

# Going Back to School during COVID-19

## 2021-2022 School Year

As the fall approaches, the attention of parents, caregivers, children, and youth turns to going back to school. Many children and youth already feel apprehensive about this transition, especially if it comes with change such as starting school for the first time or going to a new school. It is **normal** for children and youth to feel some worry and uncertainty about a new school year and some stress when getting back into school routines and relationships. This year, many families feel increased uncertainty as they consider how their children and youth may go back to school successfully while our world is still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the 2020-2021 school year, every family that had a child or youth enrolled in school had their own unique experiences around any school closures and the resulting changes in learning. For some families, more time at home meant increased closeness and comfort. For others, it meant increased stress and even trauma and loss. These experiences, both good and bad, can be useful in informing us as we make plans to start another school year.

The Alberta 2021-2022 School Year Plan is predicting that in Fall 2021, most mandatory practices around COVID-19 will no longer be required and there is a desire for school to get “back to normal” for children and youth. With this plan, individual school districts have been given the task of creating safe environments that offer effective instruction and support healthy child development while still engaging in practices that reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission as needed. As school boards continue to develop innovative processes with the resources they have been given, parents and caregivers can take steps within their home and community to support children and youth as they transition back to in-person learning.

We may be ‘all in this together’, but COVID-19 has affected each of us, and our children and youth, in different ways.

### Get Informed about Your Child and Their School

#### **Consider your child’s needs, interest, and capacity to engage in learning.**

Think about your child’s needs and preferences in all areas as you decide how to best support your child’s return to in-person learning. Consider academic, mental, physical, emotional, behavioural, and social aspects. What were your child’s needs and behaviours prior to school changes? How did the change in schooling impact your child? What supports do you think your child will need going forward? What is your child worried about and looking forward to? Answers to these questions will inform you as you take steps to support your child.

#### **Learn about how your child’s school is planning to offer services within best health promotion practices.**

Just as every child is different, every school is different and as such has different capacities around staffing, class sizes, facility layout, course offerings, supervision, special needs support, transportation, and the ability to make accommodations for your child. Check out your child’s school website or log in to your school district’s online learning and communication resource (such as SchoolZone or PowerSchool) to see the latest updates on their plans to support safety, learning, and wellness throughout the school day. Find out the school’s processes around non-instructional times such as school drop-off, pick-up, lunchtime, washroom breaks, recess, moving from class to class, etc. Contact the school office when it opens to discuss questions.

**Stay up-to-date with current information about COVID-19 and recommendations from governments and health authorities.** For the most recent information on the provincial government plan for the 2020-2021 school year, go to: <https://www.alberta.ca/k-12-learning-during-covid-19.aspx> and check regularly for updates.

## Share information with and about your child

### Equip your child for what may change.

Once you have a reasonable framework for how school might look for your child in the fall and how worries might be addressed, share information with your child about upcoming changes in positive ways. If the child's school has changed their practices around such things as course scheduling, masking, or physical distancing, help your child to prepare for these changes. Let them know that some of their classmates may still be doing in-home learning. Collaborate with your child to come up with options for what they can do and who they can speak to if they have difficulties. Support your child's resilience by helping them reflect on past school years where they were able to successfully adapt to change, make new friends, try new things, and build new skills.

### Reassure your child with what may be the same.

Highlight anything that your child may already be familiar with such as if your child will have some of the same friends in their school, or any school processes, spaces or routines that are similar to what they've experienced in the past. Create connections by bringing familiar comforts into new experiences. ("I know that you really liked having Mr. Jacobs as your teacher because you both liked superheroes. How about we email your new teacher, Ms. Singh, to find out which superheroes she likes?")

With supportive caregivers, schools, and communities, our children and youth can have a success in the coming school year.

### Share information that is accurate and appropriate for your child's age and development.

Though COVID-19 restrictions may be removed or reduced, the pandemic continues. There is always the possibility that restrictions may be reinstated if necessary to protect public safety. Do not make unrealistic promises to your child about when things will "get back to normal". Foster resilience by highlighting specific times over the past year where your child has overcome challenges. Let your child know that if change comes, you will get through it together.

### Maintain open and ongoing communication with your child's teachers.

Appreciate the challenges that educators have faced over the past year as they worked hard to create positive educational environments in new ways. Attend any open houses, meet-the-teacher nights or Parent-teacher conferences. Let your child's teachers know how your child has been doing over the past year and where you have seen strengths and challenges. Discuss any concerns you have and worries your child may have expressed, including non-COVID-19 related concerns. Share any new ideas and strategies that may be helpful to teachers and educational support professionals as you all work together to plan a successful start to the school year and maintain ongoing communication about your child's progress. Inquire about any resources, specialized supports, or accommodations that may be available.

## Strengthen your relationship with your child

- **Listen to your child or youth** in a curious and non-judgmental way.
- **Validate your child feelings**, even if you do not completely understand their experience.
- Learn about your child or youth's interests, friendships, ideas, and personal goals and why these are important to them.
- Build in special times of connection into the daily and weekly routines, such as reading time, family board game night, 'Taco Tuesdays', a nature walk, or a family art project.

## Establish healthy school routines before school starts

**Give your child as much time as possible to adapt to your expected back to school routine – especially around sleep.** Before school begins, help your child transition to a schedule that will reflect their fall schedule. Set bedtime and wake-up times, regular meal and snack times, and times for daily exercise and technology use. Make gradual changes over weeks rather than trying to change your child's schedule in just a few days.

**Return to reading:** Summer may have been a mini-vacation from reading. But finding fun ways to read before school starts can help ease the transition.

Sleep is essential for learning and self-regulation. Help your child adjust to school sleep schedules *before* school starts.

## Make school feel familiar again

**Go to the school grounds:** Practice the bus route, go play on the school playground, attend open houses, etc.

**Get social:** Arrange social activities with school friends. Talk to your child about school clubs and activities they might want to sign up for when school starts.

**Make shopping for school supplies a team effort:** Getting kids involved in the planning stages can make the actual transition to school easier.

**Get organized:** Help them get organized and set up a study space at home. Prepare them for life with a new locker if this is new for them. Practice their combination. Review what to do if they forget. Get your child used to being on time. Lend or buy them a wristwatch, or have her use their cell phone to keep track of commitments.

**Build excitement before the first day back:** Talking about school as summer winds down can build excitement.

## Help your child see options and build skills around key areas of concern

### Physical health

Let your child know that even without school restrictions, they can still engage in practices that may help them feel safer and reduce anxiety such as wearing a mask, physical distancing, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, vaccination when eligible, regular cleaning and disinfecting of high touch/traffic areas, and staying home when experiencing symptoms of illness.

### Academic success

- Reassure your child that many people have experienced setbacks in learning during this pandemic.
- Make a plan with your child and their teacher to address any gaps in learning.
- Keep track of what your child is learning in the classroom and upcoming deadlines.
- Teach your child how to use agendas, calendars and checklists to stay on top of assignments.
- Encourage your child to review their class notes for even just 10 minutes every day.
- Model a growth mindset with your child and let them know that setbacks are a part of learning.
- Praise academic efforts and healthy learning habits more than academic outcomes.

## Peer relationships and social settings

- Your child may have anxiety about being away from you, especially if they have been doing their learning online. Allow time for morning routines, be consistent in drop-off and pick-up times, keep goodbyes positive and brief, and add comforting and fun rituals to 'goodbyes' and 'hellos'.
- Arrange for visits or play dates between your child and their school friends before school starts.
- See if your child's school is able to place your child in the same class as a friend.
- Help your child to practice greetings and conversation starters; with your child, write brief scripts about how their year/summer was to help them feel more in control of the information they share.
- Help your child to better understand the possible meaning of different facial expressions, and the body language of others.
- Coach your child in communicating their feelings and addressing peer conflict in healthy ways.
- Gently encourage your child to complete simple social challenges such as saying 'hi' to 3 people, asking a question in class, or helping someone else with a problem. Offer praise and rewards for completed challenges.
- Support your child to get involved in group school activities such as extra-curricular activities, special events, and service initiatives.

## Managing feelings of stress

- Help your child or youth to understand that stress is a normal part of life. Talk about some of the common symptoms they may experience, and ask them what stress feels like to them.
- Set time aside every day to do an 'emotional check-in' with your child or youth.
- Watch for signs of distress in your child and notice possible triggers, patterns, or issues that may need your attention and care.
- Support your child or youth through co-regulation. Be a safe and secure presence for your child, reduce stress triggers in the environment, and engage in calming strategies together.
- Teach and regularly practice simple stress reduction techniques with your child or youth such as taking slow, deep breaths or tensing and relaxing different muscle groups. Help your child find activities that soothe their different senses such as listening to music or walking in nature.
- Access helpful professional and community supports as needed; engage with teachers and school administrators, mental health therapists, and other professional and community supports.
- Engage in your own self-care. Do all you can every day to get enough sleep, eat well, move your body, and connect with people that support you. Reflect on your physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and relational wellbeing and tend to areas that need your attention.

To be equipped to support your child or teen, you need to take care of yourself. Attend to your own needs with self-compassion.

**Addiction and mental health resources for children and youth during COVID-19 – AHS Edmonton Zone**  
<https://bit.ly/3IQ3kPY>

**Child and Adolescent Mental Health Intake Line: 780-342-2701**

**School During COVID-19 - AHS:** <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17212.aspx>

**Coping with Back to School Anxiety – Anxiety Canada:** <https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/coping-with-back-to-school-anxiety/>

**A Parent's Guide to Back to School during COVID-19 - CMHA:** <https://alberta.cmha.ca/news/a-parents-guide-to-back-to-school-during-covid-19/>

**For up-to-date information about the novel coronavirus / COVID-19, go to:**  
<https://www.alberta.ca/coronavirus-info-for-albertans.aspx>