

Helping a child with an intellectual disability return to school

RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER THE TRAGEDY



The most helpful approach is to validate the child's fear, help them feel safe and heard, and create a gradual, individualized plan for returning to school. For a child with an intellectual disability, use simple concrete language that is appropriate for their developmental level and predictable routines.

How you can help

SIMPLE WORDS, PREDICTABLE ROUTINES, AND A TRUSTED ADULT AT SCHOOL.



Help them feel safe and heard

Acknowledge their feelings: Say, "It makes sense to feel scared after what happened. I'm here to help you."

Use clear, reassuring language: Explain what the school is doing to help keep students safe without making promises that cannot be guaranteed.



Watch and stay connected

Watch for signs of distress: Monitor changes in sleep, behavior, mood, school avoidance, or increased anxiety.

Involve supportive adults: Coordinate with caregivers, school staff, and a mental health professional experienced in trauma and intellectual disabilities. Students will likely have an IEP or special education teacher that they are comfortable with. Reach out to that teacher to plan for your child's return to school.



Plan the return together

Create a safety plan: Identify a trusted teacher, counselor, or staff member they can go to if they feel frightened.

Practice what to expect: Use a visual schedule, social story, or step-by-step explanation of the school day.

Offer choices and control: Let them help decide what support they need, such as walking into school with a trusted adult or checking in with a counselor.

Consider a gradual return: If appropriate and coordinated with the school, begin with shorter visits or days and increase attendance as they feel more comfortable.

Consider mental imagery practice: Have them walk you through the process of going to school, finding a trusted adult, comfortable classroom, and navigating any emotions that emerge.



Most important

Do not pressure the child to stop feeling afraid or return before their concerns are addressed. Give them time, consistency, and opportunities to express their feelings in ways they can manage.

If they experience persistent distress, panic, nightmares, or worsening behavior, seek professional mental health support.

Deschutes County Crisis Line: 541-322-7500, ext. 9

If your child is in immediate danger, call 911.

This handout is for informational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized clinical guidance.