

THE CONNECTED START

An Attachment-Focused Back-to-School Guide
for Parents & Caregivers





Back-to-school season can bring a lot of feelings — for children and for the adults who care for them.

Even children who are excited about returning to school may experience bigger emotions, difficulty sleeping, increased clinginess, irritability, tummy aches, meltdowns, or behaviour that seems to come out of nowhere.

This doesn't necessarily mean something is wrong. School asks a lot of children. They are navigating separation from their caregivers, changing routines, new expectations, friendships, sensory demands, learning, transitions and many hours of managing themselves away from home.

An attachment-focused approach asks us to look beyond:

“How do I stop this behaviour?”

and instead wonder:

“What might my child be communicating, and what do they need from me right now?”

Connection doesn't mean removing every boundary or fixing every uncomfortable feeling. It means helping children experience us as a safe, steady place while they learn how to move through hard things.

BEFORE SCHOOL STARTS: BUILD SAFETY THROUGH PREDICTABILITY

Children often do better with transitions when they have some idea of what to expect.

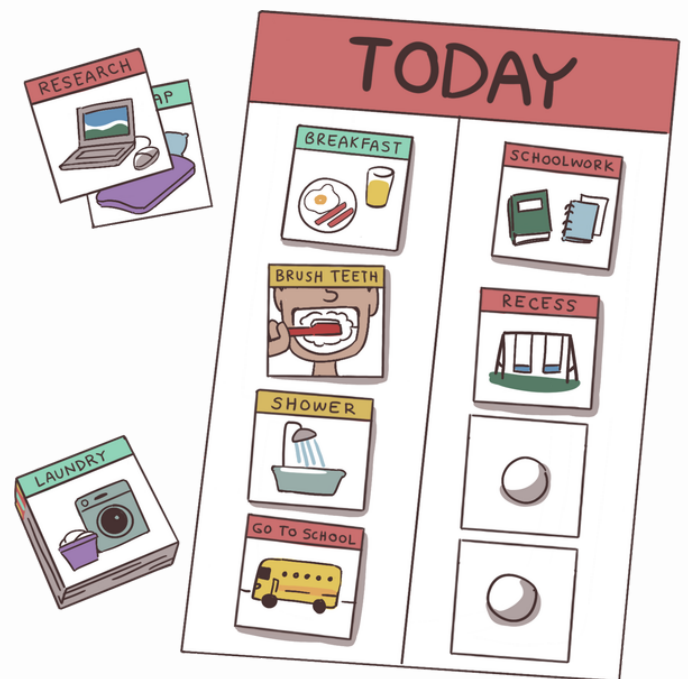
In the week or two before school, gently begin moving toward your school-year rhythm. This might mean adjusting bedtime and wake-up times, practicing the morning routine, visiting the school playground or talking through what drop-off will look like.

For children who experience anxiety, ADHD, autism, sensory differences or difficulty with transitions, seeing the plan can be easier than hearing the plan.

Consider creating a simple visual routine:

**Wake up → Get dressed →
Breakfast → Teeth → Backpack →
School**

Keep it simple. The goal isn't to create another thing your child has to do perfectly. It is to reduce the number of things their brain has to hold at once.



Offer choices where you can

School involves a lot of following directions. Small choices at home can give children a healthy sense of control.

Try:

“Blue shirt or green shirt?”

“Breakfast first or get dressed first?”

“Do you want to walk to the door or hold my hand?”

The adult still holds the boundary while the child gets some autonomy within it.

THE MORNING RUSH: CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION

School mornings can quickly become stressful when we are worried about getting everyone out the door, it is easy to find ourselves repeating:

“Shoes!”

“Backpack!”

“Brush your teeth!”

“We're going to be late!”

And usually, the more stressed we become, the harder it becomes for our children to organize themselves.

When possible, try to build even 30–60 seconds of intentional connection into the morning.

A cuddle. A silly song. Sitting together while they eat.

A quick check-in. A hug before leaving.

These small moments communicate: We are connected. You are safe. We can handle this morning together.

When your child is struggling

Try replacing: “There's nothing to worry about.” **with:** “I can see you're worried. New things can feel really big. I'm here.”

Instead of: “You're fine.” **try:** “Your body is telling you this feels hard right now.”

Instead of: “We don't have time for this.” **try:** “I know this is hard. I'm going to help you get through the next step.”

Validation doesn't mean agreeing that something is dangerous or allowing your child to avoid everything uncomfortable. It means communicating: I believe you when you tell me this feels hard.

A woman with curly hair, wearing a grey t-shirt and blue jeans, is walking away from the camera. She is holding the hand of a young child who is wearing a colorful backpack and khaki pants. They are walking on a paved path towards a school building with a large entrance. The sky is clear and blue.

DROP-OFF: KEEP GOODBYES WARM, CONFIDENT & PREDICTABLE

When children struggle with separation, our instinct may be to sneak away or make the goodbye longer in hopes of helping them feel better. Usually, predictable goodbyes are more helpful.

Create a small goodbye ritual that can stay consistent:

Hug → special phrase → high five → goodbye

You might say:

“I love you. You're safe. Your teacher is here to help you, and I will come back after school.”

Then follow through with the goodbye. Your child may still cry or protest. The goal isn't necessarily a tear-free separation.

The goal is for them to gradually learn:

My caregiver leaves. I am cared for while they are gone. And they come back.

For children experiencing significant school refusal or separation anxiety, however, a more individualized plan may be needed. Work collaboratively with your child's school and healthcare or mental-health providers rather than assuming they simply need to “push through.”

Check out our one handout “When School Feels too Hard” for strategies

AFTER SCHOOL: EXPECT THE RELEASE

Some children hold themselves together all day and unravel when they get home. You may see:

- irritability or arguing
- crying over seemingly small things
- hyperactivity or silliness
- withdrawal
- difficulty answering questions
- sibling conflict
- sensory overwhelm
- increased need for closeness

Sometimes home is where children finally feel safe enough to stop working so hard. Rather than immediately asking:

“How was school?” try giving their nervous system some space first.

Offer a snack, water, movement, quiet time, outside time, music, sensory play or simply your presence.

Later, connection questions might sound like:

“What made you laugh today?”

“Was anything tricky today?”

“Who did you spend time with?”

“Was there a moment you wished I was there?”

And sometimes, don't ask anything. Let them come to you.





CO-REGULATION BEFORE SELF-REGULATION

Children aren't born knowing how to regulate big emotions. They develop these skills through repeated experiences of being supported by regulated adults. When your child's nervous system is overwhelmed, reasoning and lengthy explanations often don't work very well.

Start with the body.

Try:

Get low and slow.

Lower your voice, reduce your words and move more slowly.

Use proximity.

Some children want a hug or closeness. Others need physical space. Both can be connection.

Offer movement.

Walking, jumping, swinging, pushing against a wall, carrying something or playing outside can help some children regulate.

Reduce demands temporarily.

A child who has managed demands all day may have less capacity when they arrive home.

Name without judging.

"Your body looks like it has a lot of energy to get out."

Stay curious.

Ask yourself, "Is my child giving me a hard time, or are they having a hard time?"

WHEN BEHAVIOUR GETS BIG

Attachment-focused parenting isn't permissive parenting. Children still need boundaries. The difference is that we try to hold the boundary without making connection conditional on behaviour.

You can say:

“I won't let you hit me. I'm going to move back and keep us safe.”

“You're allowed to be angry. You're not allowed to hurt someone.”

“We can figure out what happened once your body feels calmer.”

Regulation first. Teaching second.

Children learn very little from a lecture while their nervous system is overwhelmed. There will be time to talk, repair, problem-solve and practice another strategy later.

WHEN YOUR CHILD MAY NEED MORE SUPPORT

Some adjustment is expected during the transition back to school. Consider reaching out for additional support when anxiety, behaviour or emotional distress is persistent, significantly affecting daily life, or interfering with your child's ability to attend school, sleep, participate in activities or maintain relationships.

Your support team might include your child's:

- Classroom teacher
- School special education team
- Principal or vice-principal
- School-based mental-health professionals
- Family physician or pediatrician
- Registered Psychotherapist, psychologist or social worker
- Occupational therapist, when sensory or functional needs are a concern

If your child has an IEP or identified learning, developmental, emotional or behavioural needs, connecting with the school early can be especially helpful. Share what works at home, ask what supports will be available and create a plan for communication before difficulties become overwhelming.



PROTECT CONNECTION DURING BUSY WEEKS

September can quickly become filled with school, homework, extracurriculars, appointments and activities. Try to intentionally protect some low-demand connection time.

It doesn't need to be elaborate.

- Ten minutes playing Lego.
- Reading together.
- Walking the dog.
- Colouring.
- Listening to their favourite song in the car.
- Making a snack together.

Sitting beside them while they tell you something that seems incredibly unimportant to you — but is incredibly important to them. Attachment is built in ordinary moments.

REMEMBER: PARENTS NEED REGULATION TOO

You will have mornings when you lose your patience.

There will be rushed lunches, forgotten library books, arguments about shoes and nights when everyone is exhausted.

**Attachment isn't about being perfectly regulated.
Repair matters.**

You can come back and say:

“I was really stressed this morning and I yelled. I'm sorry. You didn't deserve to be yelled at. Tomorrow we'll try again.”

Repair teaches children something powerful:

Relationships can have difficult moments and still be safe.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

School Mental Health Ontario <https://smho-smso.ca/>

Parent and caregiver resources about student mental health, anxiety, school transitions and supporting children at home.

AboutKidsHealth — SickKids <https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/>

Evidence-informed information for families about children's physical and mental health, including anxiety, sleep, ADHD and school-related concerns.

Kids Help Phone <https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

Mental-health information and support resources for children, youth and families across Canada.

The Ontario Ministry of Education

Information about special education, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), identification and accommodations within Ontario schools.

Neufeld Institute <https://www.neufeldinstitute.org/>

The Neufeld Institute is a charitable non-profit registered in Canada. Their work grows out of Dr Gordon Neufeld's attachment-based developmental approach, and the insights in his book *Hold On to Your Kids*. They offer courses and resources grounded in the sciences of attachment, emotion, development and the vital role of play.

Caring for Kids (CPS): Maintained by the Canadian Paediatric Society, providing professional advice on attachment and emotional health for babies and children.

Nobody's Perfect (Public Health Agency of Canada): Offers official digital publications like *Attachment and Your Child's Feelings* explaining how secure bonds shape early brain development.

A FINAL REMINDER



Your child doesn't need you to make school easy.

They need to know that when school is hard, they don't have to carry the hard parts alone.

Be curious about the behaviour.

Make room for the feelings.

Hold the boundaries.

Protect the relationship.

And when things don't go the way you hoped — repair and try again. Back-to-school isn't just about helping children become more independent. It's about giving them a secure place to return to while they practice becoming independent.



This resource is intended for general psychoeducation and does not replace individualized medical, psychological, educational or therapeutic advice. If you are concerned about your child's emotional wellbeing, development, learning or school functioning, connect with an appropriate regulated healthcare professional and/or your child's school team