



Tips for Healthcare Workers Returning to Work as Stay at Home Orders Are Lifted



Parenting Center

As we all prepare to return to work, we want to offer some specific strategies to help manage these uncharted waters and difficult transitions.

1. Make peace with your own anxiety

Your child's experience of reentry begins with your response to the situation. Are you keeping your own anxiety in check? Find ways to regulate your own thoughts before embarking on this conversation. Find a way to regulate your body as well. Maybe take 4 deep counting breaths. If you worry that you are projecting your own feelings rather than being open to what they are feeling, check in with that and adjust. Being worn thin from worry, leaves you less emotionally available for your child. Practice co-regulation instead and do what you can to be a calming influence. Through this, children can internalize our calming presence which can add a sense of safety and calm to their own anxiety.

2. Explain any big feelings you're having

If staying calm just isn't in the cards for you, don't worry. First, acknowledge any big emotions in front of your child. Next, make it clear that your kids are not to blame for your feelings. And finally, remind children that they are safe, that they don't have to worry about your ability to handle your difficult feelings and that you are there to take care of them.

Here are a few examples:

- "I'm sorry I yelled at you when you didn't wash your hands from outside. Even when I use a loud voice and I have an angry reaction, I still love you and we are safe. Sometimes, when I get scared, I yell. But you don't have to worry because I know how to calm myself down."
- "You may have noticed me crying to daddy about going back to work. Just like you, I have some big feelings and when I feel sad, I sometimes cry. And then I feel better and I am still your mommy and we are still going to have dinner and read a book and have our normal bedtime. I know how to take care of myself when I have big feelings and you don't have to worry."

3. Acknowledging what has happened and what we have witnessed

Feeling understood in our distress feels better than having someone try and fix our distress. We connect with our children in tough moments by sitting next to them and showing them that we can tolerate any feelings they are having. This feels like a relief for children who may be worrying about how you are feeling, or who may think there is a right or wrong reaction. Remember that though we don't know what our children are thinking at all times, clarity around how you are feeling can feel good and settling. Share your emotions and reflect theirs.

Here are a few examples:

- "It's been really neat working from home during this time. I am really going to miss giving you a hug in between patients, but I know that I will still get to put you to bed at night."
- "Your face looks like you're worried and I'm wondering if you're feeling upset about my return to work. I feel upset too and I am here to talk."

4. Develop a routine

While it may have felt temporary before, now is the time to lean in toward organizing some sense of a schedule in your house. Kids thrive on routines. And if your child isn't going to already be obligated to their school's virtual one, then it's important to create a daily schedule and keep it visible for everyone to see. Post changes that may occur now that you won't be at home. The more predictable the schedule and the sooner you get back to your regular morning, bedtime and mealtime routines, the more secure your child will feel. Giving your child the ability to check their schedule, so they know what's next in the routine, and the sequence of their day, will make them feel more at ease and confident, thanks to not having to worry about when they'll get to eat next or take a break.

Young children can benefit from a written schedule or picture chart, but even older children still need clear conversations around expectations and responsibilities before the day begins. Make the day appropriate for your household. Consider who is there, what other opportunities your children have for activity or interaction, what mental and physical space you have and how you and your child are feeling.

Aspects to consider:

- Days you're working and days home
- Keeping the schedule week to week (not more than that) to allow for flexibility
- Maintain "familiar" structure for kids

5. Stay focused on the present

There is still a lot of uncertainty around our schedules, limits and plans in the coming weeks. Avoid talking too far in the future with your kids, or creating expectations that

you can't deliver. Talk honestly about making the best plan for "right now," and emphasize that as you have new information, you will share it. Making lists of what you can control and can't control can help kids to get organized.

6. Give specific details about what you are doing to keep yourself safe and healthy

Talk specifically about where you will be and what you will be doing. Explain the precautions you and your workplace are taking to protect your body. Take time to explain details about where you will be, how you will spend your time, what it looks like, even talk about what you will be eating and how you will rest. If you have pictures of locations (without anything scary) this can help kids have a concrete visual of what to imagine rather than scary things they may imagine for themselves. Understanding your daily routines and getting a better picture of where you will be and what you are doing can help your child cope with their concerns about the safety of your job.

7. Be patient with separation

After so much time together in unusual circumstances, we would expect some children to have difficulty with separation. Create a ritual for hellos and goodbyes, such as a saying, song, kiss in the hand or secret handshake. Make separations and reunions fun and special, and find valuable ways to feel connected when you are apart. Practice separations with a toy or stuffed animal, or in a role play about school and work. For younger kids, don't underestimate the power of peek-a-boo! It reminds them that things and people that go away, come back. You can also create planned check-in times and schedule them! Have a mid day call or a running list of conversation topics on the refrigerator. What matters most is for your child to feel they have a way to communicate with you, no matter where you are physically.

8. Support your co-parent to continue routines and boundaries

While it may feel like an OK time for you or your co parent to relax boundaries and make things "easier" on your children, routines and consistency help them to feel safe. Keep up family limits, rules, boundaries and privileges whenever possible.

9. Remember, we are resilient

Science clearly tells us that children have tremendous capacity to recover from stressful situations and circumstances. We know that children can also overcome adverse experiences with supportive relationships from their parents. You are the secret sauce that helps your child do the difficult tasks they face right now. And you are enough. Have confidence that you both can grow from these difficult times, and that the relationship you are building is powerful protection from lasting harm.

10. Embrace the new challenges

Remember that some amount of stress can be beneficial and can help us to rise to occasions in a way that helps us further our resilience and grit. Look for ways in which you have risen to the occasion in the last few weeks - whether as a teacher for your child or in playing a new role in your household. Change can be painful, but is necessary for growth. We have all adapted and deserve praise for our flexibility in the face of crisis. Find ways to be flexible about tasks and roles in this new experience and rewrite the script for what is working now. Change is possible while still maintaining the structure of predictable routines.

11. Focus on Gratitude

We all can find so much to be grateful for. Having, saying or writing more positive thoughts may have a profound impact on your mood and well being. Research shows that you don't even need to speak these out loud, but that having a daily gratitude practice can have lasting effects on your mental health. Develop and model a practice that works for you. Is it journaling? Writing letters you never send? Speaking mantras in the mirror? Or simply keeping a list on your phone? Make it a habit and allow your child the opportunity to witness your own feelings of gratitude in stressful times.

You can also notice day-to-day actions your child takes for which you are grateful, and acknowledge them, but saying "I really appreciate" instead of a simple thank you. You can talk about and take action to help those in your community and can try family gratitude exercises like rose/thorn/bud/feather where you go around and say something you are grateful for (rose), found challenging (thorn), look forward to (bud) and laughed at (feather).

With all of these tips, find what works for you and your family. For more support, please reach out to us at parentingcenter@mountsinai.org.