

Back to School - Covid-19

A crisis by definition sits outside of usual, familiar events. It calls on a new set of resources. If you are supporting children returning to school following the response to COVID-19:

- Keep calm
- Keep it simple
- Be a role model

Teachers can help children make sense of events and integrate back into school by attending to five aspects of well-being: creating a sense of safety, tending to children's social environment, developing consistent routines and responses, facilitating positive school experiences and helping children make sense of what is happening in ways that fit with cultural interpretations and responses. Main points around these dimensions are listed below.

1. Sense of safety

Provide information:

- What is happening right now
- What the school is doing to ensure safety
- What children can do to keep themselves and others safe
- Provide genuine opportunities for children to express concerns, ask questions (e.g. questions about examinations etc)
- Ensure consistent information for all children, school staff and family/whānau

2. Social relationships

- Children rely on adults' support and sense-making. Let children know that there are people who want to care for them and have their interests in mind
- Remind children about how to care for the well-being of others
- Address concerns about fitting in again
- Help children reconnect through shared activities that are lightly challenging
- Watch that children are included in play
- Maintain relationships with family/whānau.

3. Consistency

- *New normal:* 'Normal' changes with experience. Some things will be different, perhaps better, worse or simply different. Explain new routines, possibly repeatedly, to restore predictability.
- *Routines:* Maintain valued routines where you can
- *Boundaries:* Keep firm and familiar boundaries that are respectfully managed. Choice and flexibility can be exercised within boundaries

4. Positive experience

- Ensure a balance of familiar and novel activities aimed to engage students
- Make sure that activities are interesting, provide opportunities for humour
- Create opportunities to feel positive emotions
- Organise activities that allow children to experience ‘quick wins’
- Teach and/or facilitate calming activities: Mindfulness activities, breathing exercises, gratitude notes, journaling, drawing maps or pictures, holding calming objects.
- Encouraging positive social interaction: The classroom is usually structured and supportive, keep an eye on break times

5. Meaning

Significant events are likely to result in changes to children’s stories of self, or the meanings they assign to themselves and to the world. Everyone’s experience of an event is unique, their view shaped by their social, cultural, religious and personal lens. For some children, the time at home with family/whānau may have been positive while others may have been adversely affected by various aspects of the threat to health.

The following actions may support positive, optimistic stories of self and the world to emerge.

- Recognise that for many children, their own coping mechanisms and their family/whānau supports mean they are ready to learn, to get on with things.
- Acknowledge children’s unique experience of the event
- Give children the opportunity to express how they are feeling. This may not be in words but through drawings, maps, role play and other voluntary activity.
- Discuss how the recent experience can inform the way teaching and learning happens.
- Invite parents to let you know if their children are experiencing the return as challenging and let them know if their child is unsettled at school.

Differentiating support

All children can be supported by schools attending to these aspects of well-being as they return. However, some children may be more affected by the recent events than others and will require closer attention to support on each aspect. This group will include, but is not limited to, those children:

- who have previously required additional support in education
- who have experienced past traumatic events
- whose family circumstances have changed
- experiencing changes in social connections among peers
- whose sense of identity may have been closely tied to their participation in sport or other activity that has been put on hold.