David (00:05):
Thank you for joining us for today's webinar, Navigating Back to School Challenges, brought to you by Cigna. Please note that copies of the presentation slides and handouts are available for download in the dropdown box on the lower left side of the player window. Our presenter today is Cindy Dickinson, Cindy Dickinson has worked as an educator, counselor and wellness specialist, for 43 years, and has presented for Cigna's Employee Assistance Program for the past 10. She has a master's of education in counseling and consultation, and as a counselor and member of the administrative team in a New Hampshire charter school. Cindy conducts suicide prevention and awareness trainings for New Hampshire schools, and offers a variety of wellness seminars for the New Hampshire Chapter of the National Education Association, as well as teaching mindfulness throughout New England. And now, Cindy Dickinson.

Cindy Dickerson (00:58):
Thank you very much, David. Hi everybody, what a pleasure to be with you today, so we can work together on facing and finding ways to navigate the challenge of sending our children back to school. Everybody's worried, everybody's stressed, so you are certainly not alone, and not to discourage you, but I've been in the business of education for 43 years in one form or another, and I don't recall seeing as big a challenge as this in all the time that I've worked with the field. So I, I wanna give you three things to hold onto as we go through today's information. Number one is that teachers and administrators, school nurses, counselors, support staff, everyone from the principal to the custodians, are putting your children first, both in their education, in their safety, you can count on that.

Cindy Dickerson (01:48):
Number two, this situation won't last for ever, and I know I use that to get by on a day-to-day basis, and number three, you can, uh, do this, in fact you already have because you have been at this in one form or another since last March. So today we're going to help you to tap into your already considerable resilience, to understand and get more confidence about how to successfully look at and conquer these challenges. So our goals today will include taking a look at the impact of the pandemic on the back to school transition. We'll look at some tips that can help you and your child navigate with resilience, and that's such a key for what we're talking about today. We'll look at strategies from managing the learning scenarios that you may be facing, and then we'll, um, look at how stress is going to affect children, and when it's a good idea to get a little more help.

Cindy Dickerson (02:47):
So as we go and take a look first at normal back to school stressors do you remember when the normal jitters included oh, maybe getting your child on the bus, and transitioning from one grade to another, and getting to know their teacher, or mastering apa- academics, or, uh, friends, or, but the even the severe things like bullying, those seem a little ordinary right now. And we're facing something that's more like being sucked up into a tornado and spun around without much of an idea of where we are, or when we're going to be put back down on the ground. Start by taking stock of your successes as we face these various extra challenges.

Cindy Dickerson (03:28):
So we're concerned about safety, everybody is. It's comforting to know that there is a great deal being done in schools today when it comes to safety. You may have worries about your child falling behind, you may be dealing with massive scheduling changes, and that uncomfortable uncertainty about the
future. It all seems insurmountable sometimes, people are tired, there are, uh, there seems to be another thing added to your plate every day, but I want you to again remember how you did it before, and how you can tap into that-

Speaker 3 (04:05):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (04:05):
... and thrive as you these new challenges. But it helps, before we look at some tactics and some strategies, to think about the ABCs emotionally of our, uh, approach to this situation. So moving on we'll take a look at ambiguity, bumps and change, and those are all hardwired into our stress systems, those are things that human beings-

Speaker 3 (04:33):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (04:33):
... don't like and they're difficult for us. When it comes to ambiguity well, we love predictability, they equal to human beings' security and safety, particularly to children, so we have to deal with that. Fortunately with practice, with continued efforts, we can learn to be better at dealing with ambiguity, you can help your children to be better. And I like to use the analogy of everything you have to learn about living with the uncertainty of being a parent, from bringing that new baby home, you know, your first child where you had no idea what was going to happen next, right along to watching your child grow up, and perhaps take their own path, maybe something that you hadn't thought of. That's ambiguity, how did you handle that before? We can work on accepting the fact that we don't know, and one of the best ways to do that is to prepare for various eventualities.

Cindy Dickerson (05:32):
Schools are doing just that, and if you can stay informed as to what your schools are doing, and, uh, what you may be facing that have backup plans in place, then you're going to be more successful at dealing with still the great numbers of unknowns that are happening now. Another thing that human beings don't like much is when things don't go well. We don't like it when we can't control outcomes, or, or when we can't have things perfect. I'm willing to guess that in the months where you were, uh, supervising your children's education, and trying to do your own work from home, and all of the other things you had to do last winter and spring, that you learned to accept imperfection, that you learned to let go of some things, and that if you were a person who has strong control needs, or maybe you're a perfectionist, you've probably already done some great learning.

Cindy Dickerson (06:26):
I think it's important to remember that this is crisis learning, or it has particularly, eh, when it first started, uh, taking the form of crisis learning, but we're coming along, we're getting better at it, we're learning more and more, both the schools and parents. So it's helpful to settle on being a good enough parent, uh, to accepting that you're never going to be a, a perfect person in this situation and neither are your children. You can work on that, you can work on letting go of controlling the outcome when neither you or anybody else has any idea what that is going to be, takes practice, can be done.
Cindy Dickerson (07:09):
And then there’s change. You may have a child who is particularly resistant to change, and you may be one of those people yourself, because change is hard in the best of times, and we have all done so much changing, so much adjusting, over the past months that people are exhausted by that need to change. It’s time to take a breath, time to, uh, remember where your foundation is, what you’ve done before, time to call up that thought of this won’t last forever, and then to think in terms of, uh, pivoting, adapting and persevering, and I really like those words. You’ve-

David (07:49):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (07:50):
... already done this, this is what you did in March when everything went remote. Um, then we are dealing with change that’s constant, that’s difficult, it helps to anchor to the things that stay the same in our lives. And in, in your life as a parent your kids are still your kids, right, with, and all their glory with all their flaws. Teachers are still teachers whether they’re coming through a device, or whether your child is face-to-face with them. People are still learning, your family is still functioning as your family with its own identity.

Cindy Dickerson (08:25):
So if we think about those core things as the center of a gyroscope, that disk that stays in place and always is pointing in the right direction as everything else moves around it, then that’s going to give you an foundation to handle change more easily. It will also help you to build resilience, to grow in your ability to have empathy, to develop grace for yourself and your kids, and to grow in your understanding. So i- if we look at what you have to learn, and the things that you can do to overcome these ABC difficulties, you will all have super hero capes by the time this is done, and you can hold on to that knowledge that if you can do this what can’t you do, right?

Cindy Dickerson (09:11):
So how do we navigate with resilience, and one of the first aspects of being successful with that is looking at preparation. You are probably pretty good at preparation already, particularly now that you’ve done remote education in the past, and you, uh, have some ideas, you have some ways that you can go about this, uh, but if you think back to your normal routines when you were getting your child ready to go back to school you can go back to some of those things as well. Like shifting that bedtime routine, remember, uh, starting maybe a couple weeks earlier where many, many parents begin by about 15 minutes each night to move that go to bed, get up schedule. So you can do that over a, a transition until you reach school time, remembering that sleep is vital for, uh, for education, for relationships, for, for our health indeed, and for that of our children. So make sure that you work on your transitions that have been ses- successful before.

Cindy Dickerson (10:12):
Um, morning routine might be another thing that you can come back to, that doesn’t have to change just because you’re going remote, or because you’re going hybrid. Uh, an end of school s- uh, a end of summer rather ritual-
Cindy Dickerson (10:25):
... is a wonderful way to mark the end of summertime, and the beginning of the school year, and that can be particularly important if school is going to be at home. And children have wonderful ideas about that, and that can have a lasting impact, and be a lasting memory, something that continues far after COVID is down. Children need information just the way we do as adults, so talk about school a lot even if your child doesn't ask. Make sure that you give appropriate information, uh, if you have a young child there are story books that are available to help talk about the beginning of school, and there are a whole, mm-hmm (affirmative), batch of, uh, school during COVID books that have been released. Remember that principle of name it to tame it as well, so if your child has anxieties or if you do, uh-

Cindy Dickerson (11:19):
... if they're stressed and concerned being able to say these things out loud helps to take a little bit of the emotional intensity out of them, so talking is very important. With an older child you may have to ask open-ended questions, but it's important to get a dialogue going. Then for you to point out the positives, if you look at the bottom of this slide just note, and you know this already, how important it is for us to present the kind of behavior, model the behavior we want to see, uh, to be calm, and confident and positive, even if you might not feel that way 100% because you know they are little sponges. They pick up on what we're feeling and thinking, and their reactions are very, very strongly influenced by how we approach these subjects. So pointing out the positive, I can't wait to dot-dot-dot, uh, and what does your child look forward to about beginning school again?

Cindy Dickerson (12:20):
Uh, maybe you create a banner or a poster with all of the positive things they're looking forward to, or maybe you can put them on Post-it Notes and stick them around the house, that- that's a good thing for parents as well. It's important for us to be optimistic, to look forward to those things that are going to be good, or if we end up scheduling back at home education, uh, think about what worked beforehand. Uh, uh, again, sleep was something that I saw happening as a counselor that I haven't seen rested children in years, and finally, particularly these middle schoolers and these teenagers were getting enough sleep be- because of their schedules. And it's okay to acknowledge your own worries, but you want to make sure your emotions are regulated, and that what you are presenting is an appropriate example for your child, and will help them have an easier time of it by being positive.

Cindy Dickerson (13:17):
As we move on we're going to look at the different types of learning that you may encounter. You might encounter, uh, one type at first, and then shift into another one. You may have to pivot and adapt again, go back and forth between types. So the more information you have about each possible type of learning the better off you'll be when it comes to having to make your own changes, to get resources, to find backup and to manage the challenges. Remember schools are working hard on safety, on scheduling, on making things go smoothly, but-
Speaker 3 (13:53):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (13:53):
... there will continue to be safety concerns, there will continue to be norms and regular routines that are upended, things that won't look the same for children, things that won't be the same. The more you and they are prepared the easier it will be. So looking at things for example like the impact of quarantine, now we don't know because we haven't been there yet, but it may be that, uh, you're gonna be looking at something completely different. You should know the policies that are available to you as parents that show what the plans are for quarantine, and then have your own response plan in place.

Cindy Dickerson (14:32):
It's important to establish and maintain good communication with your school, and I know you're probably having your eba- your mailbox filled up with emails right now, but trust me, they are important. They wouldn't be sending you emails from your school if they weren't important, so as hard as it can be stay on top of them. Open them, check notices, check for offers of support because you will need it, even the most independent, competent parent is going to need extra support in the face of this challenge. Ask questions, don't be afraid to, uh, get into the nitty-gritty, you'll get answers as best you can, and then gather that information, and help to prepare children for what's going to be different this time.

Cindy Dickerson (15:18):
Uh, you got a great handout called Managing the Transition, and there are good examples there for you to see some concrete things that you can do. When you stress safety that's going to offer chi- comfort to your child, and one of the things they're looking for is that safety and security, which will help them to be ready to learn. And one of the best ways that you can do this is by helping them to understand the importance of hygiene without encouraging anxiety, uh, so finding, uh, their ... Helping them find their strength in simply keeping their hands washed, and using the mask, and cough and sneeze etiquette, because this is the one place where kids can feel like they can take some power and have some leadership.

Speaker 3 (16:07):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (16:07):
Uh, you can help them to see that they can be helpers, that they can be leaders, they could be part of the team that's doing everything they can to keep them safe and healthy when they're at school. Now, are next type of learning after classroom, and again, these can come in any order, um, a- and shift at the slightest notice, but we'll look now at distance learning. You have already done this, you have already learned a lot about all of these challenges, the technology, the focus and motivation-

Speaker 3 (16:39):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (16:39):
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... that feeling of isolation, how have you been successful-

David (16:43):
Hmm.

Cindy Dickerson (16:43):
... and I'll tell you. Schools and parents have done a yeoman's job and have been successful even though it might not feel that way, I've seen it. Um, uh, you make sure for example with our tech, you take advantage of what schools have learned, uh, of what you have learned, and, so make sure your computer, tablet, software, is all up to date, you have reliable connections, maybe you need a new router and amplifier. Double check your tech, check with your, a school IT person if you need to, if you can get to them, uh, people will be there to help you. You'll also need to have things like notebooks and project supplies, you know, those old fashion kind of ways of learning, manipulatives for little children-

Speaker 3 (17:26):
Yeah.

Cindy Dickerson (17:26):
... so if you have any doubts or any questions make sure you check-in with your teacher, uh, they can, uh, their par- your child's teacher can give you lots of help here. Building in routines is a great way to help your child be successful, and if your child is working successfully you're more likely to be able to do the same. So set a schedule, establish boundaries, because this is not a time where behavior can s- be allowed to get out of hand, or disrespect, or any of those things that can come from an upended routine, yeah, set those boundaries, and establish as much predictability as you can. You might setup a calendar with your child that has the periods of their day, maybe a morning meeting is built in, uh, whatever lessons there are, lunchtime built in, a time for reading, and math and specials. So working with your teacher make sure you find out what they are going to be doing, and make a visual schedule, and for younger children you can always do an illustrated kind of schedule. Don't be afraid to ask your child's teacher for-

David (18:30):
Hmm.

Cindy Dickerson (18:30):
... some tips. And please, physical activity is really, really important. Kids who are active have longer attention spans, they have faster processing, and they have better test performance. Now, motivation is hard, everybody knows that, but, uh, it's certainly something we've all struggled with, will continue to struggle with, but how do you get motivation in the workplace, is there a way that you can translate some of those skills? Measurable goals are often a way that you can motivate kids and celebrate success because that's really important. Build in accountability, so begin perhaps, begin the day with a check-in where you set some priorities, the teacher will be doing that as well most likely. Then you can end the day on a debrief where you talk about what's been learned, and again, celebrate those successes, and don't forget-

Speaker 3 (19:23):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (19:23):
... to build in some fun if you want to. Um, uh, of every school or most schools have something called the Spirit Week where one day you might wear pajamas, and the next day dress in your favorite super hero theme or sports team, so consider something like that, and maybe the whole family if you're working from home, and don't have to have your video cam on. Um, and it's okay for kids to be able to buy some extra privileges. A lot of worry about screen time going on here, but the experts say that when, when we're in a desperate situation like this it is not so much the amount of screen time, but the quality and the parents understanding of what the child is doing on screen. So don't let that be a contributor to your guilt and stress, just be aware.

Cindy Dickerson (20:10):
Finding safe ways for social contact is probably one of the biggest challenges for distance learning, or even for a hybrid model, so perhaps there are outdoor things that you can do safely with your children, maybe there are neighborhood kids that, uh, can do some distance activities. Of course, you need to follow your personal family rules for safety, your community, your state, be sure that you're doing this in a way that you are comfortable with, but things like relay races, and bike rides, and kickball, activities in small groups may be a possibility. As is a virtual gathering, and I know, uh, that in, in times of total virtual education that some schools are running social groups online with staff supervision, and maybe small groups, maybe larger ones. You do have to be careful of what goes on in those chat features if you have a group of kids meeting, so it's always a good idea unless you're really certain about what kinda communication is taking place, that you have an eye on those gatherings depending on the children, but sometimes that's better than nothing, and kids are social beings.

Cindy Dickerson (21:22):
All right, moving on now, let's look at blended or hybrid learning because that's where a lot of people are going to be starting in the fall, perhaps you're there, or maybe you'll be transitioning to that later on. Uh, you most likely are going to be looking at two cohorts or more cohorts of students that come in on rotating basis, sometimes learning remotely, other times in the classroom. What this ends up being for parents unfortunately is a wild disruption of routines, and an even greater challenge for scheduling and logistics. It's time to call on all your resources, it's time to ask all the questions you need to ask, and to reach out for help, because these challenges come right on the heels of all of the other challenges and requirements.

Cindy Dickerson (22:11):
Um, if you can, uh, build a little bit more flexibility into your schedule perhaps, maybe there are ways that you can, um, you can find-

David (22:21):
Hmm.

Cindy Dickerson (22:21):
... some, uh, ways to shift responsibilities, we'll talk more about that a little bit later, but thinking positively about the possibilities.
Cindy Dickerson (22:31):
It's important that parents talk positively about both methods, finding the things that work best for each, and pointing those out to the child, because they're going to struggle as well with having such drastic changes on a day-to-day basis. You can use things like scheduling, and morning meetings, and accountability check-ins, as bridging routines, so that you can work together with your child's teacher to make sure that you're doing some of the same routines at home that they are doing at school. And there may be disruptions in friendships, uh, you may find that, uh, your child is not in the same cohort with his or her friends, and that may be a great opportunity for you to help your child develop new friendship skills. Uh, perhaps there are options through your guidance department for in friendship building groups, don't forget to ask, and don't forget to seek out all possible assistance.

Cindy Dickerson (23:29):
Calling in reinforcements, very, very important here, think about all your options for help. Perhaps you can find a sitter who can also be a tutor, or maybe you have available family members who can jump in and, uh, spell you a little bit as you have to go from one, putting on one hat to a next. Uh, maybe you can tag-team with your spouse or partner, or maybe there are other family options that you can come up with. So these are going to be big challenges for you, you will need to find help because we are probably looking at a logistical nightmare.

Cindy Dickerson (24:04):
How do you balance all this as a parent? We take a look at the, the, uh, parent, employee and teacher, hats that you have to wear here-

Speaker 3 (24:15):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (24:15):
... and it can be tempting to think about having to divide yourself into three separate people. You know, um, uh, making sure that you're a teacher at one point, that you are an employee in another place, that you're a parent, but it might be helpful to shift your thinking about this, and think about flowing in between roles as opposed to breaking yourself apart, by shifting and reworking your priorities on a continuous basis.

David (24:43):
Hmm.

Cindy Dickerson (24:43):
And, uh, and now is the time to, to ... Now is not the time rather to try to be perfect in any of this kind of thing, but to look for ways again that you can be good enough. You wanna make the least bad choice when it comes to keeping yourself well, and keeping everybody else up and running. Planning is the key here, uh, there are lots of ways that you can explore front, flexibility, and also keep in mind that you wanna get your quarantine plans in place because that may, may be a place where double backup is...
required. Please check the resource handout that goes along with the presentation, it will help you and
guide you through things like the importance of connecting with the teacher, um, and maybe there's
tutoring available, or, uh, check what's happening with free and reduced lunch programs, what's
available there, what's happening.

Cindy Dickerson (25:35):
With the gifted program or extracurriculars what's going on? What are the opportunities, uh, what's
happening with them, is there online homework help available, or do you know homeschooler who have
been successful, and who perhaps can give you some pointers there? Remember there is help out there
if you need it, and number two, remember you need it. Getting organized is a great, uh, way to feel like
you're doing something active in this situation, so by establishing a quiet, distraction-free station for
everybody who is doing work from home, uh, getting that combination calendar up and running, so that
you have a sense of managing the time and the flow of things. Um, a, a system for reviewing emails and
information again, processing all of the information that's out there. And by the way I've heard from a
number of parents that they're overwhelmed by resources and by information.

Cindy Dickerson (26:37):
Now, in addition, uh, to paying attention to your schools m- um, communications find a couple of
sources that you feel good about, that you feel like, uh, they speak to you like they meet your needs,
and work with them for a little while rather than feeling like you have to open every offer that comes to
you from learning companies and that sort of thing. And finally bring all your work skills to bear, your
time management, your problem solving, your teamwork ability, your-

Speaker 3 (27:06):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (27:06):
... emotional intelligence, because you can use those in your role as, uh, combining a parent, employee
and coach, for learning. And then the last point on this slide is the hardest for most people that I know
because it says "Allow your child to own their own learning.," and that's difficult even at the best of
times. Here's where we find natural consequences all over the place, and that's hard sometimes to see
your child experience the consequences of maybe not doing their work, or maybe having a behavior
issue, but to the extent that you can remember your job is to shape-

David (27:48):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (27:48):
... the child, shape your child's learning. It is to keep them on task within reason, and it is to be sure that
they have what they need to learn, but it is up to your child to learn. Now, remembering that you are a
coach, and that the teacher is the teacher, might also be helpful to you because frankly if you are an
employee for a corporation, uh, and if you are also considered, thinking of yourself as a teacher and as a
parent that's more role than most people are comfortable taking on, so remember you're the coach.
Then it comes to your child's stress, let's take a look now at some of the ways that that m- might
manifest.

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Cindy Dickerson (28:31):
You know certainly that you as an adult are experiencing considerable stress with all of this. You might see as you look at the right hand side of this slide behaviors like thumb sucking and bed wetting, or some regressive behavior on the part of pre-schoolers. All of this is likely to be a sign of stress, with elementary students you might see an irritability, or cleanliness, or aggressiveness, so all of those things that you’re looking at might begin to manifest themselves. And for teenagers while it’s sometimes hard, uh, to know what is a quote/unquote normal behavior for a teenager, if you start to see, see things like reduced concentration and delinquent behavior, a lot of physical complaints, conflicts increasing and disturbances in normal behavior, you wanna be thinking about their stress responses.

Cindy Dickerson (29:24):
The way you can do this, and it’s sort of natural and easy once you get used to it, is by being available, by checking in with the child, asking open-ended questions, being aware of things that are really out of the normal. Helping your child normalize difficult feelings, I know you miss your friends, I understand that, I miss going to see grandma, or I miss, uh, when I was able to go out, and, mm-hmm (affirmative), have coffee with my friends, I know that that feels sad. That kind of letting them understand and validating their feelings, that’s really helpful even for teenagers who are going to pretend that they don’t need that.

Cindy Dickerson (30:04):
Share your ways of destressing, you have some good techniques as adults, but your children also have de-stress techniques that they’re probably learning in school. So ask them, ask them about belly breathing, or about mindfulness, or about name it to tame it, I mean those are just different words that you might or might not have in your child’s school, but they are learning lots of great ways to manage their stress, to help them, uh, help calm themselves, and they’d be happy to share them with you, but maybe you haven’t asked. You might be able to learn from them.

Cindy Dickerson (30:39):
Being aware of how strongly the stress is impacting our child and you is important, and keeping an eye out for things that might be overwhelming, when in doubt as a parent it’s better to be safe than sorry. So if you see something that concerns you don’t be afraid to consult your pediatrician, or to consult a mental health provider. They’re out there, they’re offering services, particularly mental health community agencies, they will be there for you to answer questions, and better to ask, uh, and to perhaps find relief from your concern, or be able to get your child help if they need it.

David (31:18):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cindy Dickerson (31:20):
And as we wind down today thinking about how we all put ourselves together, wishing that there was some kind of a guidebook for what we have ahead of us, remember everyday learning counts. You know, so as you’re one the quest to perhaps be the perfect parent/coach for your, your child’s education don’t overlook the good stuff that goes on because children are curious, they are driven to learn and explore, and other things besides the core curriculum count as far as learning. Anything you
do as a family, nature walks, or, or cooking, or, uh, when you read together, so remember that all counts.

Cindy Dickerson (32:01):
It's important to manage your own stress because you are the one who is, uh, guiding the, the vessel here as we go through this process, so make sure that you are able to talk to somebody, that you're able to vent, that you have a way to come and soothe yourself, and there's so much available. I recommend checking out mindfulness and breath work if you don't already do that, it's a wonderful, easy, free, stress management tool. We are all parents, teachers, uh, family members, alike trying to find our way to be patient, to be understanding, to grow in empathy, to give our children and ourselves the grace just to do what we have to do to not be perfect.

Cindy Dickerson (32:48):
So finally as we close today I want you to remember that you can, uh, do this, and remember that it won't last forever, and remember that you have already done, uh, so much of what you're going to be facing in the future. Dig deep, build your resilience as you go forward, and I wish you all the best in this journey, and that's all I have for you today.

David (33:15):
Thank you, Cindy, and ladies and gentlemen thank you very much for being with us today. That concludes today's webinar.