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Back to school health

Tips to help children return to school feeling happy and healthy

It has been a turbulent time for us all this year, with Covid-19 disrupting every aspect of our lives. This month sees the long-awaited return to school, which could be leaving many children and parents with feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.

"Covid-19 has created a huge amount of stress and anxiety for families all over the world," says Dr Myra Altman, VP of Clinical Care at mental wellness platform Modern Health (www.modernhealth.com). "In fact, according to our recent study we know that adults (57 per cent) have said that they have felt more stress and anxiety during Covid-19 than any other time in their life. This stress and uncertainty will undoubtedly have an impact on the entire household, children included."

"As families struggle to deal with the fall-out from exams chaos, don't forget that younger children also need support with their mental health – this year of all years," says former teacher Catherine Lynch of education resources and lesson-planning experts PlanBee (planbee.com). "While this is usually an exciting – if slightly scary – time for young children, this year will be like no other. Schools have made enormous efforts to give children – especially those who are moving on to 'big' school – a sense of celebration and achievement, but there is no doubt that the lengthy absence from school has made everything different."

Fortunately, there are a number of things that parents can do to help manage their child's transition back to school and ease any fears they may have.

Provide some reassurance

"First and foremost, I would recommend talking to your child about their return to school," says Leon Hady, head teacher and founder of Guide Tuition (www.guidetuition.com). "Ask them how they feel about returning to school and provide them with reassurance that it is perfectly normal to be experiencing anxiety if that is indeed the case. Additionally, if you are able to, allowing your child to start reconnecting with their peer group and friends in some physical way will also provide the opportunity for them to re-establish familiar relationships and share their experiences or concerns with young people who have also experienced similar levels of disruption to their normal life."

Dispel the uncertainty

"Try to keep your child as informed as possible about what their new routines or school day will involve and feel like," says Leon Hady. "Contacting your school and asking about arrangements that are specific to your children's schooling will also help to dispel some uncertainty that they may have regarding what will happen and provide you with a clear dialogue should you have any further questions or concerns. If possible, arrange to visit the school with your child prior to reopening, so they may see exactly how they will be protected and cared for in their settings."



Address any concerns head-on

"Be transparent with your children about what's going on and address any coronavirus specific concerns head-on," says Dr Anna Colton, a clinical psychologist with Explore Learning (www.explorelearning.co.uk). "Children can sense when things are being hidden or 'glossed over'. Tell your child that they can cope and help them to do so. Don't be scared of naming feelings – you can't put ideas in their head by doing this. If your own anxiety is overwhelming, find someone to help you so that you have support and so that you don't pass it on to your child."

Make sleep a priority

"Sleep impacts everything from memory and cognitive functioning to emotion regulation," says Dr Myra Altman. "It is an essential and productive part of our physiology. Children who are feeling anxious may have trouble sleeping. While there is no hard and fast rule, the general guide is around 12 hours of sleep a night for toddlers, 10 to 12 hours for children aged three to six, 10 to 11 hours for children aged seven to 12 and around eight to nine hours for teenagers. To make sure your children get enough sleep, create a consistent sleep schedule. Waking up and going to sleep at different times can create a kind of "jet lag" that can interfere with sleep. Establishing a consistent sleep/wake routine that varies by no more than 30 minutes will have a positive impact on sleep. Engage in relaxing activities in the evening such as reading a book in dimmed light or taking a hot bath. Avoid stimulating activities, blue light and bright light from iPads and tablets later in the day."

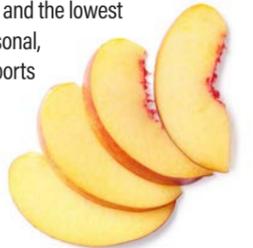
Keep everyone fighting fit



"Back to school can be a challenging time with change both in seasonal temperatures and tempers!" says naturopath Elle Fox. "Change can increase stress and, as the nights begin to draw in, some children and adults get affected by lower mood/energy levels. So how do you

keep the kids (and yourself) fighting fit, especially through a season which challenges both moods and immunity?

Most of us don't realise how much our health and resilient immunity hinge on good, nutritious food. Feed the whole family fresh, locally sourced, seasonal food (organic if possible). This ensures the highest nutrient content and the lowest carbon footprint for your spend. Seasonal, local food is less expensive and supports small local farmers – the backbone of our communities. Involve kids in food prep by cutting veg and fruit in fun shapes; teaching kids how to prepare food is both an enjoyable experience and a valuable skill for life.



Here are some excellent immunity-boosting all-rounders: green leafy veggies (especially rich in magnesium and vitamin C); whole grains and beans (pre-soaked or fermented); calcium-rich sunflower seeds; broccoli; tahini; protein and fats from pasture-fed cattle; poultry; eggs; wild-caught fish (also rich in vitamin D); butter; ghee and cold-pressed oils. Outdoor activities also boost vitamin D which helps our overall immunity.



For those dreaded mid-afternoon low-sugar tantrums, meet them at the school gates with whole fruit, veggie sticks, presoaked nuts and seeds to keep blood sugar levels level.

Sugar hides in anything processed and 'ready-meal' type. Studies show that we need 28 molecules of magnesium to deal with one molecule of sugar – can you imagine needing 28 spoonfuls of magnesium to deal with one spoonful of sugar? Banish biscuits, crisps, cakes, coffee, tea, hot chocolate, cola, anything 'tooth-kind', 'lite', 'free-from' and fizzy. Fizzy drinks can rob the body of calcium. My dad used to say, 'Water is the drink of lions'; it should be the staple drink of humans, too."

Naturopath Elle Fox is a CNM (College of Naturopathic Medicine) graduate, author and speaker. CNM trains successful practitioners in natural therapies. Visit naturopathy-uk.com or call 01342 410505.