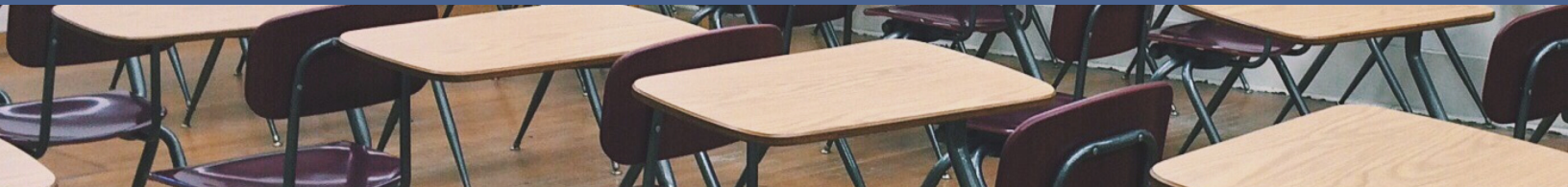


BACK TO SCHOOL STRESS MANAGEMENT

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As summer comes to an end, a new door opens for transitions and beginnings. Maybe your child is just starting high school as a freshman. Or perhaps they are entering their senior year. Maybe they are beginning a new chapter at a new school or even participating in a new sport or after school group that requires meeting a new group of kids. With so much opportunity for excitement, there is just as much opportunity for anxiety and stress.

First and foremost, we must not forget that in recent years most kids have had their school experience shaken to the core by COVID-19. Since the start of the pandemic, they have yet to have a “normal” school year and might still find it hard to transition back to in-person learning after being online/hybrid for so long.

Talk to your kids about any anxieties they might have that are COVID related and ensure you know your school's COVID-19 protocol. Here are some areas to consider in supporting their back-to-school experience:

CREATING AND DISCUSSING A ROUTINE

It's important that kids have structure, and as the school year starts, the whole household experiences a shift in their daily routine. Many kids have anxiety about the unknown.

Even if it feels assumed or redundant based on previous school years, take the time to discuss the following to support their containment:

Daily Structure: Consider drop off and pick up, who is responsible for kids getting to school, what time do they need to leave the house, what time are they expected to be home, when will parent(s) return home, and what will dinner plans look like including time and who's preparing?

Emergency Planning: Routes to get home, developing an identified landmark for refuge in case of an emergency, or identifying important contacts. Smart phones have great tools that support emergency planning, and it is wise to utilize this with your kids.

Homework Time: Some kids need a break from school before they start homework and sometimes, they want to get it over with before free-time. Talk with your children and find the best individualized solutions. Try to be flexible if that looks different in a multi-child household.

Nutrition: It can be hard for kids to swap Hot Cheetos for a healthier choice, but consider the balance and what can be controlled. Considering breakfast and dinner are likely provided at home while lunch is at school, ensure that dinner and breakfast are as healthy and hearty as possible to combat the midday Flaming Hot Lime Cheetos.

It is also important to model and ensure healthy eating habits due to the pressures that society creates around body image. Being back at school for kids might increase stress in this area and so having more open conversations around body image and healthy eating is crucial.

Remember that kids are sponges, and they absorb what you put out. Try to speak about your own body in a positive manner. It is not recommended to shame any food choices or encourage extreme diets. The best route is to encourage a well-rounded pallet.

Screen Time: As kids get into a new schedule and have homework and/or extracurricular activities, it is important to discuss appropriate screen time. Social media can be the source of anxiety for many children, and a form of self-care for others.

That is why it's important to find a balance that supports your kids style of using screen time. Invite your child into a conversation about screen time, and collaborate to find a solution that makes sense for your family. Including them in the conversation sets them up to buy into the boundaries more fully.

Sleep: Sleep is vital for a healthy lifestyle, and it is imperative that kids get enough rest, as their brains are still developing.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends that teenagers aged 13-18 should be sleeping 8-10 hours per day. Talk with kids about their sleep patterns and discuss positive ways to support a healthy sleep routine.

Here are some suggestions:

- Limit screen time 1 hour before bed
- Play soothing music or ambient sounds
- Practice breathing techniques that support calming the nervous system
- Hang black out curtains or shades
- Ensure they have enough time in the morning to fully wake up if your child is not a morning person

CREATING REALISTIC PRIORITIES

Many parents come from a generation where grades were the priority, and although they still are important, there has become a need to focus just as equally on kids' mental health while in school. Talk with your children about expectations of their performance in school, but from a more supportive positioning. It's important to remember that if children are stressed and anxious, it makes completing school work harder and impacts their social emotional learning. Speak with them about where they feel the most pressure to succeed.

Try these talking points to help your teenager organize their school work:

- Which classes do they like the most?
- Which assignments are the quickest to complete?
- Which assignments take more time or require more thought?
- Discuss strategies such as focusing on one subject per day, or alternatively, focus on the easier busy work on certain days and leave the more labor-intensive work for weekends.

CREATING OPEN COMMUNICATION

Creating a space where you and your child can talk about their excitement just as much as their stress is crucial. Implementing these tips relies on having an open, honest and collaborative conversation together. Check in with your kids about potential bullying. Support them when their friend group experiences tension. Advocate for them to teachers if they're struggling and need your support. It's important for kids to avoid internalizing their struggles or feelings alone.

Additional support is available within our community. Encourage your child to visit their school's Wellness Center to support their mental health.