



Heading Back to School – Finding Emotional Safety in Times of Stress

Written by Hannah Beach (September 3, 2021)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/back-to-school-emotional-safety-stress/>

Backpacks are filled. New runners are bought. And lunch kits are once again on the counter. There is always a familiar feeling in the air as children head back to school. Nerves. Dread. Hope. Excitement. Worry. Who will my teacher be? Will I be in the same class as my friends? Will I HAVE friends? Will I get into the classes I hoped for? Will my teacher like me? Will I find my way around?

And yet, once again this year, emotions will be amplified. Not only will children and youth be experiencing the normal nerves that are common in the first few weeks of school, but for many, this will also be layered with a heightened sense of emotion as they deal with the repercussions of the pandemic:

Many children are grieving. It's possible that they may be grieving the loss of a loved one and holding that pain inside of themselves. At the same time, many other losses may exist that might not be as obvious; these, too, involve grief at some level. The pandemic has meant a lot of loss. The loss of a routine, the loss of being with friends and loved ones, the loss of ceremonies, the loss of school as they once knew it, the loss of hope in what the future holds. These losses are more abstract than death and our culture does not have rituals to deal with these, but this does not mean that these losses are less valid.

Many children are frustrated. It's now been a long time since the pandemic first started and everyone's patience is wearing thin. When will this be over? Will life ever go back to normal? As frustration builds, we may see more emotional eruptions that come out as aggression.

Many children are alarmed. There has been a lot of change in a short period of time. Many kids haven't been in large groups of people for a long time and are feeling anxious about returning to in-person learning. Others are worried about themselves or family members getting ill. And some are even experiencing crippling alarm and hopelessness as they face an existential crisis over what the future holds.

When our alarm system becomes activated, and stays that way for a period of time, we can become restless and agitated, constantly scanning for what we imagine might hurt us. As anxiety increases, we may hear children complaining of stomach aches, difficulty sleeping, or being paralyzed by shyness. And anxiety is also underlying many other challenging behaviours we see in kids, perhaps without us even realizing the connection.

It is not hopeless. How we support children in times of stress has a great impact on their resiliency.

This all might sound quite hopeless, but it is not. How we support children in times of stress has a great impact on their resiliency and their capacity to deal with future hardships in their lives. In fact, we have an opportunity at this time to grow a generation of very strong, resilient children. In order to do this, we need to help kids to feel safe right now. As Gabor Maté so poignantly says in the recently released movie, *The Wisdom of Trauma*, "Safety is not the absence of threat, it is the presence of connection." It is in relationships that we will find healing.

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We need to help children find healthy ways to release some of the anxiety, grief, and frustration they may be experiencing. Whether we are a parent or an educator, there are universal strategies that we can use to help children to feel safe and release what stirs inside of them.

We can help create emotional safety by:

building relationship so they can rest in the safety of our warm leadership;

creating a rhythm to their days, ensuring to build in time for daily connection; and

providing a safe space for emotional release.

Let's get practical: What might this look like?

Relationship: We are hardwired for connection, and relationship creates a sense of safety. When we feel safe, we can be who we are. Our shyness disappears. Our voice comes back. We are free to take in the world and learn. Relationship and connection are the foundation of emotional safety. Children need to know that the adults in their lives are there for them, and that they matter to them. Kids need to feel invited, accepted, and seen.

Research has shown that kids who have authoritative (not to be mistaken with authoritarian) parents and teachers, are more likely to feel comfortable expressing their feelings and opinions, be happy, and successful. When we are both caring and firm, kids experience less frustration, which means less aggression and they feel safer, which means less anxiety. Basically, kids thrive when we take the time to consciously build relationship with them – when we get to know them, listen to their ideas and opinions AND when we are able to hold the space, be firm, and take the role of our caring leadership seriously.

Rhythm: Children crave rhythm. Consistent routines, rituals, and structures help children feel safe. They can lean on these and rely on them. A sense of safety can be created when children can count on, and orient around, a routine. This will help to produce a rhythm to their days, weeks, and seasons, and can offer a sense of predictability in unpredictable times.

Release: When emotions get stirred up, they need somewhere to go. Finding healthy ways to channel this emotional energy can help kids to release some of what is inside of them.

When we can support children to have experiences in the play mode, there can be more room for messy emotions to come out. Play mode does not necessarily mean play, it refers to the manner in which one enters an experience. In play mode, there is no expected outcome, rather the point of it is the experience itself and the natural engagement that one experiences as a result.

The wonderful thing about exploring in this mode is that our brains relax, our defenses can come down and we can naturally connect with what is within us. This may be completely unconscious, and therein lies the magical beauty of it. Without feeling self-conscious, we can make room for expression simply by engaging in process-based activities that feel good to us.

Some general ideas for helping kids to release the emotion inside of them are:

- listening to music as they work
- physical movement (dancing, hiking, running, parades ...)
- stories or storytelling

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- journaling
- poetry
- drama
- art – even freestyle doodling
- singing together
- simply being outdoors
- free play!

We need this too!

While all of the above is true for our children and youth – we too must find our own ways to support our emotional health.

There is a lot of talk these days about self-care and for good reason. But many of the ways people are trying to take care of themselves involve pushing themselves to do things. There is a time and place for pushing ourselves but in a culture of performance and perfection, we need to cherish and value the role play mode has in taking care of us. We too need to make room for our feelings to move and our own emotions to come out. This is going to mean different things for different people. For some of us that might mean jogging, chopping wood, hiking, and being physical. For others it might mean taking the time to just lie on the couch and imagine things (that's me), have hot baths (also me), doodle, or splash paint around.

The point is to find an outlet that provides some kind of release for you (not pushing yourself to do what you think you are supposed to) and embed it into a practice so that it becomes part of the routine and rhythm of your days. And be gentle with yourself. We all need gentleness right now, children and adults alike.

Warmly,

Hannah Beach



Hannah Beach is an award-winning educator, author, and keynote speaker. She was recognized by the Canadian Human Rights Commission in 2017 as one of five featured change-makers in Canada. She is the co-author of *Reclaiming Our Students: Why Children Are More Anxious, Aggressive, and Shut Down Than Ever—And What We Can Do About It* (released April 2020). She delivers professional development services across the country and provides emotional health consulting to schools.

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