

# Helping Young Children and Parents Transition Back to School

Transitioning back to early childhood programs or school— or starting them for the first time—can create extra challenges, particularly in times of stress. **Learn what parents and teachers can do to help children make a successful transition to in-person learning and care.**

## Transitions can be hard for children and families



The start of a new school year can mean going back to [early care and education \(ECE\)](#) programs or school after a long break, or attending a program for the first time. A new start often means lots of changes, new routines, and meeting new people. Young children are often wary of strangers and want to stay close to their parents and other familiar and trusted caregivers. Until they are old enough to talk clearly about their feelings, it's hard to explain to them that a new caregiver is going to protect

them, which means it takes time for children to get used to new people. School-aged children who are sensitive or easily worried, or those who have developmental delays, may need extra time to adjust. It's often easier for young children to make the transition if they have spent some time with their parents and the new person together. Parents also often worry about their child making the transition, and it's easier for parents to keep calm and be reassuring if they know their child's teacher and feel comfortable with them.

## Transition in a time of extra stress is extra hard

Helping children cope with stress and worries



New, easy-to-use, interactive web tools for children and teens to deal with thoughts and feelings in a healthy way.

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In recent years, many ECE programs had to use prevention measures such as keeping physical distance between people, using masks for teachers and children older than 2 years, and limiting contact between program staff and families. As COVID-19 Community Levels change, ECE programs may add or remove prevention strategies, and such changes in strategies can mean

changes in routines for children. Many ECE programs were closed to in-person learning in the beginning of the pandemic, and during local outbreaks of diseases, some programs may continue to shut down for periods of time.

For children who start in-person care after a break, changes to the space and to routines may have made everything look and feel different. Being around masked faces may add to a child's feelings of uncertainty, because facial expressions are used to help communicate feelings and provide assurance, and wearing masks make this difficult. Becoming familiar with others may take longer. Because children look to their parents for signs of safety, parents may need to put more effort into expressing confidence and security with words and body language in addition to facial expressions. This is particularly important for young children who are not yet able to talk about feelings. Children are generally flexible and can adapt, but strategies that protect children's health may make transitions to new situations and new people harder.

Even before the pandemic, children's mental health was a public health concern, and levels of anxiety were on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant additional stress, fear, and worry for many families. Worries about sickness, finances, and isolation, coping with grief from loss, and having less outside help have made parenting more stressful. The U.S. Surgeon General issued an [advisory on the nation's youth mental health crisis in December 2021](#).

Schools and ECE programs can help children and families by promoting [social and emotional learning](#). Making the transition from home to school may be harder for children with developmental, behavioral, or emotional concerns. Teachers, parents, and programs can help children by planning the transition, making strong connections, and establishing new routines. With the right support, children can adjust to their new program, make new friends, learn new things, and thrive.

# What parents and teachers can do to support during transitions

Skilled ECE providers know how to help children adjust. But with increased worries and stress, it may be good to put a little extra support into the transitions. Here are some tips to help families with the transition.

## Beyond School Supplies: Back to School Reminders & Readiness



## Teachers and administrators can

- Work to establish connections between parents and the program. Set up times for parents and teachers to meet and get to know each other.
- Create a daily structure and routines to help children learn what to expect.
- Share information with parents of returning children about daily routines to help prepare their child for what to expect.
- Provide frequent communication to parents about their children's time in the program.

- Consider holding in-person meetings outdoors, for example on the playground, in situations where additional COVID-19 precautions are needed, depending on [Community Levels](#) or the presence of people at [high risk](#) for severe illness or death.
- Provide virtual connections with parents to supplement in-person connections, such as video calls and phone meetings. Consider connecting parents to other parents to learn about the program and share experiences. Programs can create virtual tours so that parents and children can see the facility and classrooms. This helps them imagine what it would be like for their child to attend and helps them prepare for the new situation.

[Learn more about what teachers can do.](#)

## Parents can

- Make sure their child has a daily, predictable routine, with regular times for healthy meals, naps, and night sleep at home. Having a rested body and knowing what to expect at home helps children cope.
- Connect with other parents who have children in the same program and can provide information and make them more comfortable with the program.
- Talk with teachers about the best way to separate from their child at the start of the day—brief goodbyes are often best.
- Try to stay calm and reassuring during transition—using a calm voice, with a relaxed face and body to let their child know that they wouldn't leave them if the child were not safe and protected.
- Talk with their child about what to expect and help them with [strategies to manage stress and cope with worries](#), and review [positive parenting tips](#) to help children with feelings and behavior.
- Make sure their child is [caught up on well-visits with their healthcare provider](#) and is up to date with [recommended vaccines, including COVID-19 vaccines](#), to ensure that the child is healthy and well protected.
- [Monitor their child's developmental milestones and learn what to do if there are concerns.](#)
- Remember that this is a phase—building new relationships is a skill, and with support, children can be resilient. Even if it's hard to separate,

children will gain a new trusted relationship with their new teacher and feel more secure.

### Parents with concerns can

- Take [care of themselves during stressful times](#) so they can be better equipped to take care of others.
- Find resources to learn how to [promote resilience and reduce anxiety in their children](#).
- Talk to a healthcare professional if their child's symptoms of anxiety or behavior problems are severe or persistent.
- Contact a mental healthcare professional for [parent training and support](#) so parents can help their child.
- Find [resources for themselves if they are sad, worried, or stressed](#).
- For children with new concerns that persist, ask the school for an evaluation to see if the child may need [special education services or accommodations](#). For children with identified disabilities, ask the program to review their Individualized Education Program (IEP).

### Schools and ECE programs can

- Provide staff development and support for teachers if there are more children than usual who have difficulty with transition.
- Review and enhance [resources for staff health and well-being](#).
- Make sure teachers have access to mental health support if they are dealing with their own stress, loss, or trauma related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Include resources for [social-emotional learning](#).
- Seek support from [early childhood mental health consultants](#).
- Share information with families about the importance of [developmental monitoring and screening, well-visits](#) and for the whole family to stay [up to date with recommended vaccines, including COVID-19 vaccines](#).