

Hello, my name is Dr Linda

Dakwa, a psychologist and owner of New Hope Mental Health.

I'm also the mother of two college students.

It's my privilege to share a few words on children's

mental health as they head back to school.

There is much that can be said about the mental health for our children

regarding this pandemic.

Research continues in the short term and long term effects

of various aspects of this pandemic on mental health.

I'd like to share just one aspect of how you as parents

can help your child's mental health as they return to school.

Returning to school can be fun and exciting for children,

but for some, it could be a very anxious time.

It's usual and normal for children to be nervous about returning to school

after the summer. Kindergartners leave their parents for the first time.

Middle schoolers worry about finding friends and fitting in, and

high schoolers contemplate their future and still strive to fill belonged.

But how about returning to school after a year and a half of the pandemic,

having had to social distance, learn virtually

and live in a culture where constant messages of fear and caution.

They may feel more than the usual jitters of starting school.

Children may feel anxious, fearful, and apprehensive.

Some of you may have children who struggle last year  
academically, emotionally, and/or socially.

Children facing transitional life stages need support and guidance.

They do not intuitively know how to manage their emotions,

Process their thoughts, and problem solve.

They need adult help with mature perspectives to help them

understand fundamental life concepts and learn relational and coping skills.

Living in these unpredictable and changing times,

children even more need adult help.

As parents and caregivers, you can provide stability and security

for your children, both important for a healthy mental health,

especially when returning to school during these changing and confusing times.

In this video, I will share four ways you can cultivate the stability  
and security for your children.

First, be intentional to understand and know your children.

We all like to be understood, and children are no different.

Some ways you can learn about your children is to first,

spend intentional time with them by engaging in their lives.

Routinely ask your children about their day in school.

Learn the best times of the day when they tend to talk more.

For some children, it's in the car

ride back from school or at night when they're getting ready for bed.

For some, special scheduled dates are when your children share the most.

When my children were young, I had a personal policy

to never be on my cell phone, while with my children in the car,

I use that time to talk to them, or we sang songs together.

Car time was always the time to connect.

Engage in their schooling by checking on homework,

exams, and projects and making sure you have contact with their teachers.

Most of their day is spent at school,

so to know your children is to know how they're doing in school.

Routinely check their folders for homework, completed work and notes

from teachers.

If your child is in middle school or high school, talk to them about their classes.

Ask about what they're learning and how they like it.

They may need your help to study or organize their work,

encourage relationships and learn about their friends.

You will learn so much about your child

by observing how they interact with friends.

We are designed to be connected to one another and experience

a sense of belonging.

Social psychologist found that belongingness is important for well-being and reduction of mental health concerns. Through socialization, children learn about themselves in their world.

You as parents or main caregivers are the most important relationship for children to learn confidence, self-worth, and love. As children grow older,

other relationships become important, such as friends and teachers.

Initiate play dates for your children to get together with their friends.

If you're comfortable, open up your home for playdates or study groups.

These are just some ways you can know your children well.

Second way to bring stability security to your children

is to establish predictable routines and structure to their lives.

We all know that life has not been normal.

Many of us adults struggle with these changes and loss.

Imagine children who are less skilled and mature

trying to cope with these challenges.

Keep a routine to their daily tasks from getting ready in the morning,

packing lunches, doing chores and homework after school,

as well as getting ready for bed. Routines are best

followed when there's organization, so you may need

to take some time to organize your home so that your routines are easily followed.

Family traditions are a wonderful way to bring predictability to your home.

Whether it's pizza and a movie night on Fridays,  
going to a sibling's baseball game or praying as a family.

Thirdly, help children understand that change is normal and important.

Teaching children flexibility is an important life skill.

We continue to live with unpredictability uncertainty,

but it doesn't have to be that way in your own home.

Children can learn a new normal and not associate change  
as something unstable and scary.

You may be struggling with change, so it's important  
you practice self-care and find support for yourself.

If parents are managing change well,  
then children can learn to manage change well.

Lastly, to build stability and security for your children is to help  
manage their emotions and process their thoughts.

Children vary in their depth of emotions and insights.

They can struggle to express their feelings and get confused,  
not knowing how to manage them.

A young child may tantrum to express he's tired. Or middle schooler  
talk back or yell when they are afraid or sad.

High schoolers may withdraw and isolate when they're upset.

Learn their cues so you can have meaningful

conversations to help them through their feelings and thoughts.

Keep connected with your child daily and listen well.

Help them identify, express and process their feelings.

They need your mature perspective, as well

as learn your values and principles.

If you notice your child isolating and withdrawing,

respond quickly with support and care

if they continue to withdraw and you observe situations

that are beyond your ability to understand or help, seek professional help.

Don't feel like you're alone. There is help.

You merely viewing this video says something

about what you value as a parent and caregiver.

You want to be a better parent and help your children have a healthy well-being.

Your love and support are paramount to your children's mental health.

This video doesn't address all relevant mental health issues of children returning to school,

but I hope these are helpful suggestions to promote stability security

for your children as they start school.

I wish you and your loved ones well.

Thank you for listening.