

Manlius Pebble Hill School

Talking with Young Children About School This Fall

August 2020

With the news surrounding COVID-19 changing daily, feelings of confusion, overwhelm, anxiety, and frustration are to be expected from both children and adults. Children will naturally take cues from adults, especially parents, as they rely on us to provide accurate information and to model strategies for navigating challenging circumstances.

In the Lower School, we are working together to plan both virtual and in-person (outside/distanced/staggered groupings) optional opportunities for students to gather as part of our “Lower School Reorientation” to help support and acclimate new and returning students. We’ll share more details soon.

The following talking points are intended to share perspective and guidance as we all work to best support the children within our community. Please use any or all of the points below as it applies to facilitate conversations with your child.

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- As we all work to share honest information at an age-appropriate level, it’s important to remember that we don’t have answers to some questions and that is okay.

“Your question is a good one, and I don’t know the answer to it. Many good people are working hard to answer these kinds of questions, and I will be sure to keep watching for more information.” (“Look for the helpers” approach.)

- Whenever you need to have an important conversation with your child, it is always a good idea to begin by asking children what they already know. There are times when we may make assumptions about what our children know and understand. Taking time to allow children to communicate their knowledge helps us gauge their level of understanding and correct any misconceptions or false information they may have.

“I bet you’ve been thinking a lot about school and you may have even heard us grownups talking about it. What do you think is going to happen with school this year?”

- Once your child has had a chance to tell you what they know, you will likely already have a good sense about how they are feeling about this information. If you don't, just ask! Asking children about their feelings is therapeutic in and of itself as it allows children the opportunity to express their feelings in a safe place while also linking those feelings to their thoughts about returning to school. When your child is talking about their feelings, be sure to engage in active listening and reflect their feelings back to them so they feel heard.

"It sounds like you have pretty mixed feelings about going back to school. On the one hand, you're excited to see your friends and on the other hand you're feeling a bit nervous about all the changes. I can understand how your feeling."

- If kids are expressing only one type of thought or feeling you may want to prompt them to think about the other side:

"Wow! I can tell you are super excited to go back to school. Starting school in the Fall is always an exciting time. Are there any things about going back to school that you're not excited about or that make you nervous?" or "I can tell that you are feeling very worried about going back to school. A lot has changed and that's understandable. Are there any things about going back to school that you are looking forward to?"

- Remember that ANY feeling your child has is OK. What's most important is that you accept and acknowledge their feeling. This doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with it, but you understand and respect how they are feeling. Statements like "It sounds like you're feeling pretty _____ about going back to school" are good to use when you don't necessarily agree with what your child is saying, but you want your child to feel heard and supported.
- If you do agree with your child, even if they have a negative emotion, that's okay, too. Modeling healthy expression of negative feelings is a great way to build resilience and strong emotion-regulation skills in your children.

"It sounds like you're feeling pretty nervous about going back to school. It makes me a little nervous, too. When I start to worry, I try to remember all of the things we are doing at home and all of the things that your school is doing to work to keep everyone safe and healthy. When I think of all of those things and take a few deep breaths, I feel a lot better. Can you think of anything we do at home or that you've heard might be happening at school that will help to keep you and everyone at school healthy and safe?"

- After you have a good understanding of your child's thoughts and feeling related to going back to school, you can start to provide new information in a developmentally appropriate way. Our children rely on us to provide them with accurate information, so we always want to be sure that we are providing honest information at their level. Inevitably at some point this will include admitting that you don't have the answers to some of their questions and that is OK.

"It sounds like you already know a lot about what might happen with school this year. Would you like me to tell you what I know and then we can see if you have any more questions?"

- Provide reassurance that no matter what happens, they can always trust that you will make the decision that you think is best for them. It may be tempting to allow young children to choose between available options, but for the majority of young children, this is just too much pressure and they don't yet possess the cognitive skills necessary to weigh the risks and benefits.

- Avoid blanket statements and guarantees that can't be backed up. For example, if your child asks you if they might get COVID-19 if they go back to school, you should not tell them that they absolutely won't. Instead provide honest, realistic and developmentally appropriate information:

"I can understand why you would be worried about getting sick and the truth is that there is always some risk of getting sick no matter where we are. At school, just like anywhere else, there are lots of things we can do to help us stay healthy. Can you think of what some of those things might be? _____. Yes, those are all really great things we can do to help us stay healthy and not share germs. We can also _____. Everyone is working really hard to keep kids and grownups healthy. If we or your school ever felt it wasn't safe to be at school, you would stay at home like you did before. So, one good thing to remember is that if you are able to go to school, that means that all of the grownups feel that it is safe for you to be there. If it wasn't, you would be at home until it was safe again."

- Take time to discuss the different safety measures that you are aware of that will be in place at your child's school (e.g. face coverings (masks), social distancing, staying in one classroom, going outside more often for learning, breaks, and play, etc.) and how each one helps keep everyone healthy and safe.

"You and your friends will be wearing face coverings (masks) when you are inside the classrooms at school. Wearing a face covering (mask) helps us to keep our germs to ourselves so that when we sneeze, cough, and talk we don't spread our germs. Since we aren't used to wearing these, we can practice at home before you go back to school."

“In class you and your friends will be seated apart in the classroom so that even if some germs escape from our face coverings (masks), it will be harder for them to make it all the way over to another person.”

“I bet you already know a lot about washing your hands. [Let child say what they know] That’s absolutely right. Washing and sanitizing our hands gets rid of any germs we may have on our hands so that we don’t get them inside our bodies or leave them anywhere someone else might get them.”

- At the end of the conversation, ensure your child doesn’t have any additional questions. Reassure them again, that it is your job to keep them healthy and safe. Let them know that they can always come to you with their thoughts and feelings.

“I’m really glad we had this talk. No matter what happens, remember that it is MY job to keep you healthy and safe and it’s YOUR job to be a kid and have fun. So, if you have any worries about going back to school, share them with me.”

If you have any concerns about anything your child told you or if you think your child may be overly anxious or upset about returning to school, be sure to reach out to your child’s pediatrician, therapist, etc. for a more thorough evaluation. Also, be sure to let your child’s teacher know if you think they may encounter a significant struggle with returning to school, wearing a face covering (mask), etc. so they can help.

A very special thank you to
Lower School Parent Dr. Courtney du Mond, Ph.D.,
Adolescent Psychologist, for sharing this resource.