

Returning to school safely

Presenter – Brig Dunsmore, Clinical Social Worker

Brig Dunsmore:

Welcome to returning to school safely, a discussion about helping overcome child and parent anxieties, and prepare for the coming school year. My name is Brig Dunsmore, I'm a clinical mental health counselor, licensed in the state of Utah, and I'll be your host for the webinar today. We are going to talk about some of the primary concerns people have about returning to school, identifying ways to help parents address their return to school worries, and we'll talk about ways to help kids feel safe as they return to school. So, I would ask you what are some of the biggest concerns you have about your kids returning to school?

Maybe you'll see many of them here on this list, there's certainly things that parents are often concerned about when their children return to school. One of the things that is certainly most impactful at the present time is violence in our schools, and trying to ensure that our children have a safe place to be. This can create a lot of anxiety for parents. Now, we aren't going to discuss each of these today, but the hope is that some of the tools and resources we review about addressing anxiety will be useful as you address your concerns related to any of these items.

One thing I wanted to talk about here and why this is so important. In 1943, a psychologist named Abraham Maslow developed a theory about human motivation, and you can see the basics in this visual. The idea is that people want to be the best they can be, which is called self-actualization. But to do that, they have to have their basic needs met first, things like food, water, shelter, warmth. Feeling safe is one of those basic needs, so how does that apply here? The shootings in Buffalo, Chicago, other places in the country, and especially in school settings like Uvalde have left many of us feeling unsafe. And when we don't feel safe, it can be really hard to do the things that help us progress in our lives, such as going to school. How do we as parents then work through our own anxieties to build a greater sense of safety for ourselves and for our children so that we aren't stuck in these lower parts of this pyramid and we can actually work on becoming our best selves? Great thing to ask yourself is what are the things that are impacting your anxiety as your child prepares to return to school, and how is that showing up in your life?

Let's talk about things you can do with that, how you reduce your own anxiety. One of the first things to acknowledge is that, as parents, we want to protect our kids. It's a struggle to know that we can't protect them from everything. Violence happens and we cannot promise absolute safety, that makes us feel out of control, and that feeling creates fear and it creates anxiety. In order to help our children with their anxiety, we have to make sure that we're able to deal with our own. And often, it helps when we focus on the things that we can do, the things that are within our power and control.

The ones that we'll talk about today is information gathering, being able to communicate with our kids, strengthening our own coping skills, and being proactive. So first, gathering information. The more you know, the easier it is to make informed decisions. And having accurate information helps us feel less anxiety and more in control. What types of information are important to get? I think this is a good list. Information about safety planning, finding out who creates that plan and how often it's reviewed, how you can interact with that person. Finding out how the school interacts with police and fire when there's an emergency. Making sure that you understand how drills and practices are conducted, and how often. What procedures are in place if you or your child see something suspicious or concerning? Also, how will the school, the district, or the teacher communicate with you? And what are the school's expectations of you as a parent or of your child with regards to their safety procedures? And what resources are in place to help parents and children address safety and other issues at school? So, that's a pretty detailed list, that's a lot of information, but certainly it helps you feel more in control of what's going to be happening with your child as they return to school.

Talking to your kids is always vital, and we're going to emphasize that several times today. You know, I think it's important to mention that sometimes kids actually do know stuff. We know that they tend to think they know it all, but sometimes they actually do know things. So, talking to them and getting information from them can be very useful in your own information gathering. You can ask them things about what they see with personal safety issues at school. You can ask them about their experience with safety drills and procedures. You can ask them what teachers, counselors, or resource officers are there in the school and how comfortable they feel approaching them. You can also talk to them to get information about what it looks like when they or a friend is struggling and in distress.

Sometimes the best way to deal with the anxieties in your life is to take care of yourself. You know, focusing on things like getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and exercise are keys to

physical and mental health. They strengthen our bodies, improve how we think, and reduce stress hormones in our brains. Also, it's important to do something that you enjoy because it gives you a break from daily stress and lets you focus on things that build you up. Participating in activities like mindfulness, yoga, and deep breathing can help keep us centered, they can reduce muscle tension and stress. Also, it can help us ensure that our brains are getting enough oxygen.

Journaling is a great thing, it gives us a safe place to express our thoughts and it's a great outlet because we can choose what we express and who gets to see it. And maybe no one, and that's fine. Gratitude, few things help us move from a negative or worried place to a positive one like having and expressing gratitude. It changes our focus to the good things in our lives and gives us a break from negative and stressful ones. And then reaching out. Now, sometimes we all just need a little help, that may be from a friend, a significant other, a family member, or a professional. Being able to talk and share and get advice from others can help us feel supported as we work through challenges. As mentioned, when we do something, we feel more in control of what's happening around us. Our active participation can strengthen us, our children, and our communities. So, being proactive is important, that may include things like joining the PTA, volunteering in your child's classroom, attending and participating in city, county, and school district meetings, maybe joining or starting a parent's resource group, or writing to the school, or to the school district, or a legislator to offer up ideas of how you think things they can do to make your community and school safer.

One of our biggest jobs as parents is to help our kids feel safe. I would like you to think about some of the things that you've done in the past when your child was preparing to go to school. What did you do to help them feel a little more secure and a little safer? Often, those things that you've done in the past will work for you in the present, and they're good things to remember. And here are a few other ideas. You can talk to your children about violence, provide them with information. You can create a routine, watch for signs of distress, and you can get help if your child is struggling. Find out what your child knows. Children can learn about violent events from the media and classmates. And their perception may be different from reality. As a parent, you can help make sure that they have a more accurate understanding of events, which will help them feel a little bit more secure. It is okay to admit to feeling sad, scared, or angry, and to allow your child to express those feelings too. Let your child know that there is no question that's too scary to talk about. And speaking about questions, children are better able to cope with things when they feel like they understand it, and they'll gather information through questions. So again, leaving that door open and

allowing them to ask those questions is hugely important. Reassure them, certainly nothing is risk free, but when we can reassure our children that many people are working to keep them safe, it helps them feel a little bit better. Be honest. Again, children feel safer when they feel like they understand the situation. You can give them simple, honest answers that are consistent with their age and maturity level. And we'll talk just a little bit more about that coming up. Remember that you don't have to have all the answers. It is okay to say that you don't know something. You can emphasize your feelings about the issue and how much you love your child, and you can do your best to help them find the answers later. And then, patience is a virtue. Your child may not want to open up right away, and that's okay. Let them know that they can come back anytime that they want to talk.

So, a little bit more in depth about talking to our children. Certainly, the types of information we give a child will change depending on their age and maturity level. So, for an early elementary child, it's important to keep information simple and brief. Balance it with reassurances that their school and home are safe, and that adults in their lives are working there to protect them. You can give them examples of school safety like locked doors, emergency drills, and child monitoring on the playground. For children that are in upper elementary and early middle school, you may provide additional information with more details than what you're giving younger children. Kids this age will be more vocal on asking questions about whether they're truly safe, and what's being done at their school. Because a lot of their information may come from unreliable sources, again, social media or their friends, students may need some assistance in separating reality from fantasy. Provide information and discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools. And upper middle school and high school students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in school and society. They'll probably share concrete suggestions about how to make schools safer and how to prevent tragedies. Listening to them is important. Emphasizing the role that they have in maintaining safe schools is valuable. You know, encouraging them to follow school safety guidelines and doing things like not providing building access to strangers, or reporting strangers on campus, or reporting threats to school safety made by students or community members. These types of things help reassure them and let them know the things where they can take control and have an impact on what's happening.

Now, certainly we talked about the importance of us gathering information. It's also important to provide that. Provide those details to your child, and that includes your expectations of their behavior and performance at school. But some things your child may not want or they may want to know include things like the school safety plan or what to

expect during safety drills. Now, that's really important for younger children that may not have a lot of experience with the safety drills, and hearing bells going off and sirens may be alarming to them. And so, helping prep them in advance can really help alleviate a lot of stress and anxiety for them. Even reminding older children about those things helps reduce the anxiety because then it doesn't come as such a surprise. It's important to talk to kids about what they can and can't take to school. Certainly, there are much more stricter rules than there used to be, and so helping them make sure that they're following those is a good thing. Talking to them about what to do in the event of an emergency. Walking them through the process and what will happen, again just gives them a feeling of preparedness and helps them feel a little bit more secure. Let them know how to reach you if there's a concern or an issue. And of course, talk to them about how they're going to be getting to and from school.

Most people, especially children, feel happier and perform better when they have structure and a routine. The consistency also helps children know what to expect and when, which leads to a greater sense of control and lowered anxiety levels. So, some things that you can talk to them about and help set a routine. Wake and sleep times. And I would encourage you to start this a couple of weeks before school, that way they're already in that routine and it's not such a shock to them on the first day of school. You can set a meal schedule or schedule for school and for the other activities they may participate in. Letting them know what the expectation is, and when household chores are to be done. And of course, talking to them and setting up a set time to complete homework. Always keep an eye out for signs of distress in your child. And they can include many of these things that are listed here, including withdrawing from playgroup and friends, competing for the attention of parents and teachers, not wanting to leave home, losing interest in schoolwork or other things that they used to enjoy, having unexplained illnesses or aches and pains.

You know, increasing conflict with peers, with siblings, or with parents, and even having difficulty concentrating. Older students, if they're struggling, may experiment and with high risk behaviors including alcohol and other substances. So keep an eye out for those things. And of course, it is helpful to let your child know the people and the resources that are available to them if they need help at school. Talk to them about when they should go to a trusted adult and report concerns. Many school districts also have developed applications that allow students, parents, and faculty to make anonymous reports to police when they see something concerning. It's good to ensure that your child's phone has the app and that they know how to use it, and you as well. And if your child is exhibiting signs of struggle or distress, the ones that we talked about in the previous slide, reach out to someone and

maybe the school counselor, their pediatrician, a therapist, or you can look for a support group. Your Employee Assistance Program can help you connect with the professional resources and help that your child may need.

Here's some additional resources that may be useful to you as you think about talking to your children about violence and trauma. The National Association for the Education of Young People, the American Psychological Association, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a lot of information and detail, and the American School Counselor Association. Some additional ones and numbers as well. The National Parent Helpline, Everytown for Gun Safety, and the Disaster Distress Helpline, and some great resources that are available to you.

A new school year means new beginnings, new adventures, and new challenges. There are a lot of things that create anxiety about returning to school. Safety is certainly a primary focus, one that must be met so that we can become our best selves. By being proactive, asking questions, and having conversations, we can reduce much of the anxiety for ourselves and our children. And we can work together to do things that reduce violence and encourage greater safety in our schools.

Thank you so much for reviewing this today. I hope it's been useful to you. I would again encourage you if you have questions or need additional resources that you reach out to your Employee As

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