**Expect heightened anxiety, behavioral issues in returning students**

By: [Cara Nissman](https://districtadministration.com/author/cara-nissman/) | July 6, 2020

Students with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to experiencing anxiety, regardless of whether they exhibited such signs before the COVID-19 outbreak. Here are 6 tips to help these students find success back at school.

After spending months with just their families during the pandemic, students with disabilities may show signs of anxiety as they return to school regardless of whether they exhibited such signs before the COVID-19 outbreak.

“We need to be very thoughtful and prepared because anxiety will be up,” says Jessica Minahan, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and consultant based in Massachusetts. “Routines will be different and fears around germs and sickness may be more common. Many students may experience a sense of trauma. It’ll be more important than ever to be anxiety-informed and trauma-informed in our interventions with kids.”

Follow these tips to ensure students’ smooth return to school despite anxiety related to COVID-19:

* **Review the curriculum.** Encourage colleagues to review their curriculum before assigning reading and other work. For example, if a character in a book becomes seriously ill or dies, you may want to wait until later to assign that one. “You may want to reshuffle the timing of it or be very thoughtful how you introduce it,”Minahan says. “If two-thirds of the students in your class are from an apartment complex that was heavily hit by COVID-19, that should influence your decision to use that text.”
* **Validate, reframe student feelings.** If a student begins to panic in the classroom about herself or someone else getting sick, use or encourage your colleague to use the tone and volume you would use to tell a bedtime story, validate the student’s feelings by saying something such as, “I’m sorry you’re worried about your health,” and then express that she is safe, Minahan says.
* **Reframe the student’s thinking to focus on what she has control over, such as washing her hands, taking her vitamins, and standing six feet away from others.** The student might keep a journal so she can feel some control over documenting the situation. Pointing out to the student how many helpers exist in the world and encouraging her to research someone doing good for society may be helpful, she says. Also suggest the student watch positive coverage of inspiring people rather than focus nonstop on negative news.
* **Rethink breaks.** Asking a student to take a walk or engage in drawing to calm down if he is feeling anxious may allow the student’s negative thoughts to fester rather than help him calm down, Minahan says. “We assume the student needs to move, but now they’re alone with their thoughts. The brain is like a remote control. You have to change the channel to calm down.” Instead, a teacher may want to ask the student to engage in brain teasers such as sudoku, trivia, Mad Libs, and other exercises when he is feeling anxious, Minahan suggests. Or ask the student to listen to an audiobook for two minutes or think of the second verse of his favorite song. “Doing that is incompatible with worrying,” she says.
* **Prevent misunderstandings because of face coverings.** Students may show heightened anxiety because of everyone wearing masks. They may not be able to understand others’ intentions well because they can’t read their facial expressions or body language. Avoid using sarcasm or spell out when something is funny to help students navigate interactions.
* **Offer predictable positive attention.** Don’t wait for an anxious student who wants attention—or, more accurately, connection—to start to exhibit attention-seeking behavior, such as banging her knee on her desk, Minahan says. Preempt the behavior by positively greeting the student at the beginning of class and saying something like, “I can’t wait to see what you think of this assignment.” Then tell the student you’re going to check on her in five minutes and set a timer. When time is up, ask the student a question, then say you’re going to check on her again in 15 minutes and set the timer. “The student won’t act out all the time because they know you’re coming,” she says. “It’s important for teachers to always think about attention-seeking behavior as attachment-seeking or connection-seeking behavior.”

*Cara Nissman covers autism, school psychology, and IEP team issues for*[*Special Ed Connection*](http://www.specialedconnection.com/)*, a DA sister publication.*