

Returning to School:

Supporting Children During Uncertainty and Change

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant uncertainty and change. Our daily lives have been disrupted. Despite the information overload through the news and social media, we are still left with more uncertainty and change to come.

As adults work to manage the stress and change, daily demands may compete with the emotional and social needs of children. In many parts of the world, parents have been asked to work from home while also supporting their kids' schoolwork. After time away from the classroom, the return to school can present unique stress, made harder by the uncertainty of schedules and the need for families to reestablish routines.

Emotional Responses

Even though most children have adapted to the unusual circumstances of the pandemic, it is important to remember that children's lives have been significantly disrupted. Kids' ability to cope with change, uncertainty, fear, anger, and worry are less developed than that of adults. In other words, if you feel stressed about the return to a version of normal, your kids likely feel much worse.

Emotional responses such as outbursts, sleep disturbances, changes in eating patterns, worry, sadness, and withdrawal are only a few of the ways children respond to feelings that they are unable to describe or understand. Strong emotions and disruptive behaviors are not a sign of bad parenting; they are signs your child needs help coping with their feelings.

Coping Skills

Coping skills are a toolkit we carry with us. They are the things we do to endure stressful situations and bounce back. The following are examples of coping skills we can easily teach our kids. How does your child unwind and relax? Get creative and talk with your child about additional ways they can regain control over how they feel. There is no right or wrong way, and each child will have different coping skills that work for them.

- Practice putting words to feelings
- Develop a rating chart for how strong an emotion is
- Take deep breaths
- Stretch
- Take a short walk or get moving
- Count down slowly from five
- Take a drink of water
- Relax your shoulders by shrugging and shaking it out
- Take a break to play or have a snack
- Repeat a positive affirmation
- Listen to music
- Push against a wall



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Other ways you can help your child during moments of distress

- **Calm yourself first.** Slow down. Press pause and remind yourself the goal is to calm the situation—not escalate it. Be a good role model for your children by showing your emotions in healthy ways.
- **Get them talking.** This can take some effort for many children. Ask what they know about upcoming changes or what they've heard from other kids. Ask how they feel.
- **Listen.** Seems simple enough. But as parents, we get busy, or we often want to talk rather than listen to our kids. Sometimes you don't have to immediately solve the problem. You just need to listen.
- **Empathize and acknowledge how your child is feeling.** Let them know you notice them and how they feel. Put your words to their feelings, even if they don't have the words to explain it to you. Reassure them it is OK to have those feelings. Reflect back to them what you see and hear, such as, "I see you're biting your lip. You look worried." Or, "It's OK to feel sad when plans are cancelled." In this way, you are helping them understand and accept their experience.
- **Provide honest and accurate information.** Share all you can as early as you can. Knowledge and predictability reduce stress. But filter information and speak at a level your kids will understand. Younger kids don't need all the details during stressful times. Help them avoid the media and adult conversations. Encourage them to ask questions. Prompt them if needed: "That's all I know so far about when school will start. Do you have any questions?"
- **Engage and empower.** Get kids involved in planning, making schedules, and problem-solving. Offer choices.
- **Stay positive.** Avoid negative and "doom and gloom" talk. Stay optimistic. Focus on the good things to come.
- **Be patient.** Managing change and uncertainty is not a straight path from start to finish. Expect lapses into emotion, even when you thought they were coping well.
- **Trust your instincts about your kids.** You know your child best. If you feel their reaction is excessive or indicates a serious problem, talk to your pediatrician, the school, or contact the EAP.

When we help our children cope with their feelings and behavior in a safe, supportive environment, we are giving them the opportunity to develop and grow. No one is born with coping skills. It takes time for kids to build strategies they can use when needed. Being able to manage feelings and behaviors is a challenge for kids. This is our chance to help them develop stress managements skills for life.

For confidential support, free of charge, contact Caterpillar's **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**:

📞 1-309-820-3604

🌐 EAP.cat.com

📞 1-866-228-0565

🌐 CaterpillarEAP.com

For global access numbers by country

