

COUNSELOR CONNECTION

Dru Klein, Janet Goldstein & Jayna Dash

Harry Brown & Audrey Phillips



ANTICIPATION AND PREPARATION

Remote learning, as we have known it this year, is about to change. Beginning March 15th, our school schedule is changing to allow us to safely bring two cohorts of IMS students back to our campus, while a third cohort will have access to their teachers for longer class periods of synchronous instruction. Whether your student will be returning to Islander for in person learning or not, change is upon us. As we all know, change can bring with it a wide spectrum of emotions. Have no fear! As always, your counseling team is here! In this month's newsletter, we address some of the collective concerns we have heard from families, including how to help prepare and acclimate students for the return to in person learning. We also have some tips and suggestions for how to help your child manage any social anxiety they may be experiencing. We have some talking points for how to create open dialogue with your student about the impending changes, as well as some therapeutic tips for helping your student mentally prepare to be back at school. We appreciate your patience and support as we navigate this school year together. We are here and happy to help our families navigate this transition every step of the way. Let's all do our best to embrace change.



SOCIAL SKILLS REFRESHER

As the reality of returning to school in person begins to sink in, some students might be feeling uncertain about starting to interact with peers again. Social skills may be rusty due to the isolation of this last year. As parents, you can start to offer warm validation and positive encouragement by asking your student to open up and share their experiences and feelings. Here are a few helpful tips to help your students start to mentally prepare for increased social interactions:

- ✦ Consider role playing. Practice using introductory phrases/questions that can be used to engage peers.
- ✦ Make a list of coping tools that can be used in the moment (ex. deep breathing, positive self talk, etc.).
- ✦ Draft messages to school staff together, to be used if/when needed ("I am having a hard time with..." or "I am feeling...").
- ✦ Do a practice run-through of the morning routine. Do a practice run of a typical IMS school morning (ex. Practice waking up early, getting dressed, eating breakfast etc. Consider pulling up a map of IMS and mapping out a path for your students' classes).
- ✦ If your student has a friend in their same cohort, encourage them to make a plan to meet on campus to say hello (from a safe social distance, of course).
- ✦ Plan a virtual study-date with a small group of peers.

CHECK THE FACTS

Now is the time to start talking about the transition. We need to listen, observe any signs of worry/anxiety and give our students the tools they can use to cope forward. **CHECK THE FACTS** is a tool for this time. If your child is expressing concern about the return to school, you can coach them through this process. Begin by letting them know that you are available to hear what they are thinking and feeling about the return to school.

CHECK THE FACTS starts with: 1. *Check out whether your child's reactions fit the facts of the situation.*
2. *Challenge their interpretation if it does not fit the facts, to help them change their emotional reactions.*

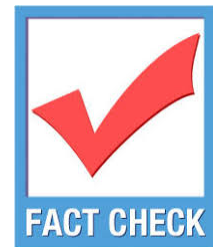
As an example, if your child says, "I know other kids won't follow the health safety rules." Your response could be, "The school is following the guidance of the CDC and the health department. School staff will be present to ensure everyone is following the guidelines. Research has demonstrated very low risk for the spread of COVID-19 at schools."

OPPOSITE ACTION is another step that involves acting the opposite to your emotions. So, if your child wants to avoid return, coach them to face the challenge head on and even to imagine what it will be like to see their friends and meet their teachers in person.

PROBLEM SOLVING is another element of this skill. When the emotions do fit the facts, then move on to problem solving, which will reduce the frequency of negative emotions and help your student feel prepared and ready.

Three steps to check the facts:

1. Ask: "What is the emotion you want to change?"
2. Ask: "What is the event prompting my emotion?"
 - ✦ Challenge judgements, extremes, and black-and-white thinking,
 - ✦ Describe the facts that you observed through your senses.
3. Ask: "Are you interpreting the situation correctly?"
 - ✦ Are there other possible interpretations?



Additional questions that may or may not fit the situation:

"Are you thinking in extremes (all-or-nothing thoughts or catastrophic thinking)?" If so, think of as many other possible outcomes as you can.

- ✦ "What is the likelihood of the worst thing happening"?
- ✦ "Even if the worst were to happen, can you imagine coping well with it?"
- ✦ Imagine saying, "So then what?" or shift to problem solving strategies.

TALKING POINTS

As we prepare to transition to yet another variation of a remote/hybrid schedule, it's important to check in with your student to see how they are feeling. It's important not to make assumptions. It helps to have an open dialogue about the impending changes, whether your student is returning to school for hybrid learning or not. Some questions we recommend you asking include:

- ✦ What concerns you the most about the upcoming transition? Why?
- ✦ On a scale of 0-10, how ready do you feel about going back to in person learning (or the new schedule)? Why did you choose that number?
- ✦ What else is on your mind when you think about the impending schedule change?

STEPS-A GROUP

Our Steps-A (Skills Training for Emotional Problem Solving for Adolescents) group will be starting again the week of March 1 and running for 10 weeks. We're starting back with our separate weekly groups for girls and for boys (meeting times TBD). The group will be led by MIYFS, IMS Counselor Harry Brown and the MIYFS Intern Audrey Phillips.

Steps-A is designed to help adolescents develop coping strategies and make better decisions, especially when emotionally distressed. Our goal is to help students to learn, practice, and become accustomed to applying these skills in daily life. If you think your student could benefit from learning new skills, then please send an email to: Harry Brown at harry.brown@mercerislandschools.org