

Many kids experience back-to-school jitters. But going back to school during a global pandemic brings with it a whole new set of unknowns.

"They don't know what's going to be happening," says Dr. Jay Greenfeld, a Winnipeg clinical psychologist who sees clients who range in age from five to 80.

"They know they're going back to school, but they don't know what it's going to look like. They don't know what the reactions will be like from their friends. They don't know what the classroom will be like. For a number of these kids, outside of kindergarteners, they've attended so many days and years in a row, so all they know is one way.

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Dr. Jay Greenfeld, a Winnipeg clinical psychologist, says there are steps that can be taken by parents and caregivers — and kids themselves — to help ease anxiety about the return to classes amid COVID-19.

"Even though the building may be familiar, there's a high chance it's not going to look the same to them. And because they don't know what it's going to feel like until a week in, or a couple days in, they are just left to think."

And with thinking can come worrying.

Here, Greenfeld offers some advice for parents and caregivers of anxious kids — and kids themselves — about back-to-school season in the era of COVID-19.

Talking to younger kids

When talking out anxious feelings about school with a younger child, Greenfeld says it's helpful to remind them that they are not alone and that they have support.

"Remind them that they have different parents for support, they have their teachers for support, they have friends," he says. "You can have them draw out a small circle and say, 'OK, tell me the five most important people in your life who you feel supported by.' Then they're identifying who these people are so that, when they need that support, they know who to go to."

Making a daily check-in plan can also help mitigate anxiety. "So, maybe it's at the end of each day, we're going to talk about what school was like, and at the beginning of the day, we're going to talk about what you're most excited about going to school," he says.

"What overrides the anxiety is 'This is what I'm looking forward to' as opposed to 'This is what I'm anxious about.'"

When it comes to persistent "what if" thoughts — especially worst-case worries about things we can't control — Greenfeld suggests reminding kids of times they have coped with challenges before.

"'What if school does go back to Zoom? Well, what happened when it went to Zoom in the spring? You survived and did OK.' That's strength building, and creates a sense of empowerment more than anxiety."

For those kids struggling to adjust to changes — to schedules, to routines — it's also worth reminding them that different doesn't mean bad. "Different is just different."

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Avoid giving kids timelines, such as ‘This will end in March’ or ‘This will end in June.’

"You don't know that," Greenfeld says. "You don't want to give false promises. What you can do with timelines is, depending on how things are going, if we're still in this situation in a few months, then we'll set some new goals, or look at new adventures we can create at home." That way, kids have something to look forward to.

While sanitization measures are important during a pandemic, over-emphasis may provoke more fear and anxiety around germs than vigilance. Instead, Greenfeld recommends empowering kids by asking them questions such as, "What are you going to do to keep yourself sanitized and clean? What are you going to do to keep yourself safe and socially distant when necessary?"

"So that the child answers that, as opposed to parents repeatedly talking at them," he says.

It's also worth reminding kids that they have no power over what other kids do or don't do — and it's not their job to tell them.

"So it's really, 'I can't control what other people are going to do, all I can do is control what I'm going to do, and I'm going to count to 20 when I wash my hands.'"

Talking to older kids

For teenagers, Greenfeld recommends parents make sure older students are focused on their priorities — which, in this case, is school — and to ensure that they are respecting public health guidelines and are not taking the pandemic too lightly.

Talking to them about what's going on in other parts of the country and world is useful, as is talking about what they are seeing on social media.

It can also be helpful for parents or caregivers to share their own thoughts with their older children. "Make yourselves vulnerable and say, 'These are my worries and concerns.' A lot of times, these kids look at their parents and don't have any idea of their own challenges."

Avoid being too lenient, especially with respect to having friends over, for example. "We want things to be safe, respectful, and parents need to, realistically, establish rules," Greenfeld says.

And don't minimize their worries. "Just because they are older doesn't mean they are less anxious," he says. "They are just differently anxious."

Strategies and tools for everyone

With so much we have no control over, it's helpful to focus on what we can control — chiefly, our perspectives.

"The way in which we think can control a lot of our feelings," Greenfeld says. "So if we start to talk to our friends about certain opinions we have or certain things we think — 'school's gonna be like this,' 'school's gonna be like that' — when you talk about it enough and think about it enough, you start to believe that's actually reality."

That's where a shift in perspective can come in.

"So it's saying, 'School's going to look different, and I'm worried about that, but at least I'm going.' 'School is going to look different, and it's not going to be as easy — maybe I can't hug my friends, and maybe I can't have recess or do gym the same way, but I'm still in school and seeing my friends.'"

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Dr. Greenfeld says for those kids struggling to adjust to changes — to schedules, to routines — it's also worth reminding them that different doesn't mean bad.

Different kids will have different concerns. Some might be worried about contracting COVID-19, others might be worried about increased restrictions.

"The reason for their anxiety can vary, but the response, in terms of strategies, can be something as imperative as mindfulness-type work: breathing, mindfulness meditation, and really engaging in regular meditation and relaxation training two or three times a day," Greenfeld says.

'Relaxation,' here, doesn't mean lying down and taking a nap. "It's more about what's referred to as four-count breathing, to settle the physiology of your brain and body," he says. "If you can regulate your breathing, you're going to feel more relaxed. And if you feel more relaxed, your thoughts are likely going to be clearer."

Greenfeld points out that kids returning to school may not have the same level of physical activity owing to changes to gym class, recess, and extracurriculars. "That means getting some type of regular exercise is going to be that much more important."

Recording thoughts in a journal can also be a useful tool. "It's not out of the question for them to reflect on their thoughts, write out their thoughts," Greenfeld says. "Write them out so they can see what they are saying to themselves, and then challenge those thoughts. Challenge the accuracy, challenge whether they are rational."

"The reality is, it doesn't matter if a child is seven, or 17, they can all benefit from doing these things."

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That goes for parents, too. "If they aren't managing their own mindsets, their kids pick up on it. It's not just a matter of make sure your kids are doing this. It's a team effort from both parents and kids."

Because we will be living with this virus for some time, Greenfeld advises that families take things week to week. "It doesn't matter what happened six months ago, or what will happen. It's this week that matters. If you've done everything you can to sanitize and safely socially distance and be respectful of different guidelines this week? Awesome. Do it again next week."

And when it comes to perspective, practising gratitude is important as we navigate these uncertain and different times.

"Our anxiety stems from what we cannot control, but one thing we can control is how we show appreciation for our teachers, the staff that will be keeping our schools clean and safe, and what we are so fortunate to have access to," Greenfeld says.

"Expressing gratitude toward others and ourselves during times like this can help decrease some of the impact of our worries related to the unknown."

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