



Leading our Kids Back to School

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

Re-entry has begun and we are now preparing to return to parts of our lives, like work and schooling, without knowing exactly what this looks like. How do we lead our children? What do they need from us? Can they adapt to the new realities of social distancing at schools and will this create anxiety and emotional problems for them? These are just a few of the questions I have been asked by parents but center around the question of – *how do I lead my child(ren) back to school?*

Will our kids feel safe?

Safety is an illusion and telling our children that they won't get covid, or that we won't get covid is not the best way to make them *feel* safe. Safety has much less to do with their surroundings and more to do with their connection to adults. Assuring our children that they will be 'okay' is far less effective when it comes to feeling secure than making sure they feel taken care of by us. In order to understand why this is so we will need to understand something about attachment and why it matters to kids.

Children are not able to take care of themselves and they can't make sense of the world like an adult does. It is their dependency on adults that makes them feel secure as they look to them for protection, guidance, and direction. The relationship with an adult is like an emotional bubble that preserves the child's heart. When a child is afraid, frustrated, or overwhelmed, it is this *relational bubble* that can provide a safe place to retreat to. Home is where the heart is, and we need our children to give their hearts to us for safe keeping.

A child doesn't feel lost when they can count on their adults to show up for them and to lead. It doesn't mean that all the threats in their life disappear and that they can't be hurt, but that they are shielded from this reality as they trust their adults to lead and to provide for them. Where they are confused, they should look to their adults to lead the way and for their adults to be responsible for figuring out issues of safety.

How can parents and teachers lead?

- 1 We can work on taking care of our kids by being their compass point, caring for them in unexpected ways, providing more than they seek, listening with our full attention, and taking the lead in feeding them
- 2 We can take the lead in matchmaking our kids to their teachers and strengthening that connection. We can remind our children that their teachers have missed them and can be trusted to lean on.
- 3 We don't know all of the details about what school will look like as they re-enter, but we can direct them to their teacher who will tell them what they need to know
- 4 We can't say 'everything will be okay' as we can't know the future but we can say that we will take care of them and they can count on that

If there was ever a time that we needed our children to rest in our care, it is now. We need to work to *strengthen and preserve our relationship* with them, providing more contact and closeness than they ask for and being generous in our capacity to make room for their big emotions like frustration, resistance, and fear. We need to take the lead and make decisions about schooling and whether to send them back to school.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do as a parent is to lead when we are full of doubts. Leadership can feel lonely and we may feel guilty as well. These are the emotions that come with parenting and we can care for our kids and lead them through these challenging times, despite all that we are feeling.

How will our kids adjust to the new restrictions and rules around social distancing?

The question of how classrooms will look and whether our children will adjust to them is understandably a big concern for parents. Schools and teachers have been working hard trying to figure these things out and should have started communicating the changes that have been put into place to parents. We can help orient our children to the changes by following the lead of the school and sharing the information they provide, for example, what supplies they can bring to school, guidelines for eating lunch, washing hands, and playing.

When we communicate information to a child that might alarm them it is best to do this in a *matter of fact and non-alarming tone and manner*. For example, this is how flight attendants give safety demonstrations on planes and it is how we lead our children through fire drills, lock down drills, and earthquake preparedness. Simple scripts and directions help to reduce fear and give the child a sense of agency.

One of the ways schools will be helping children adjust to the new rules around social distancing is by taking a *playful approach*. For example, we can sing songs to know how long to wash our hands to using hula hoops to understand social distancing. These playful approaches are strategic in helping kids adapt to new rules, experience less fear, and be less resistant to changes. Some parents might be concerned that schools aren't taking matters more 'seriously' but we need to remember that play promotes feelings of safety and rest. It will take the attention off the risks and put the focus on the rules which will help our kids adjust to the new safety measures at school.

How can parents and teachers lead?

- Support play as a way to learn about social distancing and the new rules and restrictions
- Show support for the school and teachers by positively addressing the changes they have made
- If you have concerns about the changes at the school, then direct these to the appropriate adults *without your child's involvement or awareness*. It is key that your child trusts their teacher even if you are working through your concerns with the school
- Matchmake your child to their teacher and the school by affirming that their teacher will take care of them

Will this impact their emotional well-being and create anxiety?

Some parents are concerned that sending their child to school will create anxiety and stress. To answer this question, we will first need to consider where anxiety and stress comes from. Stress arises when you are emotionally overloaded and can't make sense of everything in your life, and anxiety is a sure sign of this. It is important to remember that it isn't school that is stressful per se (although there will be stressors there for sure), but that it creates separation from home and their trusted adults. Separation anxiety is from alarm at being disconnected from their caregivers and leads the child to question- "*Who will take care of me now?*"

If a child trusts their teacher and the adults at school to care for them then the separation from home won't be as alarming and they will feel 'safer' in the care of their teachers and school. Kids feel highly alarmed when they anticipate the world is going to hurt them and there are no adults to support or take care of them. The answer is to foster a strong relationship with their teacher and make a *seamless attachment team* between the home and school. Parents can bridge the distance by giving the child something to hold onto that represents their relationship – a reminder of what they will do after school, an invisible string that connects them, to a picture of their family in their lunch box.

Our children can also be experiencing a range of emotions as a result of all the changes in their life. There may be frustration that they can't be with their friends, play where they want to, and have a limited space to move in. They may be resistant to go back to school because they have enjoyed the extra time to play and the freedom from doing work while at home. Some kids are excited to go back to school and see people whereas some of our children are worried they will get sick with covid. What is the answer to all of our children's emotions?

Emotional health and well-being requires emotional expression and for kids it helps to have someone who will listen to you. We can help our kids talk to us by acknowledging the frustration or sadness they are experiencing. Sometimes parents are worried that if they allow their children to feel sad or worried then it will never stop and their child will just 'learn' to be this way. This is not accurate and the more we tell someone NOT to feel, the more feelings it will create. Emotions are not right or wrong, good or bad. Emotions are here to serve us and have an intelligence all on their own. *The challenge is being patient with our kid's feelings and giving them enough room to express them.*

Many parents ask how they can get their child to talk to them and the answer lies again in your connection. Find some time to spend with them one on one and just enjoy being with them. As you play together, share a hobby, or go outside together, listen with your undivided attention. Be neutral as they share their ideas and feelings with you, acknowledging how they feel – rather than how you feel about how they are feeling. When children feel the conversation has become about meeting the parent's needs, they can stop talking.

If words are hard to find then play is a wonderful place to soften feelings. The very nature of play – not being real or requiring you to work at a problem, allows for feelings to be expressed without words nor consciousness. If a child is frustrated then play that changes things such as building things, destroying, putting together, taking apart, mock aggression, wrestling, arts and crafts may be helpful. If a child is alarmed you may want to play more hide and seek, building forts and hideaways, monster games, chase and so on. If your child has few words, then lead them to their expressive play.

We will likely have to make some room for frustration and some tears too. There are so many futilities that come with the changes at school – from social distancing, to missing home, that our children may be emotionally charged and in need of release. Part of the “emotional homework” we do with our kids is to help them express what didn’t work and lead them through frustration and to disappointment and sadness. Sometimes there are many things we cannot change but we can adapt and adjust if we make room for emotion.

How can parents and teachers lead?

- Bridge the home to school divide by giving your child something to hold onto that represents your relationship (i.e., what you will do after school, a picture in their lunch box)
- Listen to your child with your undivided attention and make time to just be together
- Don’t judge how your child is feeling, and don’t act defensively about what they are telling you, or try to talk them out of their emotions
- If your child is resistant to go to school you might need to explore why, come alongside their lack of desire to return, and perhaps have some tears about it
- Make room for play – especially after school which can help provide some emotional discharge
- Tears can be helpful in releasing alarm and you can support your child this way by naming the things that are frustrating and acknowledge how sad it is
- Hold onto your relationship with your child and use this as the safe vehicle to help them express what is stirring them up inside

What about learning?

There is an order to what is most important when you are under stress. Relationship comes first, with play and tears next. Learning happens best when we feel safe in our relationship with adults or when we are at play. Helping our kids feel safe again at school, making sure they trust in their teacher to care for them, and getting our children to express themselves emotionally, are all things that must take precedence over learning.

Learning is easy when kids feel safe. Learning is hard when a child’s brain is preoccupied with questions of security and when it is emotionally overloaded. If we work to create the rest our kids need then the learning will come.

At this time the world may feel out of sorts and upside down for a child and our priority is to make them feel at home again with the adults who are there to care for them. Humans are resourceful, resilient, and amazing in their capacity to care for each other. With enough patience and focusing on what matters most of all, we can carry our children through this storm, taking comfort they are shielded from the worst because we are taking the lead.

To view more, please [CLICK HERE](#) to view Dr Deborah MacNamara's webinar:



How can we lead our kids back to school amid all of the changes COVID-19 has brought? How do we prepare them for social distancing at schools? What do we do with their worries (and ours), as we face uncharted waters? Join us for a webinar that will address these concerns and more with Psychologist Dr. Deborah MacNamara, author of the best-selling book, REST PLAY GROW

Please note that this presentation will NOT deal with the medical aspects of COVID-19, nor specific rules in each school, rather, it will address the emotional needs of our children as we prepare them to re-enter school.

This event is organized for parents as part of the complementary services of the Riverside School Board.

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Dr. Deborah MacNamara is the author of ***Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (or anyone who acts like one)***, is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute, and Director of **Kid's Best Bet**, a counselling and family resource center. For more information please see www.macnamara.ca and www.neufeldinstitute.org.