

## SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING ON THEIR RETURN TO EARLY LEARNING AND CARE

As Early Learning and Care settings reopen, you might be thinking about your child's return to preschool, childminder or crèche. You may be looking forward to getting back to some kind of normality, but for your child the many weeks on pause will have become their new normal. There might be worries and concerns about the return to childcare and early learning. Many families have experienced and continue to experience stressful events and situations that may have been physically exhausting and emotionally draining on all members of the family.

We know you want the best for your child. Below are some guidelines that may help you support your child through this important time.

### Keep calm

When parents are feeling anxious, children can notice this and begin to feel stressed too. Take the time to check in with yourself. How are you currently feeling about your child's return to childcare? This may feel like quite a stressful time for many reasons. If these feelings are overwhelming, try pausing and taking a few deep breaths. If you can be mindful, and stay calm, you will be better able to remain connected to what your child's needs are and be more able to respond to them. When you are calm you are more able to see the reasons behind your child's behaviour and respond to the needs and feelings that are behind the behaviour. Ask yourself 'What is my child feeling?' and 'What does my child need?' Keep in tune with your own feelings and what you need too.

This is one simple exercise that you might find helpful:

- Pause
- Focus on your breath
- Breathe in slowly, right down into your tummy, then exhale completely
- Take 5 more slow breaths, being aware of each breath in and each breath out



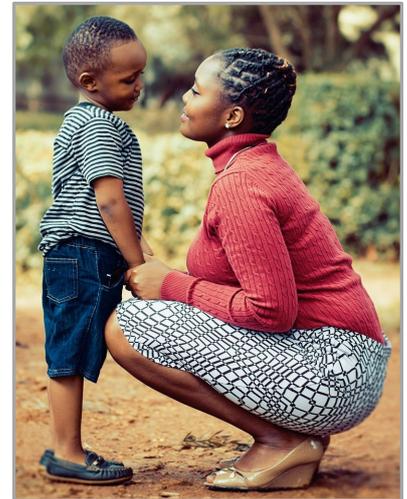
After several of these breaths, you will find that your heart rate has slowed down, your breathing is deeper and you feel calmer. It will relax your body and allow you to feel calmer and think more clearly.

If possible, get support from your family and friends. Chat with other parents about how you and they are feeling. Try to keep up any hobbies or activities that bring you peace or that you enjoy. There are lots of great mindfulness resources and ideas on the internet that you might like to try. Having good, clear information and knowing what to expect can also help you to stay calm. You will find information and resources in the links at the end of this guide.

## Communicate with your child

As their parent, you will know your child best and you are probably already aware of how they might cope with the return to preschool or crèche. Talk with your child about the plan to return and about the changes that will happen. Ask them about what they think and how they feel. Listen carefully and attentively to all they have to say and answer any questions they might have. If available, use photos of the setting and stories to help you talk about their return. Throughout the day, talk about the people from your child's setting and the activities they enjoyed if they attended before.

Join your child in play. Play helps children to make sense of what is happening in their world. Sometimes just watching their pretend play can give you an insight into how your child is feeling and what they are thinking about returning to their setting.



## Communicate with your provider and be prepared

Many children and adults find change stressful. However, as mentioned earlier, when we know what to expect, it can help to reduce this stress.

- Talk with your childcare provider or childminder as there are likely to be new procedures in place to minimise the spread of Covid-19.
- Ask questions about any changes that might impact on you and your child's experiences, for example, new arrangements at drop-off time, reduced number of children and adults in the room, or changes to the room layout.
- Help prepare your child by talking with them about these changes. Keep your voice calm and play out these new situations together in a relaxed and fun way.
- If you and your child travel on public transport to get your childcare setting, it may be helpful to practice this journey so they become familiar with any changes such as passengers wearing facemasks or restricted seating.

Your provider or childminder will also be preparing for the return of children to the setting. To help them to support your child on their return, it is important that you share with them any information you think they should know. Tell them about what your child has been interested in during the last few weeks and what they've enjoyed playing with most. This will help the educators to provide some consistency, which can help reduce stress. Tell them about any stressful events in your child's life, for example, the death of a grandparent, and discuss how your child has coped with being out of the setting and any ideas you have that will help them to settle back in. Remember, you know your own child best so keep communicating often with the educators, asking them how your child is getting on and letting them know what is happening for your child at home.

## Keep to a routine

A consistent daily routine is very important for children as it creates a sense of stability and predictability, and helps to reduce stress. This will be of particular importance when adjusting to the return to preschool or crèche.

Consider ways to establish a new family routine that will work for you and your child as you move back to childcare. For example, set up a consistent time for getting up in the morning and going to bed at night. This may need to happen gradually if your child has become used to varied times.

Ask the educators about the expected daily routine in the setting and share with them your child's routine at home. This is particularly important for younger children as big changes to their normal routines are likely to lead to more discomfort and distress.

## Be understanding

Everyone has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in different ways. Young children are particularly vulnerable to the social and emotional effects of stressful situations in the lives of their families and communities, and rely on parents and caregivers to soothe and nurture them. When young children are overwhelmed by their big feelings, we typically see this show up in their behaviour.

Your child might have separation anxiety and become distressed about being apart from you. They might appear withdrawn or angry, and they may also regress to a behaviour more typical of earlier stages in their development. These are normal responses to situations or events that children find stressful.

Your child might not be able to put their feelings into words but it is important to reassure them that they are loved and help them to organise their feelings.



## Signs of stress or trauma and what you can do

What you might see in your child's behaviour	What you can do about it
Sleep difficulty (fear of falling asleep or staying asleep; nightmares)	Make sure there is a consistent and soothing bedtime routine (bath, reading books, dim light, cuddles and snuggling). Respond immediately to soothe your child if they have a nightmare.
Changes in how they eat (loss of appetite, refusing to eat, hoarding or hiding food)	Make sure meal times are calm and consistent, where the child is able to sit down at the table. Offer choices in foods. Don't worry about any messiness.
Changes in toileting (constipation, stool holding, bed-wetting, 'accidents')	Reduce stress around toileting. Use books, games, or activities that are only for those times.  Older children should go to the toilet regularly. Ensure that they have food that supports healthy digestion – fruits, vegetables, and grains for toddlers and older children.
Reappearance of behaviours common at an earlier age (bedwetting, thumb sucking, clinging to you, fear of strangers, baby talking)	Reassure your child that you are close and they are safe. Stay near. Tell them when you are leaving and when you will be back. If they are clingy, hold them for a little while longer. Encourage comfort items, like a teddy or blanket. Make sure there is a lot of sitting on your lap and spending time together. Encourage drawing or painting and pretend play as ways of expressing fears and emotions.
Biting, kicking, tantrums, aggression	Provide safe and loving limits. Help give your young child the words to describe their emotions. 'I see you are angry. You don't want to come inside right now.' Redirect to a quiet area where they can calm down with you and organise their feelings. Read children's books that help to show how to handle emotions.
Shows no emotion, no joy	Offer a hug and a sense of safety. Give your child your full attention as often as you can (for example, avoid being on your phone too much). Children learn by imitating adults. Even babies can mirror the mood of their parent. If you are having a lot of difficulty coping in these very difficult times, consider talking to your doctor about ways to support your own emotional health. You are not alone in this.
Difficulty concentrating, frustration, difficulty with changing activities	Reduce distractions. Set up a quiet area. Model how to calm yourself down when frustrated.  Help your child to take some deep breaths – 'In your mind, count "1, 2, 3" for each breath in and "1, 2, 3" for each breath out.' Pause slightly at the end of each breath out.



## Remember

Adjustment to change is a process that takes place over time. Your child's first few days back to crèche, preschool or childminder might go really well. However, keep in mind that sometimes a child's stress will not show until a week or so into the new schedule, so don't be too surprised if you see signs of stress start to show later on. It is important that you plan for your child's return to childcare and early learning to reduce the worry and anxieties for everyone involved and to help make it a positive experience. Be sure to include your child in conversations about making plans.



**Above all, be kind to yourself. You can only do the best you can in whatever situation you are in.**

## Ask for help

Talk to your child's educator about any behaviour that is worrying you to get support and to work together on things you can try both at home and in the setting.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### Barnardos Resources

[Barnardos Heart, Body and Mind](#)

[Barnardos Resource: Your Young Child's Behaviour](#)

[Barnardos Resource: A Parent's Guide to Partnership in Childcare](#)

[Barnardos Resource: Young Children Grieve Too](#)

[Barnardos Parent Supportline](#)

### Other Resources

[National Parents Council: Early Years](#)

[First 5: Resources for Parents](#)

[HSE Information about Covid-19](#)

go to [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie) | email [resources@barnardos.ie](mailto:resources@barnardos.ie) | call 1800 910 123