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# The Bellringer



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## Letter from the Executive Director

Mental Health America in Montgomery (MHAM) is the local affiliate of Mental Health America. This newsletter is a revival of our previous publication called the Bellringer. This first edition is focused on getting our children back to school with positive mental health.

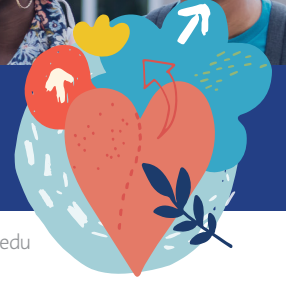
We are concerned with all aspects of mental health. As a private, non-profit agency first founded in 1951, we educate, advocate, and serve the community. The work of MHAM is driven by a commitment to provide mental health as a critical part of overall wellness, including prevention services for all, early identification, intervention for those at risk, and integrated care, services, and supports for those who need them, with recovery as a goal.

Some of our recent activities include a Tennis Tournament, exhibiting at a Biscuits Baseball Game and several health and wellness events, facilitating Mental Health First Aid Courses, and creating a Mental Health Handbook. With your help we can continue to promote mental health wellness in our community. Please consider joining the association by visiting [mha-montgomery.org/become-a-member](https://mha-montgomery.org/become-a-member).

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# Tips for Transitioning Back to School



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It seems as though summer break just started and yet a new school year is right around the corner. What can we do as parents and caregivers to help our children transition back into the routine of a new school year? How can we help ease anticipatory anxiety for an anxious child? What can we do to strengthen the mental health of our adolescents dealing with increased academic pressure and social stress? Here are some helpful tips for making the transition back to school as seamless as possible.

## For All School Age Children

**Reestablish a good sleep routine now!** Don't wait until the night before school resumes to try and get to bed on time. It won't work! Sleep is habitual. If your child's sleep routine has transitioned to something closer to being nocturnal, start easing back their bedtime by 15-30 minutes each night starting today! Remember most children need somewhere between 8 and 11 hours of sleep at night. Especially teenagers.

**Set the alarm clock early.** This will help them fall asleep more quickly and make those early morning school wake ups a little easier. Do not wait until the first day of school to try and get up early!

**Set a predictable routine for school days.** Have a set place for backpacks, homework completion, lunch boxes, snacks, water bottles, spare pencils, and shoes. Practice getting out the door in the mornings! Each night, have a routine for making sure things are ready to go first thing.

**Discuss time and transportation expectations with your child.** For example, "Set your alarm for 6:00. Shower, brush your teeth, and get dressed. Have breakfast and your shoes on and be ready for the bus by 6:45." Plan when baths or showers will take place. Give your child as much autonomy as reasonable for their age and developmental level. Stick to your preset bedtime.

**Ensure meals, snacks, and down-time are part of your child's daily routine.** It may be helpful to pause after school for a snack and a little time to unwind before jumping into homework. This is especially true for children who find school overwhelming or who are more introverted or shy.

**Try to avoid over-committing your child's after school time.** Sports and clubs are wonderful! But it is easy to forget that children need down time after school just as much, or more, than adults do! Over committing your child may result in exhaustion, emotional instability, sleep issues, and performance issues. Find a balance that allows for studies, extracurricular activities, and restful activities for your child.

**Talk with your child about age-appropriate safety issues.** Who can pick up your child? Does your family have a "code word" to ensure the person should be picking up your child?

## For The Anxious Or School Avoidant Child

**Talk about their concerns about the new year.** Reflect on any positives from the past year.

**Let them help pick school supplies** and prepare items for the new year. Let them pack or help pack their backpack so they know where things go.

**Show them the school and practice the plan** for

pick up and drop off.

**Go to meet the teacher** activities and allow them to ask questions about the teacher, classroom, and daily routine.

**Inquire about any friends** in the classroom and let your child know.

**Aim to have a predictable school day** schedule whenever possible. Discuss changes with your child when you can. Routines, as mentioned in the previous section, are very helpful for reducing daily anxiety.

**Discuss the school day and highlight the positives.** Discuss things that could have been better. Give your child space to share their concerns without trying to fix it.

**Ensure they have downtime after school.** Children who are anxious may be especially tired after a long day at school. Create a quiet restful space for them to unwind before jumping into other activities.

**Be predictable and accessible to your child.** Knowing you will be there and that you care about them instills a sense of safety.

### For middle and high schoolers:

**Remind them the importance of sleep** at this stage! Reinforce this with established bedtimes.

**Set media restrictions** to ensure sleep hours are protected. Keep electronic devices in a central location in the home at night so they do not interfere with your child's sleep.

**Set expectations and a routine for hygiene.** Ensure they have hygiene items they need, especially if they aren't likely to ask for them or think they need them.

**Help them establish time management and accountability** with assignments early on. This will likely mean checking on grades and assignments



frequently in the early part of the school year.

**Set an expectation for homework or daily study time** if needed. This reinforces you care about their academic performance and are available to help.

**Talk with them regularly** about their friends or struggles at school. Listen non-judgmentally and do not jump to offer advice. Who is important to them? What is going well this year? What do they wish they could change? Showing an interest in the small details of their day will make them more comfortable coming to you when there are bigger issues in their lives.

Whatever age or situation your child may be navigating this school year, give it a little time. It takes the average young child about a month, and the average teenager about two months, to adjust to a new academic year. As the parent, you may also experience increased stress as the family sets new routines and adjusts to the increased demands of a busy schedule. This is normal and you will likely find your stride as a family as the weeks pass into another school year.



# Talking to Kids About School Safety



School violence and the resulting intense media coverage bring school safety issues to the forefront for all of us. However, children, in particular, may experience anxiety, fear, and a sense of personal risk. Knowing how to talk with your child about school safety issues could be critical in recognizing and preventing acts of violence, and will play an important role in easing fear and anxieties about their personal safety. To guide parents through discussions about school violence, Mental Health America offers the following suggestions:

1

**Encourage children to talk about their concerns and express their feelings.**

Some children may be hesitant to initiate such conversation, so you may want to prompt them by asking if they feel safe at school. When talking with younger children remember to talk on their level. For example, they may not understand the term “violence” but can talk to you about being afraid or a classmate who is mean to them.

2

**Talk honestly about your own feelings regarding school violence.**

It is important for children to recognize they are not dealing with their fears alone.

3

**Validate the child’s feelings.**

Do not minimize a child’s concerns. Let him/her know that serious school violence is not common, which is why incidents such as Columbine and Conyers, Georgia, attract so much media attention. Stress that schools are safe places. In fact, recent studies have shown that schools are more secure now than ever before.

4

**Empower children to take action regarding school safety.**

Encourage them to report specific incidents (such as bullying, threats or talk of suicide) and to develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills. Encourage older children to actively participate in student-run anti-violence programs.

5

**Discuss the safety procedures that are in place at your child’s school.** Explain why visitors sign in at the principal’s office or certain doors remain locked during the school day. Help your child understand that such precautions are in place to ensure his or her safety and stress the importance of adhering to school rules and policies.

# 6

## **Create safety plans with your child.**

Help identify which adults (a friendly secretary, trusted teacher or approachable administrator) your child can talk to if they feel threatened at school. Also ensure that your child knows how to reach you (or another family member or friend) in case of crisis during the school day. Remind your child that they can talk to you anytime they feel threatened.

# 7

## **Recognize behavior that may indicate your child is concerned about returning to school.**

Younger children may react to school violence by not wanting to attend school or participate in school-based activities. Teens and adolescents may minimize their concerns outwardly, but may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow their school performance to decline.

# 8

## **Keep the dialogue going.**

Make school safety a common topic in family discussions rather than just a response to an immediate crisis. Open dialogue will encourage children to share their concerns.

# 9

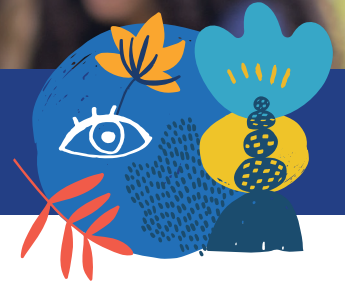
## **Seek help when necessary.**

If you are worried about a child's reaction or have ongoing concerns about his/her behavior or emotions, contact a mental health professional at school or at your community mental health center. Your local Mental Health Association or the National Mental Health Association's Information Center can direct you to resources in your community.

## **The Following Behaviors Are Signs That a Child May Need Help**

- Lack of interest or poor performance in school
- Absence of age-appropriate anger control skills
- Seeing self as always the victim
- Persistent disregard for or refusal to follow rules
- Cruelty to pets or other animals
- Artwork or writing that is bleak or violent or that depicts isolation or anger
- Talking constantly about weapons or violence
- Obsession with violent games and/or TV shows
- Lack of enthusiasm, energy or motivation
- Carrying a weapon to school
- Overreacting to criticism
- Restlessness and agitation
- Bullying
- Misplaced or unwarranted jealousy
- Involvement with or interest in gangs
- Withdrawal from friends and activities

# Bullying Tips for Parents



Incidents of school violence demonstrate that bullying can have tragic consequences for individuals, families, schools and entire communities. Bullying is painful, lasting and related to low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, anger, and other mental and physical health problems. Because of the increased risk of suicide associated with bullying--for victims and perpetrators alike--open dialogue and support are crucial in ensuring safety for our children and teenagers.

## Recognize It

Bullying is aggressive behavior. It occurs when a child is targeted by one or more youth with repeated negative actions over a period of time. These are intentional attempts to cause discomfort or injury and can include name-calling, obscene gesturing, malicious teasing, exclusion, threats, rumors, physical hitting, kicking, pushing and choking. Cyber-bullying is also a real and growing problem today. Make no mistake: bullying of any kind is a form of violence that should not be tolerated.

## See The Scope Of The Problem

The Journal of the American Medical Association reports that one-third of U.S. students experience bullying, either as a target or a perpetrator.

- More than 70 percent of teachers and students have witnessed bullying in their schools.
- 28 percent of students, in 6th through 12th grade, report being bullied.
- Only a small percentage of children who are bullied, report it. The reason is often because they do not believe adults will help them.

## Spot The Bullies

- Both boys and girls bully. Boys bully more often and are more likely to experience physical bullying. Girls are more likely to

experience emotional bullying and sexual harassment.

- Bullies usually pick on others out of frustration with their own lives. They target other children because they need a victim who is weaker than them.
- While they may feel uneasy about it, many children tease their peers simply to go along with the crowd.
- Bullying is linked to depression. Bullies are more likely to have social influence and be overly concerned with popularity. They are also more likely to have low self-esteem, be easily pressured by others, be less able to identify with the feelings of others, view violence in a positive way, and have difficulty in following rules.



## Know Their Targets

- Those who are seen as being different from their peers or are weak, depressed, less popular, or unable to get along with peers are more likely to become victims of bullying.
- Females in high school (22 percent) are twice as likely as male high school students (11 percent) to report being cyberbullied. They are also more likely to report being bullied on school property (22 percent to 18 percent).
- LGBTQ youth are at special risk of being bullied; up to 85 percent report having been verbally harassed, and 40 percent physically assaulted.

## Take Steps To Stop It Checklist

- Start early. Parent/child talks are essential. Teach kids to respect others before they start school and continue to talk about this topic on an ongoing basis. Even small acts of teasing should be stopped in their tracks. Don't fail to correct this kind of behavior due to a child's young age. This is exactly when to stop it.
- Teach your children how to be assertive. Encourage your children to express their feelings clearly, say no when they feel uncomfortable or pressured, stand up for themselves without fighting and walk away in dangerous situations.
- Stop bullying when you see it . Adults who remain silent when bullying occurs are encouraging it and making it worse.
- Listen and support children who speak up. Telling an adult about bullying is not easy for children. If a child comes to you seeking assistance with bullying, spend time listening to them and provide affirmation and support before taking actions. Read through and discuss our Bullying Checklist with your child as a resource.
- Recognize the signs of depression. Youth who experience persistent bullying can develop signs of depression like sadness, isolation, poor concentration and sleeping problems. These symptoms can affect their relationships



and school performance. Many children do not recognize or speak up about their emotional needs. Make sure to reach out and get them help when you see these signs.

- Tell your children to take action when they see bullying behavior. Tell them to speak out against the bully and inform a teacher if the behavior doesn't stop. Bullying continues only when we allow it to.
- Communicate clear policies and consequences. Bullying is less likely in schools where adults are involved and firm about stopping bullying behaviors. Send out a clear message at your school that bullying will have negative consequences.
- Team up . Work with your PTA or local MHA affiliate to make sure that schools treat bullying as violence. Help them develop programs to prevent bullying and promote safe school environments.

## Additional Resources

You can find more helpful information about bullying at [stopbullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov).

Check out an online Guide to Bullying and Cyberbullying at [onlineschools.org/student-bullying-guide](https://onlineschools.org/student-bullying-guide).

View "My Life is Worth Living," the world's first animated series about teen mental health and suicide prevention at [mylifeisworthliving.org](https://mylifeisworthliving.org). The series includes five powerful stories told over twenty episodes.