

A parent and carer guide to helping children feel safe about returning to school

Returning to school during covid -19 can be difficult for some children and teens. Some will show obvious signs of stress, others may try to hide their worries and/ or anxiety. Some may not feel anxious about it until after the event and may not disclose or show signs until days, weeks or even months following. Other children and teens may not have any issues at all.

Parents want to know- what is my child feeling and how may my child react.

Working out when our kids do not feel ok, or are feeling unsafe can sometimes be difficult, it is important to be on the lookout for any **unusual behaviour**. This can sometimes be an indicator that something is not feeling quite right for them. Acting out and physical distress are **almost always** signs someone is not feeling safe

Feeling Safe

On the safeness continuum when the elements of safety are not present, it will result in someone feeling unsafe. During times of crisis, children and adults alike may feel like they have no choice, no control and no idea of how long the crisis will last. There are ways we can reinforce feelings of safety for our self and others.

(continuum of safeness diagram following page)

Feeling unsafe can result in panic, anxiety, stress and confusion, some signs our children or teens are feeling unsafe include:

- Anger
- Not being able to sleep
- Finding it hard to focus
- Defiance
- Overly exaggerated or inappropriate responses
- Irritability
- Trying to control everything (over planning)
- Avoiding the discussion and anything to do with it or people who want to speak about it
- Negative behaviour

Of course, one of the best ways to find out how our child or teen is feeling is to talk with them. It is important to remind our children we are available and will listen and understand their feelings are very real and we are willing to act to help them if necessary.

We can assist children to FEEL SAFE even in the unusual situation of covid 19.

Coming out of isolation at home and into a wider environment we are told is safe and yet may feel unsafe, could see the presentation of Early Warning Signs. We can help our children and teens to feel safe by reinforcing their feeling safe building blocks.

The building blocks to feeling safe – the safety equation

To help our children feel safe it is important to understand the elements of feeling safe. The Protective Behaviours personal safety and empowerment programs refers to this as the safety equation:

$$\text{Safety} = \text{Choice} + \text{Control} + \text{Time limit}$$

Reinforcing the elements of safety

Choice

Encouraging children's own decision-making regarding strategies that can help them to feel safe. Ensure we are demonstrating our strong safety choices. We do have the choice as to how we respond to what is happening around us.

Control

Explaining to our children in an age appropriate and honest way, how everyone involved are making informed choices and maintaining control over what we can. Eg: even though we may not control the situation, we do have choice and control as to how we respond.

Time limit

Talk with children and teens about time in increments they can measure. Checking in with them regularly This way their focus is not on months/ years but on their next supportive check in with you

Tips for parents to help children and teens feel safe

- 1- Regularly remind our children and teens they have the right to feel safe all the time and their feeling safe is our first priority and we will do all we can to help them to feel safe.
- 2- Ensure our children know they can talk with us or anyone on their safety team if they feel unsafe or unsure about anything. Practice talking with our children and encouraging them to talk with their safety people. (You may like to find out who this is at their school and let them know)
- 3- Talk with your children about how they are feeling and try to spend quality time with them every day. This is a time where they feel relaxed and comfortable enough to talk with you if they want to.
- 4- Be honest and age appropriate with children when talking about any crisis particularly COVID-19. Helping children to discuss feelings is a very important part of helping them to manage their feelings, thoughts and behaviours.
- 5- Talk with your child or teen about behaviours they can implement to help themselves feel safe during this time, examples include, hand washing, hand sanitizing, social distancing, coughing and sneezing protocols, staying home when feeling sick. More can be found on the [WA Health Department](#) website
- 6- If relevant, ask our teens to freethink ways in which they can openly discuss covid-19 concerns and actions of safety within their friendship circle. Examples could be respecting boundaries, not sharing foods and drinks, practicing covid-19 safe measures and being honest and supportive with each other.
- 7- Children and teens can find it difficult to negotiate what is legitimate media coverage, understand sensationalism and discern fact from fiction. They do pick up on the quality of language, body language and on heightened emotions.
- 8- We can help children to feel safer by encouraging them to stay away from social media and being mindful of the possibility of children hearing and or experiencing emotionally charged and panic driven conversations.
- 9- If our child or teen overhears or sees confusing and scary messages, talk with them. Use the opportunity to teach them the difference between credible and non-credible news stories. Young children often do not know the difference between reality, reality TV, Facebook, social media and even Disney movies. Be their guide, steady true and with purpose.
- 10- We can access correct information from our local government authority. [WA Health Department](#) has some great resources [here](#). The [World Health Organisation](#) has other resources that are fantastic for using as guides in our education and care setting.
- 11- We can help our children to feel safe by strengthening and reinforcing their feeling safe building blocks. (the elements of the safety equation)

Continuum of Safeness

