



Transitioning Back to School

Head Start Heals - Frequently Asked Questions

Q. How can teachers support children returning to their classroom after COVID-19 quarantine?

As children return to school it is important that we meet them where they are at. We know many children will be returning to us who have experienced additional trauma and stress due to COVID-19 and its surrounding factors. Providing consistency, predictability, and safety through nurturing relationships and supportive environments will help all children with the transition back to school.

- **Start with Relationships:** Connect, Connect, Connect. Use responsive relationships to help children, families, and staff feel safe, secure, and valued. Provide positive descriptive praise and feedback across the day, find times to connect with individual children through play, keep families in the loop. Check in with your co-workers across the day. For children who have experienced trauma one nurturing and responsive adult relationship can make all of the difference!
- **Schedules:** Update visual schedules including time for new safety procedures, for example, extra hand washing. Re-teach the new schedule and refer to it often across the day. Having a consistent predictable schedule provides children with a sense of safety and security.
- **Routines:** Be prepared to teach new routines and practice them often throughout the day. Think about ways to make routines engaging, fun, and places to connect with children. For example, Teaching mask wearing: I am going to use a familiar song and change the words to talk about wearing a mask, we will sing the song every day before transitions to remind kids to keep their masks on; or I am going to do a role play with my co-teacher about how and why we wear masks at school now.).
- **Expect Behavioral Changes:** COVID-19 has been hard for all of us. Be prepared to see behavioral changes in children. Remember behavior always communicates a message. Think about what needs a child is trying to get met by the behavior and try your best to fill that need. Have classroom rules with visuals posted and re-teach these rules across the day. Provide positive praise for children who are following the rules. Kids feel safe when they know the expectations/rules. Be patient with children and yourself. We are all experiencing more stress..
- **Emotional Literacy:** Children may show a wide range of feelings throughout the day. Label and validate these feelings. For example, you look worried, it's ok to feel worried, let me sit with you until you are feeling less worried). Think about places in the schedule where we can check in with individual children about their feelings as well as times to teach feelings to the whole class. You can place a feelings face chart by the sink, as kids are doing extra hand washing check in with them about how they are feeling; Read a book or social story to the whole class ask children: How are the characters feeling? How might you feel in a similar situation?

- Self-Care: Do frequent check-ins with yourself across the day. Notice your own emotional state. It is ok to feel worried or overwhelmed. Think about activities you enjoy in the classroom and make sure to engage in those (E.g., doing art with the kids, going on walks outside with the class, having dance parties). You may find you need more breaks across the day, be prepared to communicate with your colleagues and ask for help when you need it. Drink plenty of water, get lots of sleep, don't forget to eat during the day, and breathing really does help!

Additional Resources:

Rebuilding the Pyramid: Reconnecting After a Break

<https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/Rebuilding-the-Pyramid.pdf>

Hand Washing Social Story for Children

https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/washing-hands_story.pdf

Additional Pyramid Model Resources and Strategies for Re-Opening After the COVID-19

<https://www.spec-pa.com/covid>

Caring for Children in Group Settings During COVID-19: A Follow up Conversation

https://goto.webcasts.com/starthere.jsp?ei=1312141&tp_key=80ad8382b9

Health and Hygiene: Preventing and Responding to COVID-19

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/physical-health/coronavirus/health-hygiene>

Transition Tips for Reopening Infant/Toddler Programs

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/coronavirus/transition-tips-reopening-infanttoddler-programs>

Q. How do we support families in preparing for the transition back to school?

Families can begin to prepare their children for the transition back to school by previewing, practicing routines, and reassuring children that they will be safe.

- **Previewing:** School may look very different as children come back from COVID-19. Be prepared to talk to your child about some of the changes that may happen (E.g., “When you go back to school I won’t be able to walk to your classroom. We will say goodbye in front of the school”; “When you go back to school your teacher and classmates will be wearing masks just like you. These masks help to keep everyone safe and healthy from germs”). Check in with your child’s school to get updates on new policies and procedures.
- **Practicing School Day Routines:** Think about starting to practice waking up with enough time to get ready and get to school on time. If bed time has been creeping later and later, now is a great time to practice going to bed earlier in preparation for school. Starting to limit screen time can also support children’s transition back to school. If you know when school is reopening you can start a countdown (E.g.,. Make a calendar and start crossing off the days until school starts).
- **Reassuring:** You or your child may be feeling anxious about returning to school, let them know it’s ok to feel nervous, remind them of the fun they have at school (E.g.,. What are you looking forward to the most when you go back to school? Who are you excited to see?) Remind them that the important adults in their life will always do their best to keep them healthy and safe (E.g., We are all going to wear masks now to keep you safe, your classmates safe, and teachers safe). Plan ahead with your child on how you will say goodbye the first day of school (E.g., secret handshake, 10 hugs and kisses, waving from the door). Remember kids cue off of your feelings, the calmer and more positive you are feeling about going back to school the better they will feel about it.

Additional Resources:

What Comes Next Back to Child Care

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3413-what-comes-next-back-to-child-care-following-shelter-in-place>

Helping Kids Back Into School Routine

<https://childmind.org/article/helping-kids-back-school-routine/>

How to Help Children with Difficult Transitions, Like School Closures Due to Coronavirus

<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/emergency-response/coronavirus-outbreak/resources/how-to-help-children-transition-school-closures-coronavirus>

The Importance of Schedules and Routines

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/coronavirus/importance-schedules-routines>

Supporting Preschoolers and Their Families Through Transitions

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/transitions/teacher-time-series/supporting-preschoolers-their-families-through-transitions>

Q. How do we support children who may be experiencing separation anxiety?

Children may show more anxiety around separating from their parents or caregivers right now. One reason a child may not want to leave a parent or caregiver's side is because this is their way of feeling safe and secure during these stressful times. There are strategies that can support children and parents who are dealing with separation anxiety.

- Routines and schedules are key, they help children to feel a sense of predictability and security.
- A special object from home (transitional object) can also help with separation, they help kids to hold a piece of their caregiver with them even when they are not together.
- They can also support the message that, you, their caregiver is coming back at the end of the day (E.g., giving your child a picture of you to take with them to school or something small from home that belongs to you).
- Reassuring your child that you are going to do everything you can to keep them safe and identifying school as a safe place will also help the transition back.
- It is also important that caregivers check in with their own emotions and levels of anxiety. Young children pick up on our stress and worries, we can help them during these moments by labeling our feelings and modeling a strategy (E.g., "Mom's feeling a little worried right now, I am going to take five (5) big deep breaths to help the worry leave my body").

Additional Resources:

Help Us Stay Calm

https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/Stay-Calm_Infographic.pdf

Separation Anxiety Disorder in Children

<https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=separation-anxiety-disorder-90-P02582>

Daily Separations and Reunions

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/transitions/article/daily-separations-reunions>