



# SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD IN RETURNING TO SCHOOL

**Dear parents and guardians,**

**Welcome to the new school year!**

We couldn't be more excited for another school year. We also recognize that this year will look unlike any we have ever encountered. While this comes with new opportunities, it will be a transition for all of us and these transitions will be ongoing.

As our counseling teams met together over the summer in preparation for the new school year, it was clear that our students and our families were grappling with similar experiences. We were reminded that community extends beyond the institutions to which we belong--that we're stronger when we stand together.

It is our hope that in sharing this resource with you will further support your family's return to school this year. Whether we're a part of the same school or sending care from a distance, we will be by your side every step of the way.

**With care,**

**Kendra, Mary, & Merritt (Ravenscroft)**

**Kelly & Twanna (Cary Academy)**

**Chrissy, Martha, and Shelley (Durham Academy)**

# Coping & Calming Strategies

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**1** **Talk or write it out!** Find a trusted adult or your journal and share/write about the following:

- What are my worries? They may be about school starting, about COVID-19, about connection with friends, or anything else.
- For each worry, you can share:
  - What do I think is going to happen?
  - What are other possibilities about what may happen?
  - What is my family currently doing to adapt? To stay safe and healthy?
  - Are my worries realistic?
  - How can my adult or family help me see things differently or more accurately?

\*Some of the questions above adapted from the book "Freeing your Child from Anxiety" by Tamar E. Chansky

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**2** **Art.** Draw or make your worries using your favorite art supplies, clay, or another medium. Focus on:

- If you could see your worries, what would they look like?
- What colors would you use?
- What would your worry be doing?
- Describe your worry art to a trusted adult!

Check out this website for more artistic ways to calm your worries:

<https://www.counselorkeri.com/2020/03/22/mindfulness-crafts/>

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**3** **Breathing.** Try these breathing techniques in a comfortable position--sitting or laying down. You can also put your hand on your belly while you try them.

- **Figure 8 breathing:**
    - Trace a figure 8 with your finger. As you trace one half, take a deep breath in. As you trace the other half, take a deep breath out. Repeat.
  - **4-7-8 breathing:**
    - Breathe in as you slowly count to four. Hold your breath as you count to seven. Exhale as you slowly count to eight.
  - **Belly breathing:**
    - Place your hand on your belly while you take slow, deep breaths. Picture your belly filling up with air like a balloon with every in breath and emptying out completely with every out breath.
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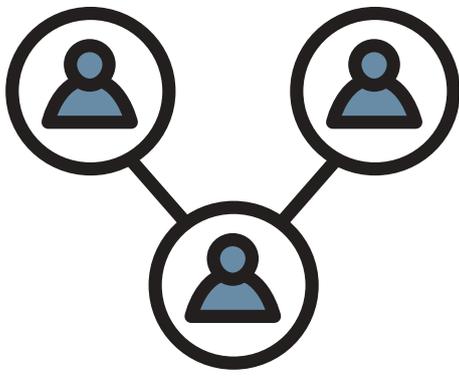
**4** **Grounding technique.** Sit in a calm space indoors or outdoors. Take a few deep, relaxing breaths and identify:

- 5 things you can see
  - 4 things you can hear
  - 3 things you can touch
  - 2 things you can smell
  - Take 1 deep breath!
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**5** **Progressive relaxation.** Begin at your head or toes and slowly tighten and relax each part of your body as you work your way through each set of muscles from your head down (or your toes up). Notice how your body feels when you are done.

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**6** **Mindfulness.** Download a mindfulness app (Calm, Headspace or Breathe are great options) for guided mindfulness exercises.



# Navigating Social Relationships

Our world has changed in many ways since students last left the classrooms in March. Just as adjusting to virtual learning took time, readjusting to the reality of physical school will take time too! In fact, while we will be returning to a familiar environment, many aspects will have changed.

This truth applies to social relationships as well. Peer relationships are an important part of the school experience. Younger children work through key skills of making friends, conflict resolution, and collaboration. Adolescents navigate complex social circles and work toward establishing their identity as individuals. Yet, both processes have been put on hold as students have been separated from their peers.

As we look ahead to returning to school, we may assume that kids will be thrilled to jump back in to in-person interactions with their peers. While this may be true for many students, it may not be true for all. Some may have anxiety about relating to others in “real-time” or seeing people face-to-face again. Some may be nervous about reacquainting themselves with friends that they haven’t seen in a while, or perhaps worried that a friend (or themselves!) has changed and that the relationship will not be the same. This range of emotion is normal! In fact, these feelings show their growing awareness of themselves and others – for it is true that we all have changed in response to the events that have shaped the past months.

Whatever mix of excitement, worry, or confusion your child may be experiencing- start the conversation with your child now. **Ask them how they’re feeling about seeing their friends, and above all else, continue to remind them that however they’re feeling is okay!**

*Some helpful reminders for*

# Talking with your child about returning to school

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## *Navigating the transition*

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This will be a transition and it will take time to figure out your new routine. How both you and your child feel day-to-day will likely be different.

## *Presence vs. problem-solving*

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It's okay to not have the answers--you won't be able to fix everything!

## *Offering reassurance*

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Remember, when children experience uncertainty, kids look to trusted adults for answers and reassurance. Creating a mantra of, "We'll work through this together as a family" can help keep us all grounded!



Whether you will be in person or virtual this year, here are some examples of questions to ask your kids and some norms for these conversations:

## Before school:

- How are you feeling about starting school?
- What are you looking forward to?
- Is there anything you're feeling nervous/worried about?
- What are some strategies you can use if you're feeling nervous, overwhelmed, etc?
- What would help you feel prepared for your first day?
- Who are some trusted adults and friends you can talk to if you need help/support during the school day?
- What questions do you have?

\*For younger children, their behaviors are often more telling than their words in regards to worries and fears. Depending on the needs of your child(ren), using a social story or books can be a great way to discuss feelings.

## After school:

- How did the day go?
- What was the best part?
- What was the most challenging?
- What are some things we can do to help you feel even more prepared for tomorrow?
- Was anything different than what you were expecting? How so?
- What made you laugh/smile?
- Did anything make you sad?
- What was it like to see your friends at school again?



## How do I let my kids know that I'm listening and hearing them?

- "Listening to understand rather than listening to respond"
  - As difficult as it can be, give your child the space to say everything they're thinking or feeling before talking about possible solutions. For example, ask your child "Do you need me to just listen right now or do you want me to help brainstorm strategies/solutions to help?"
- Acknowledge your child's feelings/fears with responses like "that makes sense", "I would feel that way too", or "You sound worried/scared/excited, etc."
- Be mindful that you're in a good mental space when you initiate these conversations. Pay attention to your own feelings and model taking care of yourself. We are all experiencing feelings of uncertainty and anxiety right now, and it's important that the focus of these conversations stay centered on your child's needs.
- Choose a time and place where you and your child can fully engage in the conversation--dinner table, car ride, before bed, etc. "In the moment" of big feelings is not often the best time. If your child seems resistant to sharing, involve your child in choosing the best time to check in (e.g. "It's important that we talk about going back to school. When would you like to talk about it?").

# Additional Resources

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## Resources

- [CDC: Talking with children about Coronavirus Disease](#)
  - [CDC: Helping Children Cope](#)
  - [Stay Positive: Tools to help you feel stronger and more hopeful \(mhnational.org\)](#)
  - [Supporting Families During COVID-19 \(childmind.org\)](#)
  - [Taking Care of Your Mental Health in the Face of Uncertainty](#)
  - [How Parents Can Protect Their Kids' Mental Health During a Pandemic](#)
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## Crisis Hotlines

- Crisis Text Line (24hours/7days a week): 741741
  - National Suicide Hotline (24/7): 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
  - Hopeline (24/7 confidential local hotline): 919-231-4525 or 1-877-235-4525
  - Wake County Mobile Crisis Management (Local resource that will come to you): 877-626-1772
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