

Creating Safety When Returning to In-Person Programming for Caregivers

As we prepare to return to in-person programming we want to provide some information to help with this transition for you and your children. It is important to note that some children will have a smooth transition and other children might need a little more support with this transition. Our hope is to create safety for your child(ren) and family during the return to in person programming.

It Starts with Us

- Wellness
 - In order to help your family and others, we must take care of ourselves.
 - When starting to feel anxious, intentionally move into a relaxed posture. Your body will respond by recalling other times you felt relaxed, reducing your anxiety. With your child you can practice being a rag doll, Woody from Toy Story, or a cooked noodle.
 - Mindfulness can help to calm the nervous system and ground us. Try to use mindful moments a few times a day by yourself and with your children. You can use mindfulness moments first thing in the morning, during the drive to drop your children off, or before bedtime.
Examples of mindfulness: repeating a mantra (I can do this, I am safe, this shall pass, today is a new day), use a guided meditation, deep breathes (in through your nose and out through your mouth) or focus on being present in the moment.
- Be Aware of Your Nonverbal Cues
 - You can communicate safety through your facial expression, eye contact, tone of voice, posture, gestures, and timing and intensity of responses.
 - Your nonverbal cues can impact how someone else feels. If your nonverbal cues are angry, your child might feel angry or if your nonverbal cues are calm your child might feel calm.
 - If you are feeling anxious or worried about your child starting in person know this feeling is normal. Use some wellness activities to help you feel less anxious.
 - Smiling helps to communicate safety to the nervous system. We know that staff and children will be wearing a mask and that will make it hard to see smiling faces. Some staff might have a picture of themselves without a mask on their lanyards so children can see their smile and feel safe.

Use Safety Based Messaging Instead of Threat Based Messaging

- Threat based messaging communicates that things are dangerous, unsafe and unhealthy.
 - Avoid saying things such as, "It's not safe," or "It's dangerous," or "So you don't get sick."
- Safety based messaging communicates prioritization of health and safety.
 - You can say things such as, "Starfish has protocols in place to stay safe," or "We are washing our hands so we can stay healthy."
- Be mindful of what you are saying. If you say something is a bad idea or unsafe and your child overhears, they may believe something is a bad idea or unsafe.

People Respond Differently to Stressful or Traumatic Events

- Staff here at Starfish understand that people will have different feelings, memories and perceptions of the pandemic. We do not want to assume that our experience was everyone else's experience. Some people might have felt unsafe, isolated, or depressed, while others might have felt connected and safe.
- Staff will remain curious and ask questions to avoid making assumptions and judgments.

Create Predictability

- Staff will intentionally use routines and rituals throughout the day to provide a predictable rhythm.
- Start and end the school day the same way.
- Staff will share and provide reminders when there is a change in the routine.
- It is important for caregivers to also create a predictable schedule for their children. This will help your child know what is coming next and to create calm and safety for them.
- Support mental rehearsals of routines to imagine what happens first and then next and next.
 - Can draw or write down their schedule so they can anticipate what is coming next.

- It is also important to discuss with your child the changes and safety protocols that will be implemented to ensure safety for your child and staff.
- It could be helpful to practice wearing a mask in home, how to properly wash their hands, and reminding children we are doing this to keep everyone safe and healthy.
- Click [here](#) for a video on how to wear your mask.
- Click [here](#) for a video on Starfish's Safety Protocols to help your child know what to expect when returning to in-person.

Be Consistent

- We all have an instinct to survive and our job is to coregulate with others to help them feel protected and connected.
- When we consistently keep others safe, help them to feel seen/understood, and help them to soothe, they will begin to feel secure and safe.
- We do not need to say the perfect thing or fix things. We need to be present and empathetic.
 - Take the time to sit down, remove distractions, and actively listen.
 - Be clear, consistent, and kind in your responses.

Use the Attunement Steps

- When we understand how we are feeling and why we are feeling that way, we can begin to feel in control.
- Attunement Steps can help with this. There are four steps to the attunement steps. These are:
 - Notice: Notice your feelings, nonverbal cues and responses so you can calmly provide support. Notice the child/adult's feelings, nonverbal cues and behavior.
 - Name: Name the feeling you believe the child/adult is feeling.
 - Validate: Validate the feeling, not the behavior. This is the most important step as it helps people to feel seen, which creates a feeling of safety and connection.
 - Respond: Depending on the age of the person either offer calm down or connection choices or ask if there is anything you can do to help.
 - Examples of calm down activities are taking a few deep breaths together, stretching, yoga, coloring, and fidgets.
 - Examples of connection activities are hugs, high fives, or soothing touches, reading a book together, playing a together, cooking/baking together, and going on walks.
- Click [here](#) for a video on the Attunement Steps and how to use them.
- When people feel in control, they believe they can handle what happens in the world.
 - Ways that staff will help your child with this is through social stories, mantras, pictures or other reminders can help people to remember they are in control, happy, or safe.

Be Playful

- Play helps to release nervous system arousal and allows for more tolerance for feeling frustrated.
- If you cannot play, try being playful, silly or laughing.
- If you have any questions or concerns please reach out to your child's teacher or Family Service Guide.