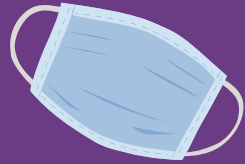


# Back To School with Grief and COVID-19:

## A Resource Guide for Parents and Caregivers



Children are going back to school this year with a backpack full of feelings. Some may have been impacted by illness, death, or loss of income due to job loss. Some are happy to return but many are afraid of going back because of worries about getting the virus. Parents are now faced with the difficult decision of whether or not their child will return to in-person instruction or continue to learn remotely. With information changing on a daily basis, it is important for parents and caregivers to help children and teens understand how to cope with the uncertainty in the ever-changing world that we are living in.

### NORMALIZE IT

Children take their cues from their parents and caregivers. Children and teens can sense when their parents or caregivers are anxious. It is important to normalize that it is okay to feel worried, scared, or uncertain about going back to school or deciding to stay home and learn remotely.



- **Let your child know** that you have worries too, but you will continue to ensure that they will be safe and supported. Share with them about how you cope with your own stress.
- **Ask questions.** Ask your child or teen directly what they are worried about and ask if they have questions about returning to school. You can have your child make a "worry list" and talk through each item.
- **Be honest.** Answer questions and share facts about COVID-19 in a way that your child can understand.
- **Don't assume.** If you notice changes in your child's behavior, try saying what you are observing instead of assuming that you know what is happening. Realize that there is a good reason for your child's behavior.
- **Talk about what has changed.** Your children have experienced a myriad of losses during this pandemic. If they are going back to school after someone died, talk about what will be different for them. Even if they have not experienced the death of a loved one, they have lost their routines, connection to peers and teachers, and their sense of safety. Allow them to have space to talk about the good changes and the hard changes.
- **Self-care:** Grieving children benefit from healthy, caring adults who are modeling good self-care. Find ways to relax and enjoy time together by going for walks, trying a new activity, playing board games, or learning a new skill.

### INCREASE THEIR SAFETY

Unfortunately, tough days are inevitable and can arise without warning so it is important to have a plan for how you will tackle those difficult days together and empower your child to seek out support when you are not around.



- **Plan for difficult days.** Milestone days (first day of school, school events, birthdays, or death anniversaries) can bring up big feelings for any child. Discuss what they can do if they feel sad, scared, or worried during the school day.
- **Access supportive adults.** Talk to their teachers, coaches, or counselor to ensure they are aware of how your child may be feeling. Have a plan for them to check in with that person during the school day if they need to and assure that they are able to leave class without asking or explaining.
- **Take breaks.** Your child may need time during the school day to leave the classroom and go for a walk before they can rejoin their lesson.
- **Transitional object.** It may be helpful for your child to have a special object that they can carry with them throughout the day to help soothe them during difficult days. Caregivers can also write a note for their child to keep in their backpack to read throughout the day.
- **Foster connection.** If your child is remotely learning, plan time for them to connect with friends or peers during the school day. Check out online gaming resources or set up a virtual play date so they can interact and connect with friends.

# SEE BEHAVIOR AS INFORMATION

At Imagine, we let children and teens have all of their feelings. Wearing masks and social distancing can make children and teens feel isolated and lonely and can increase stress and anxiety. It may also be difficult for your child to articulate their feelings, so their distress can show up in their behavior. It is important to be on the lookout for changes in their behavior and to know when to intervene.



You may notice some of the following behaviors:

- **Infants and toddlers:** excessive crying or irritation in younger children, increased need for parental attention
- **Pre-school age:** returning to behaviors they have outgrown (for example, toileting accidents or bedwetting), excessive worry or sadness
- **School age:** difficulty focusing, unhealthy eating or sleeping habits, irritability, headaches or unexplained body pain, lack of interest in activities
- **Teens:** avoidance of activities they previously found enjoyable, poor school performance, "acting out" behaviors, use of tobacco, alcohol, or other substances.



Here are some ways that can help:

- **Eat, sleep, and move:** Ensure that your child is maintaining routines such as quality sleep, regular eating, and getting exercise.
- **Quality time:** try to join your child in play and leisure activities whenever possible.
- **Catch your child being good.** By calling attention to your child when your child is being a good listener or coping appropriately, you increase the chance that your child will repeat those behaviors in the future.

# FIND SUPPORT FOR YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS

You or your child may experience increased stress during this pandemic. Fear and anxiety can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions. If you are in need of additional support, seek out the help of a trusted professional or request additional resources.



- Visit [imaginenj.org](http://imaginenj.org) for more information or speak with one of our clinicians at (908) 264-3100
- Locate support groups for grieving children at: <https://childrengrieve.org/find-support>
- For more information about how to support grieving students go to The Coalition for Grieving Students website: <https://grievingstudents.org/>
- For adults in need of mental health support: SAMHSA's National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357) and TTY 1-800-487-4889
- For children/teens in NJ who need additional support: 2nd floor youth hotline: 888-222-2228 anytime or text them at 888-222-2228.
- Sample back to school talking points <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/covid-19-pandemic-resources/>



**IMAGINE UNIVERSITY**  
A Center for Excellence & Education



**imagine**  
A CENTER FOR COPING WITH LOSS