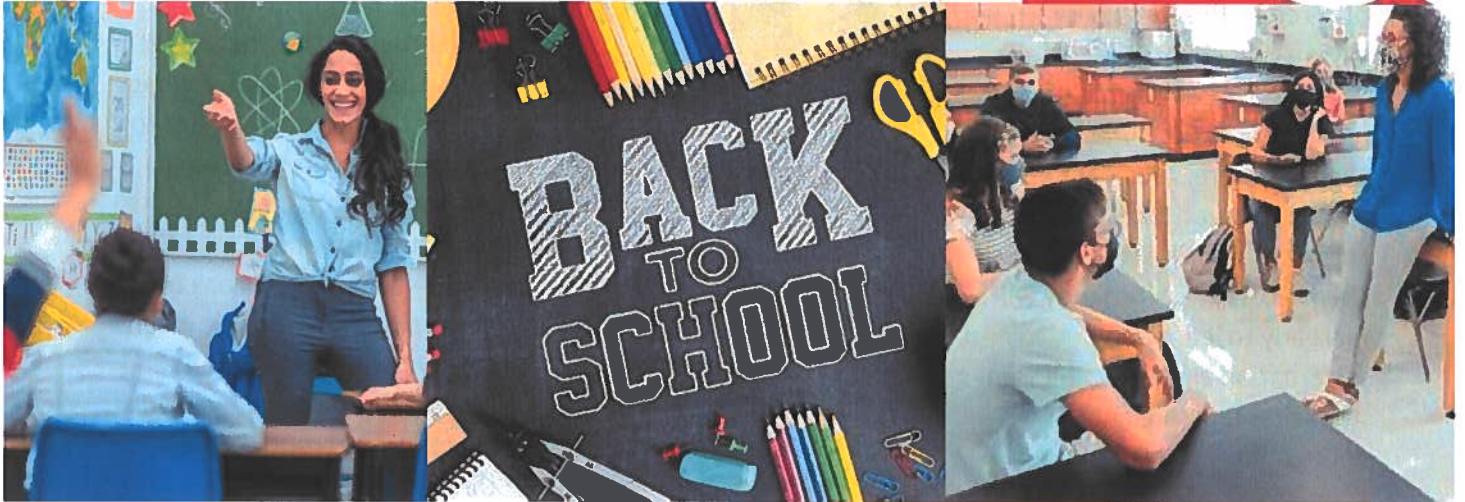


GOING BACK TO SCHOOL A YEAR INTO THE PANDEMIC

by Mary M. Kreitz, LPC



Change is Stressful

All change is stressful, even good change. The return to school involves a lot of change even in the best of times. This is especially true for students who are starting school for the first time, those who are transitioning from elementary to middle school or from middle school to high school, or students who are new to the school they will be attending this fall. One way to help children cope with change is to view it as both a challenge and an opportunity. Talk about what is the same and what is different in your classroom and in your school. Acknowledge what might be difficult and plan strategies for coping. Identify new opportunities that arise because things are different and plan ways to make the most of those opportunities.

Expect Behavior Change

Be prepared to see your students behaving in ways that aren't usual for them. Keep in mind that behavior always communicates a message. Try to figure out what need the child is trying to meet through that behavior and then help the child to identify a more appropriate way to meet that need. Responding to the need rather than the behavior will help to avoid unwanted meltdowns and power struggles.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE NEW ACADEMIC YEAR

The past year has been stressful for everyone. As schools prepare to welcome students back for the start of a new academic year, it is important to keep in mind that students are not all starting out in the same place. At the end of the last school year, some classes were in the school buildings, some lessons were being delivered virtually, and there were hybrid mixes of both in-person and virtual learning. Regardless of what the situation was for the last school year, teachers want to help their students to start this year off on the right track. There is a lot that teachers and school staff can do to help.

Supportive Relationships

When children are going through difficult times, having a relationship with a supportive and responsive adult can make a world of difference. Research has shown that children who have a relationship with an appropriate adult who makes them feel safe, valued and supported tend to be the most resilient when life throws them a curve. Before they will be ready to learn new information and skills, children must first feel safe and connected.

Practice Self-Care

You can't take proper care of your students if you aren't taking proper care of yourself. Your students need and deserve teachers who are healthy and mentally present. Make sure you are getting enough sleep, eating healthy and getting exercise. Children pick up on the mental and emotional states of the adults in their lives. The calmer and more positive you are about the start of the school year, the better your class will feel about it.



Differences in Learning

The last year was difficult both for learners and for teachers. It is hard to be at your best when you are worried about issues of health and safety, when you are juggling multiple roles, when things are uncertain and when you are adjusting to unfamiliar technology. As they start the new school year, students may be feeling self-conscious about being behind academically. School staff need to be prepared to meet them where they are without judgment. They also need to resist the temptation to interpret students' struggles as a reflection of their own failure as instructors during the past year.

Structure & Routines

As we adapt to changing circumstances, structure and routine give us a sense of control, alleviate some of the stress and give our minds a much-needed break. Structure grounds us by providing understanding of what's next and helps us to organize what we are doing from moment to moment. Routines anchor us by providing a degree of predictability, and a comforting mental break for our brains. We feel safe when we know the expectations and rules. Children not only need structure and routine, they thrive on them.

Get Information

Check in with your child's family to get updates about stressors from home that may be affecting their behavior and learning at school. For some students, school is an oasis of calm and structure in an otherwise chaotic and unstable life. Having an idea about what students are dealing with in their personal lives can help you to be more patient and understanding if the student is struggling at school.



Professional Help

If you find that you are having emotional distress that doesn't go away and that the strategies you're using to cope just aren't enough, reach out for professional help. Talk to your school counselor about helping you to connect with a therapist. **Call Child & Adolescent Behavioral Health at 330-433-6075 to schedule an appointment to speak with professional behavioral health clinician.** If you or someone you know is thinking that life isn't worth living, help is available any time, day or night.

Call the National Suicide Lifeline at 800-273-8255

Text 4HOPE to 741-741

Call the Crisis Center at 330-452-6000



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