

# Help Preschoolers Adapt, Post-Covid

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## Today

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What can parents and caregivers do to help children navigate new, post-pandemic transitions? In part one of a four-part series, today's Daily Dose shares advice from a variety of experts in psychology, education and special needs on getting children back on track. We unveil strategies to help the youngest learners adapt to a world in which life is returning to pre-pandemic routines even as they may lack skills and experiences from that world.

– with reporting by *Fiona Tapp from Ottawa, Canada* 

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## Big challenges for small people

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**1** |

Virtual learning didn't cut it

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When children began returning to school after COVID-19 lockdowns, many teachers observed unusual behaviour, as Keli Kane, a reading specialist and educator of 19 years, describes. “What we were seeing was crying, laying on the ground, and fear of separation from their parents at the door. It was tough. They couldn’t even walk in a line.”

Dr. Sharon Witkin, a psychologist with over 30 years of experience in the assessment and therapy of children, families and adults and the Chief Clinical Officer at [Polygon](#), which offers support for those with learning differences, says the coronavirus made it even harder than usual for children to master the rite of passage of saying goodbye.

“Our culture really expects children by five to be making a pretty substantial separation from their parents,” she says. Prolonged lockdowns, school closures and more one-on-one time than usual with a parent or caregiver interrupted this cultural norm. “Kids just didn’t have the practice of separating, especially the three- and four-year-olds, that we would expect them to have before starting kindergarten, and for many that made the transition to school more difficult.” This has made readjustment all the more difficult.

Meanwhile, very young children, who have yet to experience a traditional in-person group setting, may have struggled to create bonds with teachers and other kids through virtual learning, says [Sally Macaluso](#), a special education preschool teacher with a decade of experience in the U.S. public school system. She says that despite teachers’ best efforts, small children really need a traditional school experience.

“Virtual learning options did not allow children to engage in the same types of play and social interactions that in-person classrooms typically provide, like taking turns, sharing, negotiating, speaking nicely to each other and learning to follow rules. Therefore, missing out on in-person interactive play could impact how a child learns to appropriately engage with their peers and teachers.”

Kane says that many of the skills little kids usually gain in a preschool setting have to be explicitly retaught in school, as the isolation and indoor confinement of lockdown limited kids’ opportunities not only for ordinary social interaction but also for natural observation and problem-solving.

## 2 |

### Some children are affected more than others

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While all children have been affected by lockdowns and by health and safety policies such as mask wearing, the damage to those with exceptionalities has been even more severe. “As a special education teacher, I know that the pandemic impacted the special education and referral process throughout the country, which delayed some children from receiving critical early-intervention services for developmental delays and/or disabilities. These delays in interventions could impact the child’s trajectory to attaining new skills,” says Macaluso.

Dr. Witkin agrees. “Families that have a child with some sort of disability or special needs have been more heavily impacted than families whose kids are flexible, adaptable and high resource. We’ve seen a lot more of the burden fall on our most vulnerable, which is typical of any societal event.”

So what’s a parent to do?

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**What parents and  
other caregivers can do**

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## 1 |

### Planned play

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To help navigate the many changes and upheavals kids have experienced, parents and caregivers should pay extra attention to establishing reliable daily routines that provide structure for small children, including plenty of time for independent and collaborative play, says Macaluso.

“Play in all of its forms — creative, constructive, dramatic and motor — is critical for a child’s overall development. Children learn academic, cognitive, social-emotional and physical skills through play. If possible, set up playdates or go to places where your child can engage with other children, like the zoo, park or library.”

With a routine that comprises an array of experiences, children can build skills that the pandemic made it so difficult for them to acquire.

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## 2 |

### Use summer play to prepare for school

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Kane says that parents can help their very young children practice some key skills before school starts up again. “There are two things you need as a kindergartener: you need to know how to count and you have to know your letters and your sounds and how to write them; that’s the beginning of the alphabetical principle.” She encourages parents to help children practice both phonological and alphabetic skills by identifying sounds and letters and to ask children lots of questions about the stories they enjoy, to encourage reading comprehension skills.

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## 3 |

### Ask them to help you

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Adults should allow children opportunities to assist with chores and tasks around the home, says Macaluso. This helps them develop important skills and a sense of independence. And while young children may not initially be all that helpful to your chores, by starting them at a young age, it becomes far more likely that they will take on a vital role in your household community as they grow and develop.

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## 4 |

### Name and talk about feelings

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Macaluso says that kids may have missed out on opportunities to learn about their emotional inner world and how to handle big feelings. “Learning to label their emotions is one of the first and most important steps in developing a child’s social-emotional intelligence. It is important to let children know that it is OK to feel all different types of emotions and that our feelings can change from moment to moment. Parents and caregivers should help children to identify and name feelings, normalize them, as well as teach healthy ways to manage their emotions and self-regulate.”

## Creative parenting

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### 1 | Teach by doing: Manage your anxiety

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As children easily pick up on their parents' feelings, understanding your own anxiety is key in helping your kids feel calm and learn how to manage their feelings. "Whether you say anything or not, most kids can sense when a parent is highly anxious and so it's your job as a parent to look at your own feelings and take care of yourself in ways that help you manage your anxiety," says Dr. Witkin.

Macaluso agrees, noting that, "Adults should model the behaviors they'd like to see in their children." In other words, taking good care of yourself may be the best thing you can do for your kid.

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## 2 |

Use these tips for greater at-school comfort

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Dr. Witkin says that, if the school agrees, you might consider planning to speak with your child part-way through their day, to allay their fears about saying goodbye and your own anxieties as well.

If permitted by the school, your child can also select a stuffy friend or other object to take with them to class. "A transitional object can work well. It really does help if a kid can take their teddy bear to school," Dr. Witkin says.

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## Community Corner

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**What parenting strategies have you learned that you'd recommend to others?**

**Share your thoughts with us at [OzyCommunity@Ozy.com](mailto:OzyCommunity@Ozy.com).**

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