


**Supporting Your Kid's Mental Health Needs and Our Own As We Navigate Changing School Environments**

Terri Henzri  
ACMH Education Coordinator




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March 16, 2022

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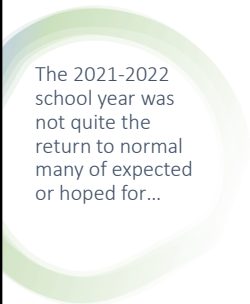
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The 2021-2022 school year was not quite the return to normal many of expected or hoped for...

Covid-19 continues to challenge....  
our kids,  
our schools,  
and ourselves, as parents  
and all who care for and about kids....

And there are also additional related challenges to success including a stark increase in mental health issues in children and youth, lack of access to adequate services, supports and even school staff in addition to new challenges facing kids and families including....

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Finding the ups and downs of this school year a little stressful..

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**You are not alone!**

Parents, youth and educators across the state and nation report finding this school year even more stressful than last and are searching for ideas and support to make the best of what is left of it.

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## Today's Objectives

**Discuss**

- New and familiar stressors which continue to challenge all kids including changes in schedules, learning environments, routines, and the lingering affects of the past 2 years.

**Highlight**

- How these changes and challenges are hard for all kids and may be especially difficult for kids who struggle with anxiety, depression or other existing/emerging mental health issues.

**Share**

- A variety of practical tips, strategies and tools you can use to help support your child's learning, emotional and social development and success during the remainder of this school year across learning environments.

**Provide**

- Provide tips, strategies and resources to help you support your child's mental health and wellness and your own as you navigate the end of yet another challenging school year.

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**Discussion Question**

What are some challenges have you and your kids experienced this year?

Or,

What are you most concerned, worried, or excited about as the school year continues?



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### Covid Continues to Challenge Learning Environments for ALL Children & Youth

- Being a kid during a pandemic continues to be incredibly challenging and stressful due to...
- Relentless uncertainty and change.
  - New and changing expectations and realities.
  - Fear of what might happen next.
  - Ongoing threat of isolation, removal or altered access to peers, teachers and other formal and informal activities and supports that all kids rely on.
  - And even though many schools have recently returned to more familiar operating procedures - most kids are dealing with some level of trauma after all of the uncertainty of the past two years...

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### What's is trauma and how is it related....

- Trauma is an emotional response to a distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope.
- Safety matters... and all of kid's physical and emotional safety have been challenged over the past 2 years.
- Trauma affects individual youth in different ways, but most kids have experienced some level of trauma during the pandemic.
- And many have experienced trauma that has overwhelmed their ability to cope..

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### Trauma is tough on the brain

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### Trauma Impacts at school

- Trauma can negatively affect academic performance.
- Trauma can undermine and/or challenge critical learning skills.
- Trauma can affect a student's ability to focus or pay attention in the classroom.
- Trauma also affects social and emotional development.
- Trauma can affect moods and behavior.




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For students, feeling safe is important. After meeting basic needs for survival like food, water, and sleep, feeling safe and secure is necessary before anyone can focus on relationships, learning, or other opportunities for personal success.

@mentalhealthamerica




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### Classroom Strategies to Support All Kids to Feel Safe at School

- Prioritize social and emotional well being over academics.
- Help kids to continue to rebuild social connections/relationships.
- Create a safe and 'open' space.
- Model coping strategies and utilize and share tools and tips.
- **Give kids a sense of control!**
- Develop/support classroom rules and expectations together.
- Make sure kids feel their voices are heard and valued.
- Be patient when kids act out.
- Partner with families!
- Keep an eye out for kids who are struggling and connect them to additional help if needed.
- Remember as things move closer to pre-pandemic school environments - for some kids the 'old typical school day' and routines may no longer feel familiar or comfortable.

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Other ideas of strategies to build strong classrooms, schools or learning communities...?

How has your school helped kids feel safe at school?

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What can kids do to help themselves feel safe at school?

- Be prepared
- Identify adults/peers you trust
- Share your fears and concerns
- Find tools you can use if you feel overwhelmed or stressed such as using 'grounding items/activities'




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Support at Home is Key and #1 Predictor of Success

Tips to Create a Supportive Home Environment:

- Remember to take care of your own mental health!
- Check your expectations and anticipate challenges.
- Learn all you can about how the stress/trauma of the last 2 years may be affecting your child or others.
- Partner with the school if your child is struggling emotionally, behaviorally or academically.
- Encourage communication and be sure they know are listening and hear them.
- Share your feelings, fears, concerns and struggles and model how you try to manage them.
- Know when your child's struggles may be a sign of something bigger and how to get help if you need it.




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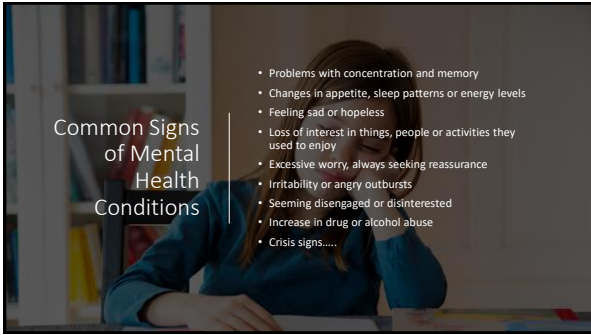
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**Common Signs of Mental Health Conditions**

- Problems with concentration and memory
- Changes in appetite, sleep patterns or energy levels
- Feeling sad or hopeless
- Loss of interest in things, people or activities they used to enjoy
- Excessive worry, always seeking reassurance
- Irritability or angry outbursts
- Seeming disengaged or disinterested
- Increase in drug or alcohol abuse
- Crisis signs.....

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**Tips to determining the difference between 'normal or expected' Pandemic Stress or Emerging Mental Health Issues or Symptoms - Factors to Consider:**

- Do youth come in and out of moods or do they seem to stick with them over time?
- If they are disengaging or isolating themselves from others or typical activities ask yourself:
  - Is this new? Or related to previous patterns of behavior?
  - Might it be related to typical development?
  - Do they engage with others when they do venture out of their rooms or into the world?
  - Are their interactions and moods ever positive?
- Many clinicians suggest that if one or more symptoms are present for at least two weeks, they may suggest depression or other mental health issue and you should reach out for help

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**Crisis Signs That May Signal A Need to Seek Help Now**

**If you notice any of the following signs in your child it may be necessary to take immediate action as they may be thinking about suicide:**

- Giving away possessions
- Risky or self-destructive actions
- Increase in drug or alcohol use
- Obsession with death
- Withdrawing from life
- Indirect or direct threats of suicide
- Drastic personality changes
- Lack of interest in future plans
- If your child is experiencing suicidal thoughts, it's important to seek emergency care immediately. If you think your child is in immediate danger of taking suicidal action call:
  - **The National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK** where trained counselors can help you find local resources & suggest next steps
  - Your local CMH crisis line
  - Or if you need immediate help call 911 or go to your nearest emergency room.

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Other indicators that you may need to seek help or more information soon:

- Extreme outbursts or excessive mood swings
- Worrying so much that it is causing stomach or headaches
- Persistent nightmares/lack of sleep that affects your child's ability to function during the day
- Avoiding formerly enjoyable activities, including spending time with friends
- Being unusually quiet, sad or reserved, preoccupied
- Change in appetite - eating considerably less, or more
- Seeing or hearing things that other people don't
- Extreme panic
- Onset of new behaviors or rituals that are repeated and disruptive to normal activities
- Frequent mood swings or sudden shifts in energy
- Changes in how your kids dress – if they are wearing long sleeves in hot weather or hats all of the sudden they could be self harming.

Mental Health America

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### Resources to learn more about emerging or escalating mental health conditions

- ACMH [I am Worried About My Child's Mental Health](#)
- ACMH [Get Help Crisis Resource Page](#)
- ACMH [I Just Found Out My Child Has A Mental Health Disorder](#)
- ACMH [What is a Mental Health Crisis & What to Expect if One Occurs](#)
- Mental Health America's
  - [Know the Signs: Recognizing mental health Concerns in Kids and Teens](#)
  - Parent/Youth Online Screening Tools [www.MHAScreening.org](http://www.MHAScreening.org)

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#### Additional Challenges for Children & Youth With Existing or Emerging Mental Health Challenges

- Ongoing uncertainty, lifestyle changes and everchanging routines and expectations....
- Layered on top of existing challenges due to Anxiety, ADHD, Depression, OCD and other mental health issues....
- Can make being a kid with an existing or developing mental health challenge during an ongoing pandemic downright overwhelming....
- And for many has already reached or surpassed a breaking point....



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Anxiety, Depression, and other mental health challenges are on the rise....

During uncertain times like these, our anxiety can be difficult to manage. We might be having trouble focusing or be fixating on the pandemic too much. We might find ourselves feeling panicked or scared more often than usual. It's normal for our anxiety to flare up during times like these.



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Special Challenges for Youth With Anxiety & Depression

Kids who struggle with anxiety or depression may become overwhelmed by the ongoing changes and uncertainty and struggle to manage moods, new 'worries' or new expectations that seem to constantly be changing. Fluctuating energy can also make it hard to stay motivated and function.

What you might see:

- Irritability
- Difficulty staying focused, making decisions or getting started
- Reluctance or refusal to participate
- Chronic absences or physical complaints
- Getting stuck in *'thinking traps'* or on negative thoughts especially when feeling overwhelmed, anxious or powerless.

They may also:

- Avoid activities or people
- Have poor school performance
- Seek excessive reassurance
- Refuse to go or participate in school
- And even act out

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Thinking Trap Examples – Jack.org

**WHY DISTRACTIONS?**

When we're feeling anxious, we can often get stuck on worrying thoughts and upsetting emotions. Finding ways to distract ourselves or get active can be a great way to disrupt those patterns and focus on more positive things.

**We all find ourselves trapped in our own thoughts sometimes. Whether it's getting stuck worrying about the future, things going on right now, or staying safe, thinking traps can happen to any and all of us!**

Here are some common thinking traps we might find ourselves stuck in.

COMMON THINKING TRAP	EXAMPLE
All or nothing thinking Catastrophizing Overgeneralization Mind reading Negative filter	<p>Something is either going to be 100% perfect or 100% bad. The pandemic is never going to end, ever!</p> <p>Signs of COVID on my feet look like I'm going to get this whole school!</p> <p>How they're gossiping about me and how they think of me aren't real!</p> <p>So what if I scored 2 goals, I also missed a penalty kick. We lost and it's all my fault.</p>

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### Tips for Kids With Anxiety

#### What is helpful?

- Talking about their fears and listening trying not to diminish their concerns.
- Letting them know you are there for them and can and want to help.
- Help them to plan coping strategies and develop/practice skills they can use.
- Encourage and recognize brave behavior by helping them to:
  - 'Ride the Wave'
- Help them to be a 'Thought Detective' - Examine the evidence about their fears
  - Talk about the difference between 'What ifs' & 'What is' and help them learn strategies to do that on their own
  - Approach and manage fears by creating exposure steps that build from where they are

#### What isn't helpful?

- Accommodations that 'accommodate' anxiety or avoidance
- Extra time or ignoring issues it just lets anxiety build up
- Journaling and Relaxation Techniques

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### Tips for Supporting Kids With Depression

- Create an environment where kids feel comfortable talking about their feelings.
- Listen without judgment or trying to fix or minimize the problem.
- Help them keep a sense of perspective and find some silver linings if you can.
- If your child is stuck in an ongoing circle of negative thoughts and/or focusing on worst case scenarios – it is then ok to start to challenge their thinking a bit.
- Remind kids of challenges they've overcome in the past.
- Help them to create coping strategies to help manage uncertainty/ negative feelings and lists or concrete steps to help them to adapt to day-to-day challenges.
- Support them to make new goals and plans when they are missing the way things used to be and help them to reflect upon things they feel grateful for.
- Help them to sort through the things they can and cannot control.
- Support them to use coping strategies for the things/situations they cannot control.

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#### Other Helpful Resources From Mental Health America and Jack.org

The image displays four resource cards from Mental Health America and Jack.org. The first card, 'STOP NEGATIVE SELF TALK', features a green background and a 'S.O.S.' acronym. The second, 'WORKSHEET: FEELING SAFE', is a white worksheet with a green header and a checklist. The third, 'IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS', has a blue background and includes a diagram of a person sitting at a desk. The fourth, 'THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS, ACTIONS', is a purple card with a diagram showing the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and actions.

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Managing Different Learning Environments

- In- Person Learning
- Virtual Learning
- Hybrid

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Most kids returned to in-person learning

*It may have looked the same..*

*but surely for many or most still does not feel the same...*

*and neither do they....*



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In Person Learning Advantages

- Increased focus and engagement
- Less ZOOMing
- More hands on learning partnering and collaborating
- Being with friends! And a broader circles of adults
- Reconnection to formal and informal supports – Making seeking or finding help and support easier and more natural with less responsibility on kids and families
- Return to regular day-to-day activities and routines
- Others....



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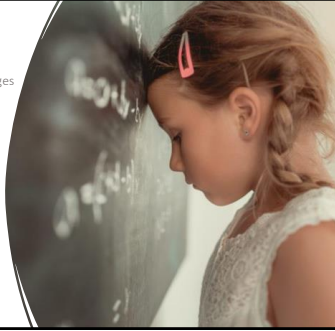
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### In Person-Learning

Same School – New Struggles

For Many Kids with Mental Health Challenges

- Adjusting to new routines, expectations and safety protocols can be overwhelming for students especially those who struggle with organization or rely on familiar routines and predictability.
- Many kids will struggle and spend extra time, energy and brainpower just trying to remember where to go, what to do and not to do, leaving little energy for focusing on the teacher, learning or successfully interacting with peers.
- Kids with Anxiety or OCD may struggle with additional worries and engage in new rituals or repetitive activities to manage them.
- Kids who struggle with impulsiveness or behavior may struggle to adjust to new or changing rules, expectations and requirements affecting their ability to be successful & their relationships with peers.




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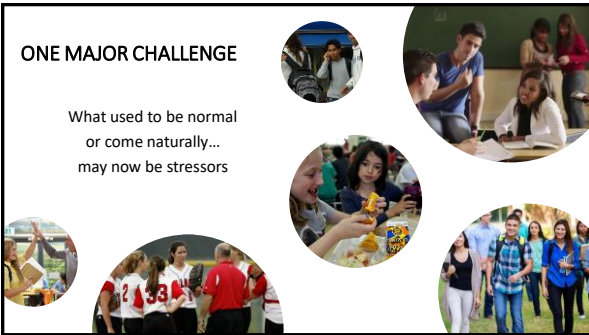
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### ONE MAJOR CHALLENGE

What used to be normal or come naturally... may now be stressors




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### Social Challenges




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Supporting Your Child During In Person Learning

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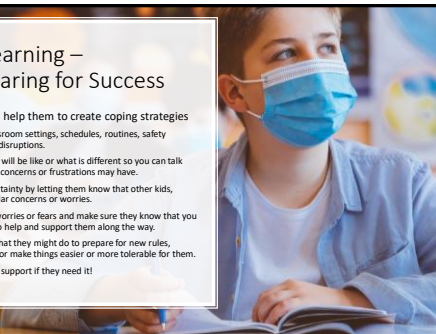
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**In Person Learning – Preparing for Success**

**Prepare their mind** and help them to create coping strategies

- Talk about changes to classroom settings, schedules, routines, safety protocols as well as, likely disruptions.
- Ask what they think things will be like or what is different so you can talk through any specific fears, concerns or frustrations they may have.
- Help normalize their uncertainty by letting them know that other kids, families and you have similar concerns or worries.
- Try not to minimize their worries or fears and make sure they know that you and the school are there to help and support them along the way.
- Help kids problem solve what they might do to prepare for new rules, routines or other changes or make things easier or more tolerable for them.
- Encourage them to ask for support if they need it!

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**In Person Learning – Prepare for School Safety Protocols**

**Practice** to help adjust to new school safety, protocols, rules or routines

- Practice new procedures such as:
  - Wearing a mask
  - Staying 6 feet apart
  - Washing hands
  - Safely share materials and space
- Plan specific ways to still stay close and play with friends while keeping social distance.

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### Strategies kids can use to feel safe and supported at school

- Let someone know if you are struggling with your new routines or learning.
  - Be aware of the things that make you feel stressed or out of control and the things that help you.
  - List strategies you can use when you feel stressed, anxious, overwhelmed or depressed.
  - Identify adults and friends you trust at school who can help and support you when you need it.
  - Make a plan for how you will handle the things or situations you are worried about or that are challenging for you. For example if you are having trouble with classwork or managing your anxiety about covid or safety protocols how might you talk to your teacher or someone else at school about it.
  - Talk to your family about how you are feeling.
- Other tools or strategies your kids have found helpful?




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Remember  
Feeling Safe and Secure  
is the #1 Key to Learning!

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### Special Issues- School Refusal

- Some children and youth may be so anxious about returning to school that they refuse to go.
- This is especially common in kids with anxiety and depression and kids with other learning or social challenges.
- School refusal can occur in any learning environment including in-person and virtual.
- Kids resist or refuse school in different and creative ways.
- Childmind.org has a great resource with tips & strategies for managing school refusal based on what you are experiencing with your child.

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### Virtual Learning At Home




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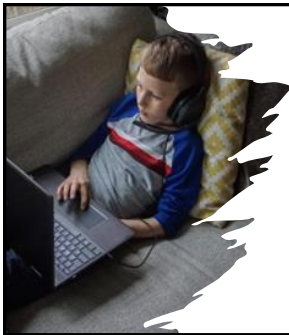
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#### Successful Virtual Learning Requires

Self Motivation and Control, Focus, Organization, Persistence, and other **'executive functioning'** skills, including the ability to stay on task, manage frustration and multi-task...

Many of which are the very skills that lots of kids with ADHD or mental health challenges struggle with..

Making virtual learning stressful and even overwhelming for youth who already have difficulty managing boredom or frustration or in environments that may increase distraction and procrastination...

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### Virtual Learning Challenges

- Lack of face-to-face connections and social connectivity
- Reduced classroom structure
- Added distractions from being at home
- Being responsible to self organize or know what is expected
- Managing multiple teachers or online learning platforms
- Technology creates extra headaches and extra steps
- Larger assignments or projects with multiple pieces
- Lack of hands-on learning or other learning modes
- Difficulty shifting out of socializing virtually during school

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### Virtual Learning - Tips to Help Your Child be Successful

- Prepare for the things you can - Set them up for success - space, materials.
- Create routines and post schedules for each day, create checklists.
- Master the tech – Practice it- List it - Troubleshoot problems from last year.
- Keep it interesting while keeping them interested \*\*Mix in movement breaks.
- Try to create clear separations between school/learning/work time and family or play time and develop transition rituals or activities if you can.
- Try accessing directions for classroom tasks/assignments in multiple ways.
- Utilize available resources - Communicate w/ teachers – Access other supports..
- Ask for help if you need it!
- Create strategies to help kids feel less isolated and more connected.
- Plan specific ways to interact and stay close with friends, teachers, and classmates.
- Other suggestions? Things you have found useful?

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### Virtual Learning At Home Tips for Families

- Cut yourself some slack! It is ok to take a break or reduce expectations a bit.
- Trust your instincts!
- Remember that you are an expert and that you know your child best. You know what your kids need to focus on most, what they have down and what they struggle with - so feel ok about focusing in on their key needs or the basics and letting the rest go when a break is needed.
- Communicate! Don't hesitate to ask teachers specific details about what to expect and how you can help your child to be successful.
- Don't fall into the 'Guilt Trap'...
- Remember to take care of your own needs too!

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### Hybrid & Mixed Learning



#### Additional Challenges

- Keeping track of what to do on what days of the week and adjusting to ever-changing routines can be especially challenging for kids with mental health challenges – especially those who rely on predictability, and daily routines.

#### What you can do to help

- Create visual schedules for each day of the week.
- Try to create some consistency in each day - even on alternating days.

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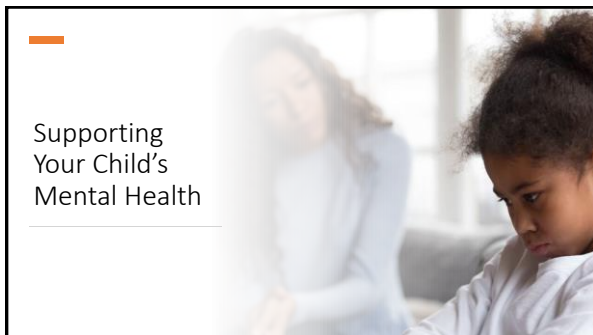
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Supporting  
Your Child's  
Mental Health

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Supporting Your Child's Mental Health in new and changing school environments

1<sup>st</sup> ~ Prepare Their Mind

Talk	Talk to your kids about how they are feeling about school and if they have concerns or are worried about any changes, new schedules, protocols or expectations.
Ask	Ask what they think things will be like or what will be different so you can talk through any fears, concerns or frustrations they may have.
Help	Help normalize their uncertainty by letting them know that other kids, families and you have similar concerns or worries.
Try	Try not to minimize their worries or fears and make sure they know that you and the school are there to help and support them along the way.

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Supporting Your Child's Mental Health

Help Them to Develop Coping Skills and Strategies

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graph TD
    A[Help] --> B[Support]
    B --> C[Model]
    C --> D[Resist]
  
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Help	Help kids problem solve what they might do to prepare for changes or challenges to make things easier for them.
Support	Support them to develop a list of coping skills or strategies to help them manage new situations that concern them or deal with feelings of anxiety.
Model	Model coping skills whenever you can. Use this opportunity to share your skills and help them to develop their own skills and strategies.
Resist	Resist the urge to jump in and try to fix everything for them. Let them know you trust that they can figure out how to manage these challenges.

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**Tips for Success for Parents**

- Check yourself, your mood and be mindful of your interactions with your kids especially if they are struggling to manage their mental health right now. It is ok to prioritize their and your mental health and wellness and focus on having a good and supportive relationship with them right now.
- Try to avoid being hyper-vigilant about everything they do or how they are acting even if you are watching very carefully...
- Try not to worry so much about your child having "fallen behind". Most all kids are in the same boat and most experts agree that what is most important in the overall development of most kids right now is rebuilding connections, community, and most importantly social and emotional foundations.
- Even if your child is currently struggling... There are things you can do to support your child's mental health and academic needs. Parents can be ready to advocate for extra support and structure if they notice their child is struggling and at the same time reinforce the importance of positive mental health and resilience – taking time to celebrate the fact that we have made it through a very challenging time together!
- Trust your instincts!
- Reach out for help and support if they or you need it.

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**Tips for Success - Families**



- Remember that you are not alone!  
Things are still really challenging and everyone is feeling it...
- Stay connected
- Take care of yourself as well as your kids
- Practice self care, mindfulness, and gratitude
- And most importantly **have hope!**  
You can do this ~ And this too shall pass....

Keep in mind that as a parent of a child with mental health challenges this is not your first rodeo ☺ You have experienced unexpected change, uncertainty and weathered turbulent times before. Rely on and draw from that experience and build upon the things that have helped you and your family in the past.

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**Don't forget to support your own mental health.**  
It is equally important!

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## Resource Links

- [ACMH Back to School 2021 Resource Page](#)
- [Mental Health America Back to School Toolkit](#)
- [Mental Health Ontario School Mental Health Backpack](#)
- [Jack.org Covid 19 Mental Health Resource Hub](#)
- [Understood.org Back to School Anxiety in Kids What to Look Out For](#)
- [MHA Know the Signs: Recognizing Mental Health Concerns in Kids and Teens](#)
- [MDHHS Map of Local Community Mental Health Services](#)
- [MDHHS Covid 19 Mental Health Resources](#)

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## Questions? Or Need Additional Assistance



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**Stay Connected**

[www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org](http://www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org)  
[info@michiganallianceforfamilies.org](mailto:info@michiganallianceforfamilies.org)  
**1-800-552-4821**

 @MichiganAllianceForFamilies  
 @mialliance  
 /MichiganAlliance





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**Disclaimer and Compliance**



*The information expressed during this presentation is the opinion of the individual presenter(s) and may not reflect the opinions of Michigan Alliance for Families, Michigan Alliance - PTL, Michigan Department of Education, or U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs.*

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 Michigan Department of Education, Harsh Building,  
 608 West Allegan, P.O. Box 30008, Lansing, MI 48909


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## Michigan Alliance for Families

Michigan Alliance for Families is an IDEA Grant Funded Initiative of the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education, and Michigan's federal Parent-Training and Information Center (PTIC) funded by U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

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