work your way back towards a typical sleep routine by making bed time 15 minutes earlier each night.
- Practice calm breathing with your child so that they can learn to use this when their anxiety rises. The Sparklers website has a clear explanation about tummy breathing, have a look at sparklers.org.nz/parenting/sparklers-home-tummy-breathing. Apps such as Smiling Mind, Headspace and Breathe, Think, Do - give guidance around mindfulness and mediation ideas for children.

Getting to school

- Make sure that you leave home with plenty of time to get to school, so that the drop off is not rushed or stressed.
- When you leave your child at school make sure you say goodbye without sneaking out when they are distracted. However, don't linger too long either. Leave your child with a statement that connects them with home such as 'I'm looking forward to seeing you at three o'clock and hearing all about your day' or 'I will see you after school and we will be able to share a Milo and a chat then'.
- It might be comforting for your child to have a small toy from home or a family photo in their school bag. They may like to wear a necklace or bracelet that connects them to home.
- Praise your child for their brave behaviour and remember to also praise yourself too. If you are feeling anxious or stressed and feel that you need further support please speak to school staff for advice and guidance.