



Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional problems.

TRENDS

HELPING STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES RETURN TO SCHOOL DURING COVID-19

Young people are keen observers of people and environments, and they notice and react to stress in their parents and other caregivers, teachers and peers. For children with mental health challenges, the disruption of typical routines and loss of social supports are traumatic events. As they return to school, your students may worry about their own safety and the safety of their loved ones, how they will get their basic needs met (e.g., food, shelter, clothing), and uncertainties for the future.

A primary factor in recovery from a traumatic event is the presence of a supportive, caring adult in a young person's life. Social connectedness improves the ability of children and youth to develop resilience in response to adversity. As students return to school, a focus on relationship building between students and adults and peer relationships should be a priority. Students with psychiatric disorders will require time and attention to reestablish daily routines, practice self-care, and manage their emotional reactions to universal precautions such as social distancing, frequent handwashing and wearing facial coverings while at school.

Here are some strategies to consider in supporting these students as they return to school:

Provide age-appropriate information

Educators should work with parents and caregivers to prepare students for the return to school by providing clear, age appropriate information about what to expect in terms of scheduling, changes to the school environment, and who their teachers and other support staff will be. Providing opportunities for on-line and/or telephone meet and greets, and orientations prior to the actual return to school, will decrease fears of the unknown and help students be prepared for the "new normal".

Teachers and other school professionals should make time available for children to ask questions and talk about their concerns. They may provide opportunities for students to access books, websites, and other activities on COVID-19 that present information in child-friendly ways. Teachers and parents should encourage limitation of young

people's exposure to media coverage, social media, and adult conversations about the pandemic, as these sources may not be age-appropriate. Ongoing access to news and social media about the pandemic and constant conversation about threats to public safety can cause unnecessary stress for children and youth.

Create a safe physical and emotional environment

Upon return to school, many students will experience excessive worry and feelings of anxiety. Educators should reassure children about their safety and the safety of loved ones. Teachers and caregivers should maintain regular routines to provide children with a sense of safety and predictability (e.g., regular classroom routines, bedtimes and meals, daily schedules for both learning and play).

Teach emotional regulation and self-care activities

When children are stressed, their bodies respond by activating their stress response systems. To help them manage these reactions, it is important to both validate their feelings (e.g., "I know that this might feel scary or overwhelming") and encourage them to engage in activities that help them self-regulate (e.g., exercise, deep breathing, mindfulness or meditation activities, regular routines for sleeping and eating).

Increase students self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the sense of having agency or control—an especially important trait during times of fear and uncertainty. Children often feel more in control when they can play an active role in helping themselves, their teachers/peers, and their school. For example, children can help by following

safety guidelines (e.g., washing their hands), assisting with maintaining a safe classroom environment (e.g., helping to clean surfaces and supplies), or providing emotional support to a peer.

Emphasize strengths, hope, and positivity

Children need to feel safe, secure, and positive about their present and future. Teachers can help by focusing children's attention on stories about how people come together, find creative solutions to difficult problems, and overcome adversity during the epidemic. Talking about these stories can be healing and reassuring to children and youth.

Be alert to signs of trauma that do not resolve relatively quickly

Emotional and behavioral challenges in children and youth with psychiatric disorders may be exacerbated during a pandemic, as everyone adjusts to a new sense of normal. If students show an ongoing pattern of emotional or behavioral concerns (e.g., nightmares, excessive focus on anxieties, increased aggression, regressive behaviors, or self-harm) that do not resolve with teacher/school supports, additional specialized help may be needed. Be alert to behavioral changes and statements your students make that may indicate the need for services in addition to what your school can provide.

To learn more:

- [Healthychildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Return-to-School-During-COVID-19.aspx) – <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Return-to-School-During-COVID-19.aspx>
- NJ Department of Education – <https://www.nj.gov/education/covid19/studentsfamilies/wellness.shtml#r>



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