



'Be brave:' How to help your kids with back-to-school pandemic fears

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(Credit: Pexels)

A clinical psychologist says we need to be brave as we embark on another school year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dalhousie University Professor Dr. Simon Sherry tells our newsroom we're living during anxiety-provoking times, so it's normal for students and parents to be nervous this fall.

"It's important to acknowledge that living in a pandemic is stressful. COVID-19 is poorly understood, it's largely visible, and it is a threatening and uncertain stressor," Sherry says. "COVID-19 is also hard to avoid and hard to contain, so I think it's important for parents and children alike to acknowledge we are returning to school in anxiety-provoking times."

He recommends parents sit down and have a chat with their kids, reminding them schools should keep them safe.

"At this point our children are socially and emotionally malnourished. They need the structure, socialization, and learning that school provides."

Sherry also believes we need to normalize COVID by adding it to the list of general health risks associated with schools like bullying, smoking, or assault.

He says we have been able to move forward by accepting these risks, which we also need to do with the pandemic.

Sherry cautions against what he calls "parental overprotection" when it comes to COVID.

That means you focus so much on keeping your kids safe from the virus that you instill a sense of danger, which can provoke anxiety.

"It's going to be important to give children a sense of agency and a sense of control. Allow them to participate in the back to school process, to make decisions at a developmentally appropriate level," Sherry says. "Kids who have a sense of control, and have a sense of agency within their world, will be less anxious because they're able to chart their own course and choose their own adventure."

Sherry has additional advice for post-secondary students as most schools adopt a COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

He says rolling up your sleeves twice should be seen as a way to care for your community.

"And to have children and adolescents understand that sometimes we should set aside our personal rights and our individual liberties in the service of helping our community and serving a greater good."

He adds the vaccine mandate is an opportunity to teach youth about the importance of collective responsibility and looking out for one another.

Many post-secondary students are returning to class on Wednesday.