

DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
OFFICE FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

*SOME THOUGHTS ON SENDING YOUR CHILD BACK TO SCHOOL:
BACKPACKS AND COVID-19:*

This year is particularly challenging as parents prepare to send children 'back to school.' In previous years, September was heralded as a time of beginnings marked by new school supplies, new sneakers, haircuts, new clothes or uniforms; all in anticipation of that 'First Day of School.' This year will be different. Backpacks brimming with new pencils, notebooks and folders will also contain extra hand sanitizers, masks, tissues. As parents send children to school, there may be an extra 'heart tug' of anxiety and concern fueled by questions related to the pandemic-'will my child be safe, protected against the virus?' So much is, and has been, out of our control these last months. We have been upended by the virus, so many aspects of our lives have been disrupted. There are no easy answers, no quick fixes, so we rely on 'best practices' as defined by the professionals to keep our children and ourselves safe and healthy.

Some suggestions to make the transition to school easier for you and to empower your child in the process.

1. As the adults we set the emotional tone for our children. Children take their cues from us. If we appear overly anxious, worried, concerned these feelings may be imparted to our children. The last thing we want to do is create more anxiety for our children as they return to school. **Remember**, six months ago children were sitting next to friends in classrooms; eating lunch in the cafeteria while seated with peers; playing on playgrounds. Suddenly, abruptly, school doors were locked, hallways silent, classrooms empty, playgrounds abandoned. Shelter in place became the new norm. Some children will navigate the return to school with ease, relieved to once again be with friends, back to a routine; returning to school seemingly without a care. For others, the disruption of six months ago may be expressed as undercurrent of worry and fear surfacing in statements as: "I'm scared that.....," or 'What if....,' 'How will I know that...' Still other children, particularly those who have experienced loss due to the pandemic, may exhibit behaviors of separation anxiety: clinging to you, crying, even becoming physically ill. As caring adults, emotionally present to our children

we listen, support, reassure. We provide the 'emotional holding place' for our child's fears, worries and concerns, and in so doing we allow them to walk through the school doors hopefully more carefree.

2. Routine provides a sense of security and safety-particularly for younger children. This year establish a 'Home From School Routine.' Do you want your child to use hand sanitizer as they come in the door? Remove shoes? Change clothes? Take a shower or bath to 'wash away the day?' What about the backpack? Where will your child place it? Outside the door? Be clear about at the start of the school year and empower your child to be in control of this routine.
3. What will help your child feel confident beginning the school year? Will it be that extra face mask in the backpack? Or a picture of someone special tucked into a pocket of their backpack. Maybe it will be a note from you. Ask your child what may help them feel less worried, scared. Adults carry rosaries and say prayers - what would help your child?
4. Think about problem-solving before the problem occurs. Worry and fear are the breeding ground for monsters to become nightmares. By discussing the what-ifs and developing contingency plans your child will know what to expect. You reduce fear by replacing the unknown with age-appropriate knowledge. Be prepared to answer the question: "What if I don't feel good in school..." with calm reassurance.
5. There was a time when wearing masks was fun.-it was Halloween. Today the narrative is "Heroes wear masks!" Encourage your child to be the hero/heroine by wearing their mask. Include a 'full face selfie" of your child without a mask. This may reduce the impulse to take off the mask to show others 'what they look like."

Finally, support the professionals in our schools. Educators, nurses, guidance counselors, social workers, all dedicated to serving your child and family in providing a positive academic experience. Remember, they will be the first line responders who are a member of your team. The staff of secretaries, cleaners and maintenance people, they too experience the same concerns and anxieties, thank them for their service and dedication. And don't forget the crossing guards

and bus drivers. Many valuable lessons amidst this pandemic-perhaps the most important...we are all in this together. And together we can all make a difference. Blessings and good luck!