

## Welcome Back to School: Nurturing Faith, Well-Being, and Mental Health

As we begin a new school year, the YCDSB Mental Health team extends a warm and heartfelt welcome to all our returning and new families!

The transition back to school is a time of dynamic growth and transformation. It is completely natural for both students and caregivers to experience a mix of emotions—excitement, anticipation, and sometimes a little stress or anxiety. Whether your child is starting Kindergarten, transitioning to high school, or returning for another year, supporting their mental, physical, and spiritual well-being helps ensure a fulfilling year anchored in hope and community.

In partnership with School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO-SMSO), we offer these evidence-informed strategies to help your family navigate a mentally healthy return to school.

### 1. Re-establish Predictable Routines

Predictability creates a sense of safety and lowers stress levels for children and youth.

- Adjust sleep and mealtimes: Gradually shift back toward school-year sleep schedules and consistent mealtimes prior to the first week of school.
- Practice the journey: Walk or drive the school route, review school layouts together, or arrange a casual meetup with classmates to build comfort.
- Anchor routines in prayer: Consider starting the morning with a brief blessing or wrapping up the day with a simple family prayer of gratitude. Remind your child that God walks with them in every step of their journey.

### 2. Listen, Validate, and Open the Conversation

Giving children space to talk about their feelings helps build trust and lets them know they are heard.

- Listen without judgment: Normalize their fears by reassuring them that feeling nervous about change is completely okay, and remind them that caring adults will be at school to help.
- Try these conversation starters:
  - *"How are you feeling about this upcoming school year?"*
  - *"What is one thing you're feeling excited about?"*
  - *"Is there anything you're feeling a bit worried about?"*
  - *"How can I help you feel more comfortable about school?"*

### 3. Practice Calmness & Coping Strategies Together

Co-regulation is powerful—when you practice calm techniques together, your child learns how to regulate their own nervous system.

- Breathing & Grounding: Explore quick relaxation techniques together, such as taking slow, deep breaths or practicing grounding exercises. Reassure your child that they can use these same techniques if they feel overwhelmed at school.
- Focus on the positives: Create a list together of things they are looking forward to, such as reconnecting with friends, joining a club, or participating in a favorite class.

#### 4. Remember Caregiver Self-Care Matters

Taking care of your own mental health is essential for effective parenting—by supporting yourself, you support your child.

- Take time for the basics: Prioritize your sleep, get daily fresh air, and engage in quiet reflection or mindfulness.
- Reach out for support: Connect with family, friends, or community networks when you need extra encouragement.

#### Working Together with Your School:

If your child is experiencing persistent school-related anxiety or struggling to adjust, please know you are not alone.

- Connect with us: Reach out to your child's classroom teacher, school principal, or a guidance counselor. School staff can partner with you to modify expectations, build supportive transition plans, or connect your family with specialized board supports.
- Advocating for your child: If your child's anxiety stems from experiences with bullying, racism, discrimination, or harassment, reach out to your school principal immediately so we can work together to ensure a safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environment.
- The Mental Health Team is available through referral from your school principal to consult and determine if further support is needed.

We are committed to partnering with you to nurture a safe, caring, and inclusive school community where every student can thrive.

*Wishing you and your family a healthy, inspiring, and connected school year!*