



WELCOME BACK !

The return to school this year will look and feel very different for all of us. For caregivers and students it can be helpful to see it as an adventure, and to seek out new learning, as we figure out a new normal together.



UNDERSTANDING WORRY

by the Hearts & Minds Committee



This school year will be a time of change, with many new rules and a lack of familiarity. It may be a time of feeling unsure about many things, and a time when some people may worry more than usual. That's okay. **Worrying is a normal, even helpful, part of life!** Worry and stress can help keep us focused on what we have to do. A healthy amount of stress reminds us to wash our hands during the pandemic, or helps us make that looming deadline at work.

But sometimes, worries can get so big, that they start to take over our feelings and actions. We may start to believe that whatever is the worst thing that *can* happen, *will* happen! Or, our feelings of fear take over and we may try to avoid a situation completely - even though nothing scary or unsafe has actually happened! (It can help to think of these fearful thoughts as "False Evidence Appearing Real", or F.E.A.R.). Sometimes, stronger, more persistent worries are called anxiety.

WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT AND WE CAN'T MAKE THINGS THE WAY WE WANT THEM TO BE, WE HAVE TO STAY FLEXIBLE AND FOCUS ON WHAT WE CAN CONTROL (LIKE GETTING A GOOD NIGHT'S REST, EATING HEALTHY, AND CONNECTING WITH OUR FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES).

If you find that you're getting overwhelmed with worries or anxiety, it can help to:

- Consider realistic thinking statements like: Is this fear really likely to happen, or am just afraid that it will?
- Stop and ask yourself, "What would I tell my friend to do if they were worried about what I'm worried about? What would they need?" and then try to do those things.
- Remember that, as a parent, our experiences may be very different from our children's. In fact, a lot of the time, our children aren't even worried about the things that we are - and they don't need to be!
- If you choose to discuss your worries in front of your child, keep things age-appropriate and focus on solutions, not problems. Talk to your kids about healthy choices when feeling worried or anxious.
 - Model calmness, resilience, and relaxation to your child, even when you are feeling unsure.
 - Remember, our children "borrow our calm" from us, but they can also learn to worry from us!

For kids, being worried or anxious may look like a headache, or a stomach ache, or trouble sleeping. It can even look like being really excited. If you are concerned about your child's worries or they voice concerns to you, ask how they're feeling, and what they're worried about. **If your child's worried feelings are so strong that they can't do what they need or like to do - like sleep, eat, go to school, be around their friends, or do their school work -** it may be time to seek additional support and talk to your doctor or ask your Principal to contact your school support team.

BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY IN YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILD

by *Dessy Marinova, Ph.D., C.Psych.*

We all experience stressful events, tough transitions, and sudden setbacks that turn our lives upside down. COVID-19 is one of them, and it has affected our lives in different ways. Intense emotions, doubtful thoughts, and the volatility of this evolving situation may often sway our minds either to the past or to the unclear future.

You may ask yourself: How do I help myself and my child in transitioning to this unusual new school reality?

Dr. S. Hays, Psychologist, advises that building psychological flexibility is helpful in coping with life stresses. It is defined as “being present, opening up, and doing what matters.” Here are some tips to help you:



**Being Present:
Focus on the here and now
& take things one day at a time!**

Find many little moments each day...

- When you catch your mind wandering – resume paying attention to here and now.
- When you focus your attention on here and now, and help your child do the same.
- Say, “We appreciate each day and focus on one activity (one day) at a time.”

**Opening Up:
Expect changes, acknowledge them
when they happen, and adapt.
Remember: This situation is temporary.**

Create several little moments each day...

- Acknowledge the situation as it is and expand your awareness.
- When you say to yourself or your child that “today’s challenge” will teach our minds to reach out and connect with our support system (like family, school, and friends).
- Learn what to do more, less, or differently in a difficult situation in order to adapt and save your mental energy.
- To observe how people around us are doing the best they can.



**Doing What Matters:
Take care of important things for you
and your loved ones!**

**Find several moments each day to focus
on a valued and meaningful activity...**

- For your family: Spending time together playing a game, or mindfully preparing a meal together.
- For yourself: Taking time to relax, reflect, and recharge your mental batteries.
- For your work: A small stride in accomplishing a goal, or working towards completing a planned task.
- When you treat yourself kindly, hug your child, and show appreciation for your efforts and for what you have



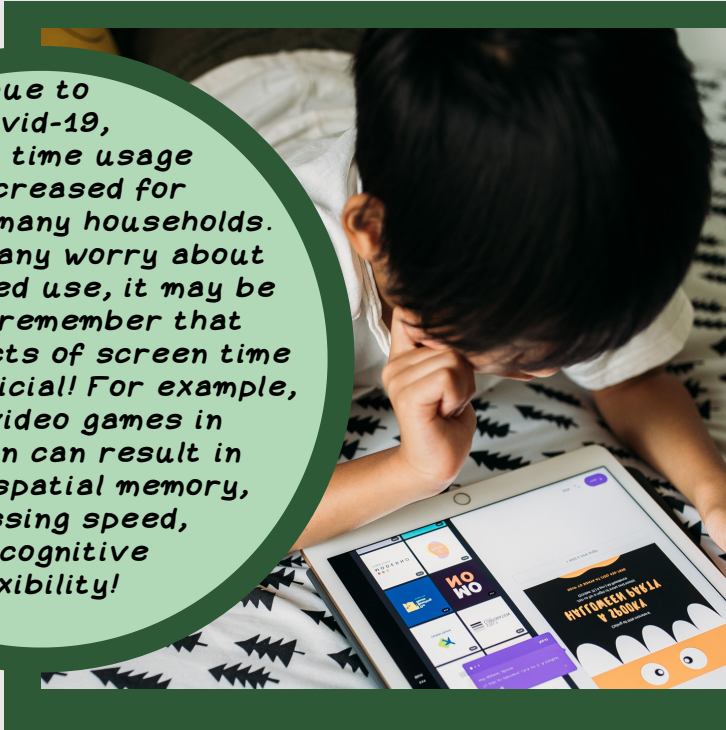
Giving ourselves and our children the gifts of being present, of embracing the unfamiliar with curiosity, and of focusing our attention on our values and sense of purpose, will re-energize us to engage fully in our lives and nurture our ability to cope well with this school year’s challenges.

EVERYTHING IN MODERATION: HOW TO HELP OUR STUDENTS MANAGE SCREEN TIME USAGE AS WE RETURN TO LEARNING

By Helena Zajderman, Ph.D., C. Psych.



Due to Covid-19, screen time usage has increased for children in many households. To address any worry about this increased use, it may be helpful to remember that certain aspects of screen time can be beneficial! For example, playing video games in moderation can result in improved spatial memory, processing speed, and cognitive flexibility!



Moderation in screen time should be the goal. So how do we help our students limit their screen time use, and get ready to return to school and school expectations?

Consider what children are doing on their devices. Using apps that allow for social connections or to learn a new skill/hobby may be helpful during the time of social distancing. Remember, many of the activities children and teens do on their devices are developmentally appropriate, and in the past would have been done off-line (such as socializing with friends, reading for pleasure, or listening to music).

Try to encourage children to use screens purposefully, and not just as a habit. Have discussions with children and teens that address mindless scrolling through social media, especially if this is occurring during homework time, daily routines (e.g. bedtime), or during family time.

Try to set some reasonable boundaries to slowly decrease screen time use. For example, attempt to agree to times of "no screen" during the day (perhaps during meals, or an hour before bed).

Try to balance digital play with other forms of play (like board games, building toys, pretend play, arts and crafts). Try to offer other options for fun and well-being, such as going for a neighbourhood walk, cooking together, or exploring nature.

Try to role model responsible technology use.

RESOURCES

[Resilience Guide for Parents \(American Psychological Assoc.\)](#)

[Dr. Dan Siegel - The Healthy Mind Platter](#)

[Return to School Mental Health & Well-Being Guide \(TDSB\)](#)

[Preparing for School Resources \(TDSB\)](#)

[Be a Feelings Coach! Video \(TDSB MHWB\)](#)

[TDSB Mental Health Videos](#)

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Psychological Services provides clinical and counselling services, as well as psychoeducational and other assessment services. We work with parents, teachers, and students, along with other school staff, to help identify challenges before they get out of hand. To learn more about us, [CLICK HERE](#).



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ASK THE PSYCHOLOGIST



by Afroze Anjum, Psy.D., C. Psych.

Question: How do I help my 6 year old daughter get used to wearing a mask? And how can I help my 16 year old son who says "Nothing can happen to me and they are forcing me to wear it"?

Adjusting to a new experience of wearing masks is unique and strange for most children. **Acknowledge your child's discomfort, validate her feelings** by naming them and make sure that you listen to her concerns in their entirety.

Engage in a back-and-forth discussion so she understands the reasons of wearing masks. For instance "your mask will keep your germs to yourself, which will protect mommy and your friends from getting sick". **Click HERE for a helpful YouTube video from Bill Nye about masking for kids!**

Give her a sense of control by letting her select her favourite mask, draw on it, or drawing a picture of her mask to hang in her room. **Make it fun** such as both of you wearing masks together and playing imaginary/funny games or complimenting her with comments like "Oh you just look like a doctor or superhero in this". Which character do you want to be?



Let her get used to wearing it for some time during the day starting with 5-10 minutes and gradually build to longer times.

Regarding your teen, he may be feeling self-conscious about his looks in the mask, which is normal at this age. Furthermore, **teens usually have a feeling of invincibility that makes them overestimate their abilities and underestimate the risks**. So, he is probably not thinking through the consequences of his decision. In addition to the above-mentioned suggestions, have a matter-of-fact talk with him and engage in a conversation backed by some of the following studies published in **reliable journals, showing efficacy of masks (Click HERE for articles)**.

Finally, you can **reward your children in various ways when they wear a mask** by smiling, praising them or even giving them something they like. If nothing works and your son or daughter continues to show signs of excessive worry around wearing a mask, then consider consulting with your family doctor to rule out any possible medical factors.