

Self-awareness is key to helping kids cope with back-to-school stress

September 24 2021, by Bev Betkowski



Credit: University of Alberta

Kids anxious about heading back to school after a year of pandemic lockdown can best be helped by parents and teachers getting themselves grounded and present, says a University of Alberta education expert.

Connecting with how their own bodies respond to stress or fear can help adults shake off the isolating effects of the pandemic, which in turn

helps them be better able to deal with any stress or trauma children are experiencing, said Alexandra Fidyk, a professor in the Faculty of Education.

"Once you are in an attuned relationship with yourself, you can let your attention move to others without leaving your body," said Fidyk, an expert in trauma studies and somatic, or mind-body psychology as it relates to teaching, learning, culture and the arts.

Some youngsters returning to school will be anxious after a year of at-home learning, which means the adults around them need to be aware of their own anxieties, said Fidyk.

"When we've experienced fear, excessive worry or both, we are often dysregulated, meaning our physiology has been engaged in fight, flight or freeze responses or a combination of them. These are natural self-protecting reactions, but they can kick in when we're not in danger, and over a long period of time, fear and worry wear us down. They make us constrict, lose focus, drain energy and impact vitality.

"For most, our capacities have shrunk during the pandemic. We have experienced less [social engagement](#), so people may have fallen into a sense of isolation or even inundation."

That means parents may not be in the best frame of mind to help children who are grappling with making the shift from home to school, said Fidyk.

"If we are overwhelmed and a child comes to us and they are also overwhelmed, it is unlikely that we can attune to them. The range and intensity of what we can handle will be smaller."

Regulate yourself to relate to others

Only when we feel safe can we regulate ourselves and are then able to relate to another, to validate or empathize with them, she said.

One of the most important ways people can regain their balance is by reconnecting with their physicality and imagination, suggested Fidyk, whose research explores methods like body mapping that [teachers can use in their classrooms](#).

It can be as simple as alternately hand-clapping our thighs for a few minutes while breathing more deeply or moving freely to the beat of enjoyable music.

"If we develop [self-awareness](#) such as noticing the sensations—not emotions—going on within us and tend to those sensations as needed, then we are able to be more engaged in the moment. Doing this helps us self-regulate and builds capacity and resilience."

Through such awareness, more "aliveness" returns, Fidyk said.

"Through connection, the student will feel seen, heard and understood where our presence and regulation helps them feel better. So when they need help, we can actually comfort and reassure them."

Some children likely flourished at home during the lockdown, she noted.

Self-directed learners who had no problem completing their assignments may have gained new confidence or voice and perhaps developed new interests, and integrating choices and options into their assignments will continue to encourage this new growth, Fidyk noted.

Others would have struggled.

"Some kids needed structure, predictable routines and the social

engagement that classrooms provided; students might have been unable to complete assignments, and that could have caused stress."

In coming back to the classroom, children face a new set of worries ranging from catching COVID-19 to leaving at-home support systems they've developed over the past year.

"Some will feel excited to go back and see their teachers and friends, but they might also feel fearful or overwhelmed."

They may also struggle being back in a more structured environment of sitting at a desk for most of the day.

Other children—particularly those who are part of a close nuclear family, newcomer or multigenerational family—might feel at a loss if they were being supported in their learning at home by a relative.

"For some kids, there might be a sense of abandonment if someone at home was comforting that student, and the child now leaves that person to go back to school where a close relationship is not to be found."

Tips for parents and teachers

There are several ways adults can help stay grounded and ease students' transition back to school, Fidyk suggested.

- Make simple, reassuring statements to children. "Use terms such as, "You are safe; you are not in danger; you are not alone." When connection has been established, let them know that, "I hear you; I see you; you can trust your inner voice," Fidyk said. It's also important to keep your voice lower and slower; higher notes signal stress.
- Add imagination into lessons and activities by inviting the arts

into learning, including handcrafts like knitting, sewing, beading, weaving or carpentry. Engage in sensory-based experiences using tactile elements such as yarn, string, fabric, elastics, felt and blocks. Also make room for rhythm, entertainment and diverse music such as traditional instruments or earth-based sounds.

Introduce storytelling through [image-making, enactment and play](#)

- To help children get used to long periods at a desk, teachers can integrate simple physical movements and energized breathing through their lessons. A good exercise is a butterfly tap on the breast collar: cross hands at wrists on the upper chest and alternately tap slowly. "This supports presence and regulation—and so attention and learning."
- Teachers can get class off to a good start each day by leading students through diaphragmatic breathing. Inhale through the nose for four seconds, then exhale through the mouth for four seconds; repeat three to five times. Encourage students to do it on their own whenever possible.
- Balance activities so that "lightness and ease" can be brought to a difficult lesson. "If some activity or conversation is challenging, stay with it for a short period of time, shift to something less demanding, then return to the challenge. Moving between demand and ease helps to keep us more focused and builds capacity and resilience."
- To help reassure students they're returning to a safe space, schools should clearly communicate their COVID-19 protocols. "Kids need to feel that school is a safe place, and knowing the protocols or practices in place helps them to trust what was said." It's also important to respond to student feedback—for example, if they express a need for a sanitizing dispenser at a certain location. "It's important to really hear their worry and act on it if possible."
- Parents and teachers should work to stay grounded through these

steps: Secure a sense of safety by letting your eyes scan your place; move or adjust if you need more distance or need to face another direction, and ask yourself, "Am I in danger?" Second, check your regulation by shifting your attention inside your body and asking what sensations you notice. Take deeper breaths if you're experiencing shallow breathing or rapid heartbeat. "Then you can be in relation with the world around you and the tasks at hand."

- If you feel overwhelmed by what's going on in your body, let your eyes move around the room, orient and land on a particular object. Then name the qualities of that object, such as red, metal, modern—chair. "This brings your attention into the outer 'here and now' so that you can become more present, calm and attentive."
- Exercises can help. If sitting regularly and often, rock on your sit-bones; press your feet into the floor to bring awareness back into your body, pull your shoulders high to your ears, hold for three to five seconds and then drop quickly. Introduce bilateral clapping by reaching up over your head or patting your hands on your outer thighs or opposite biceps.
- Value silence and quiet time, and take time during the day to pause. "The more we slow down and reset ourselves, the more we shift our quality of life. We can begin to take delight in the little things. Go for walks, greet your neighbors, be social, move your body, do arts, engage in activities. We need to rebuild our communities through [social engagement and play and movement](#)."
- If possible, welcome pets into schools, classrooms and your home.
- Use humour, tell jokes and laugh.
- Make, share and eat nutritious food as a family or with a friend.

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Self-awareness is key to helping kids cope with back-to-school stress (2021, September 24) retrieved 25 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-09-self-awareness-key-kids-cope-back-to-school.html>

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