

Return to school. A trauma informed approach

May 15

Written By [Dr Tara Quinlivan](#)

Over the past few weeks we have seen endless debate about whether schools should reopen. Facebook has become a hive of home schooling parodies and every man and his dog has posted homeschooling effectiveness tips. We've seen everything from the 'just spend time together that's more important than school work' to the 'they'll fall behind!!!' panic poster. With schools opening again in a week the reality of school under the COVID19 cloud is about to hit. I wanted to share some thoughts on what the return to school might look like for a lot of kids.

I am writing this with full acknowledgment that I do not yet have school aged children and so I am borrowing the experiences, thoughts and feelings of my clients, friends and family. In this post I thought I would write wearing my professional hat more than my personal one. I want to write about what we may see in our children when school goes back. Especially our young primary school aged children. Before I do that I want to start with what I am seeing in all of the adults around me. From either side of the schooling fence both parents and teachers are doing more than we would have thought possible only a few weeks ago. I see parents and teachers wearing all of their hats once. Parents are trying to support their schools and children by hustling their kids to submit as much work as they can, and I see teachers doing metaphorical backflips to tailor their online classes to their student's needs/attention span/capacity. All adults are doing heroic efforts to buffer their children and students. I see a lot of anxiety about how children are coping and worry over the potential long term consequences of this academic disruption.

Unsurprisingly, I will not be focusing on children's academic development throughout this period as this isn't my area of expertise. What I want to highlight is the need to take into account the potential emotional responses our children will show upon their return to school. I want to focus on the necessary emotional scaffolding children will need to engage in any work that

we subsequently ask of them. No one is learning when they're distressed, and I think we can anticipate a lot of distress when school goes back.

For many children the return to school will be a delightful experience. It will mean reconnecting with friends and school teachers and they will race out the front door ready to get back to normal. This however won't be everyone's experience. In fact, I imagine that it won't be a lot of families experience. The return to school is likely to stir up some anxiety for our kids, ourselves and our teachers. Emerging from the sanctuary of our homes and back out into public spaces is likely to be a little confronting. This is at odds with our concurrent feelings of wanting to break free from this lockdown. At the moment I'm feeling pretty stifled being at home. In my mind I'm ready to get back into the world. A few weekends ago I took a very big adventure to the local fruit and veg shop, I even chose to do my shopping at a nearby farm to make it extra special. However, once I was there I started to feel nervous. I suddenly remembered that the world was not as safe as I wanted it to be. I was confronted by the hand sanitizer at the door, the restriction of how many people could be in the shop at any one time, I remained vigilant about keeping a respectful distance from other shoppers and staff, and I had to stand a socially uncomfortable distance from the check out. It wasn't the outing I envisioned. I left feeling sad and a little angry. Something like this might be our children's experience of returning to school. First, our children will be hit by the anticipatory anxiety of going out into a world that feels unsafe. Over the past few weeks we've had to teach them that the outside world is dangerous and that staying home is a must. Soon we will renege on that claim and force them back into the world we just told them was unsafe. It's going to a tricky transition for them. Second, once they are at school they'll discover it isn't exactly the same experience that they knew before COVID19. There will likely be many differences whether it be the initial lack of other year levels, or the additional safety procedures the school is implementing. This lack of congruity is likely to be uncomfortable. For children the 'not quite the sameness' and anticipatory anxiety will only be compounded by their innate desire to be near their caregivers and places of security when they feel distressed. Some things you might start to see in the coming weeks include:

For parents;

- Reluctance or refusal to go to school
- Increased clingyness in the morning
- Increased tearfulness
- Poor sleep on nights before school
- Temper tantrums on school mornings
- Feeling sick- especially stomach aches, headaches and any other ache related to muscle tension (sore legs, jaws etc)
- For teachers
- Kids being reluctant to leave their parents
- Poor concentration and memory
- Hyperactive behaviours or withdrawn behaviours
- Increased clingyness with teachers
- Oppositional behaviours and refusal to do work
- Behaviours more suited to an earlier age
- Distractibility

We might be tempted to see these behaviours as signs of being naughty, attention seeking or just wanting to stay home because it's easier than school. However, lessons from research into trauma and anxiety indicate that these behaviours have a far more primal and adaptive base. There's heaps of great neuroscience behind all of this, but I'm going to explain it at its most practical level. We've told our kids that the outside world is dangerous. We've told them this with every conceivable messaging tool we have. We've literally told them, then we've modelled it (by staying home etc) then we've subtly taught them again via our own anxiety. Right now the most sensible thing their little bodies can do is react to the invisible danger. The lower parts of their brain in charge of bodily protection have swamped the parts of their brain in charge of clear thinking, reasoning and emotion control. So they're on high alert. Their bodies are ready to respond to a threat and they will attempt to avoid or attenuate that threat in any way they can. This might mean that they become hyper vigilant of their environment, paying attention to every small noise in and outside of the class room. This is an evolutionarily adaptive response to threat as it protects them from anything that might jump out at them. However, it also makes them easily distracted and unfocused. Similarly, having your

emotional engine revving makes you quicker to react to threat. You can pounce like a coiled spring if your muscles stay tight, your body focuses its energy on your circulatory system so you have heaps of lovely fresh blood and oxygen pumping through your body, and the parts of your brain that unleash anger are in the driver's seat. However this also makes your body hurt and feel sick, it's exhausting and you're constantly a little grumpy. Most kids will be functioning this way a little bit, and many kids will be in this mode a lot.

You know who else will be in this mode? Us. We're likely to send our children back, or receive our students, with a fair amount of trepidation. Add to that the external pressures of departmental requirements and parental work changes and our stress centres will be singing. Plus, schools are likely to get thrown back into face to face learning with the same sort of lead time they got when they got thrown into online learning. Schools are likely to be trying to pull themselves back together while dealing with new safety measures, department of education requirements and all their own personal stuff. It's going to be hectic.

So what's my grand solution? The truth is there is no one great solution. I will attach a list of strategies at the end and you can feel free to choose any if they suit you. But, the main thing I want you to take away from this piece is curiosity, knowledge and understanding. Question the behaviours you see in the children around you and question your response. Approach problematic behaviours with good faith. Predict and assume that you are facing a frightened child rather than a disobedient one. We have far more sympathy for our children's behaviours when they're sick than when they're well. We can tolerate and nurture more whining and clinging when given a medical context. Right now all of our souls feel a little sick. Take that empathy and patience and reframe children's behaviours in your own mind. You'll be amazed how powerful the presence of a sympathetic, contained and curious adult can be on the most violent of children's behaviours.

Secondly, observe your own responses. We've all had those days when we feel like the whole world is just being a jerk. However, when we break it down it's far more likely that, as the common denominator, there's something about us

that's making us think everyone's a jerk. Pay attention to days when you're feeling more vulnerable, reactive and in sensory overload (ie days when noises and touch annoy you more than usual). Acknowledge and notice any anger as it starts to build and be aware that you might be less patient and more reactive than you'd like to be. Awareness is key to implementing any change or strategy. When you approach aggressive or regressive behaviours from a perspective of understanding and empathy you help the person (whether it be a child or yourself) understand and let go of the emotional energy that's driving them. As people we will persist in our behaviours until we are effectively heard by the people around us. Expecting ourselves, or the children we serve, to get back to normal without acknowledging the omnipresent weirdness we are currently living is unrealistic. Returning to school will be hard on multiple levels (and joyful on others) so expect anxiety to rear its head in some weird and wonderful ways. Stay curious and stay empathetic.

Some strategies to try

For parents:

Basically you want to gradually expose your kids to all things school related.

You can try;

- Start your normal morning routine a week before school starts
- Start using language such as "when you go to school" rather than "if you go to school"
- Use visual aids such as calendars to count down to school starting.
- If you know what safety procedures your school will be implementing discuss them a few times before school starts (ie you'll still be doing lots of hand washing, your teacher will still be using the hand sanitiser, Mrs X won't be back at school till the virus has gone down a bit more). Be especially mindful around any "kiss and go" arrangements as children may react strongly if they were expecting you to walk them to their door.
- We can also start to prime our children emotionally
- give emotions names. These can be names such as "sad", "angry" or "worried". But they can also be descriptive words such as "shakey", "fuzzy", "spiny", "gurgley", "heavy". To describe my trip to the shops I might say; "I was so excited to go, but then when I got there I felt

surprised and disappointed because it wasn't the same. I felt a bit fuzzy the whole time, a bit wibbly wobbly and I was happy to come home. But it was also really fun to drive somewhere new and see the autumn trees, that bit felt warm and nice"

- Check in with kids before school starts. Ask them what they're looking forward to, what they think might be different, what they're expecting. Validate any fears and correct any misconceptions.
- Problem solve with kids- if something is a particular worry, work with kids to help come up with a few solutions. Include kids in this problem solving.
- Use your own feelings as a model. A conversation with my son went like this;
 - Me: "we might start kinder again soon, how do you feel about that"
 - Will: "I might feel a bit nervous"
 - Me: "I'm starting to go back to work again soon and I'm feeling a bit nervous about seeing people again"
 - Will: "Like you're a bit nervous that they might have the cold, and you don't know, and then you'll get it"
 - Me: "Yep, exactly like that. But I've been thinking...I've thought of some stuff I can do that'll make me safe"
 - We then talked about various safety things like hand washing and social distancing. He could connect them to things he does at kinder and he left the conversation feeling less anxious.
- Stay calm ourselves. This point will likely be the most difficult. Stay calm ourselves. To do this in a genuine way we need to focus on ourselves as parents. Think about what you're going to need to help support your child back to school. All this stuff takes both emotional energy and time. Think about your own resources and what you can give. If you can, build in buffers to help yourself. Recruit helpers where you can, lighten your load for a week or two in other areas of your life. Plan your own respite, even if its just sympathetic friends who can listen to you, or training your own internal voice to be compassionate to yourself.
- Communicate with your school

Normally I would say to parents that in cases of school reluctance you should plan and coordinate with your school. Perhaps for you this will be possible, but its also likely that our teachers will be managing the emotional load of many children. Speak to your teacher if you can but remember that they're going through a pandemic too and their work world has been totally flipped around. The school might be struggling to get itself back together and might not be able to respond in a way that you would like. Take the return to school slowly. It will be an exploratory process where you, your child and likely their school all figures out what's happening together.