



Back-To-School: Five Tips for Supporting Children’s Mental and Emotional Well-being

By Dr. Rhonda Randall, for Optum Idaho

More than a year and a half since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the toll on our physical and mental health is clear and well-documented – and, we’re learning, may be affecting children and teenagers disproportionately.

Recent research from the [Kaiser Family Fund](#) reports that more than 25% of high school students experienced worsening emotional and cognitive health during since March 2020, and more than 20% of parents with children ages 5-12 reported similar worsening conditions for their children.

As we move into the new school year, helping to provide our kids and teens with the necessary support, structure and tools to help them manage their feelings and adjust to ongoing changes of daily life is imperative. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) guidance states that “students benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person instruction in the fall 2021 is a priority.”

Below are a list of tips and suggestions on how to better manage children’s emotional health and wellbeing as we head back to school:

Tip #1: Share information. The [CDC](#) is a great resource for learning how to talk to your child about COVID-19. It’s important to provide children with appropriate support sooner rather than later. Talk with your child, be emotionally supportive and understand worries may extend beyond the anxieties that may come with heading back to the classroom for a new school year. Be proactive about learning what steps you can take to help reduce the amount of stress in their lives and help provide a strong support system for getting through possible challenges that may arise.

Tip #2: Help them feel secure. Going back to school may be daunting for children, especially after the stress and disruption of the pandemic. The CDC emphasizes -- Be reassuring about their safety and validate their feelings by emphasizing that it's OK to feel upset, scared, anxious, down and even angry. You might also share how you manage your feelings to help them learn from you. Make sure your children know they can ask questions at any time. For adolescents, consider walking them through the use of self-care tools like the [Sanvello app](#) to help navigate difficult emotions.

Tip #3: Listen and watch. Parents, friends, teachers and family may often be the first line of defense for a child who may be struggling with their mental and emotional well-being yet unable to articulate their needs. Let them know you are here to listen and it's safe to share how they're feeling. Pay attention to more than just their words - it's critical for parents to be aware of their children's moods and uncharacteristic changes in behavior so they know when it's time to seek expert support.

Tip #4: Help define boundaries and create regular routines. Consider limiting exposure to news coverage – including social media – and prioritizing and establishing a regular routine that provides children with structure when not in the classroom as this may help better manage children's emotional wellbeing. For example, consider after-school activities, sports, or hobbies that interest your child.

Top Tip: Take Action. Make sure to discuss your concerns with your pediatrician or family physician as soon as possible. Your doctor may recommend a plan of action or even a counselor who might help find ways to reduce any unhealthy stress and improve overall health.

What to Watch for – And How to Help

Depression: A hallmark of the pandemic is increased stress, which may lead to a higher incidence of depression and maybe other behavioral illnesses. Some common signs of depression in children, according to the [CDC](#), include feeling sad, hopeless, or irritable a lot of the time, having a hard time paying attention, low energy or fatigue, feeling worthless or useless, and showing self-injury and self-destructive behavior. In addition, [suicide rates](#) have been increasing and affect all ages so consider seeking professional support and care for depression to help reduce the chances of suicide and other possible self-harm behaviors.

For more health and wellness information, visit [Live and Work Well](#).

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