

THE SCHOOL RE-ENTRY TOOLKIT

A Two-Part System for Supporting Students After Illness, Surgery, or Hospital Care

Created for: Students, Families, Teachers, School Staff, and Healthcare Providers

Purpose: This guide is designed to share general information and practical considerations to help support conversations among families, schools, and healthcare teams when a child is returning to school after illness or surgery. This should not replace guidance from a child's healthcare providers, educators, or other qualified professionals.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit has **two parts** designed for different audiences:

PART 1: Student & Family Guide

Written at a 6th-grade reading level

For students returning to school and their families

Warm, accessible, trauma-informed language

Fill-in-the-blank tools students can use immediately

PART 2: Professional Implementation Guide

Written for school staff and healthcare providers

Detailed checklists, legal frameworks, and protocols

Professional language with actionable steps

Templates and resources for official implementation

Hospitals and schools can distribute both parts together or separately based on the audience's needs.

PART 1: STUDENT & FAMILY GUIDE

1. WELCOME BACK (For Students)

Returning to school after being sick, in the hospital, or having surgery is a big step. You might feel excited to see your friends again, but you might also feel nervous, tired, or unsure. These feelings can change every day, and that is completely normal. When your body goes through something big, your mind and energy change too. You are not expected to "bounce back" right away or feel exactly like you used to.

This toolkit was made to help you feel safer and more supported as you return. It helps you share what you need without having to talk about private medical information. It also helps your teachers understand how to help you learn while your body and brain continue to heal.

You deserve patience, respect, and a chance to learn at a pace that feels right for you. You are not alone in this process, and you do not need to explain everything or pretend to be okay when you're not. This toolkit is here to guide you step by step.

2. WHY YOU MAY FEEL DIFFERENT NOW

After an illness, major treatment, or surgery, school may feel harder than it used to. This isn't because you're doing something wrong. It's because your body and brain are still recovering, even if you look the same on the outside.

How your body might feel different

You might feel tired even after doing small things, like walking between classes or sitting in your seat too long. You may feel dizzy, weak, or have headaches. Loud sounds or bright lights might bother you more than before. It may take you longer to move around or get comfortable in your chair.

How your thinking might feel different

Your brain might feel slower or foggy. You might forget steps in a task or lose focus during lessons. Reading might take longer, and writing might feel harder. You may

understand something one day and then struggle with the same thing the next day. This happens to many students who return after an illness.

How your feelings might change

It's common to feel nervous, stressed, or overwhelmed by things that never bothered you before. You may feel sad or frustrated because you want things to go back to normal. You may be afraid that people will treat you differently or ask questions you don't want to answer.

How your social life might feel different

You might want to see your friends, but you might also worry about what to say or how to talk about what happened. Some kids want to share everything. Some want to share nothing. Both are okay.

Everything you are feeling is normal. Nothing about your reaction is wrong or strange. This toolkit helps you communicate these changes without needing to explain private health details.

3. HOW THIS TOOLKIT HELPS YOU

This toolkit is designed to make your return to school easier. It gives you simple ways to tell teachers what you need so you don't have to explain your medical situation. It also helps your family and teachers understand what you are going through, even when they can't see it.

This toolkit will help you:

- Describe how you're feeling in clear, simple ways
- Decide who at school you feel comfortable talking to
- Understand what kind of school day feels safe right now
- Know what to do if you feel tired, stressed, or dizzy
- Figure out how to handle homework and tests
- Plan what you want to say — or not say — to friends
- Create a safety plan if you feel unwell during school
- Help teachers know exactly how to support you
- Help your family talk to the school without stress

**You do not have to fill out every section.
You do not have to explain anything you don't want to.
You get to choose what feels right.**

4. STUDENT PACKET: HOW SCHOOL CAN SUPPORT ME

You can fill this out alone or with a trusted adult. You don't need to share medical information. You only need to share how school feels for you right now.

About Me

My name is: _____

I am in grade: _____

My school is: _____

The adults at school I feel okay talking to are:

- My teacher
- School counselor
- School nurse
- Administrator
- Another adult I trust: _____

This helps your school know who to check in with and who to direct questions to — so you don't have to keep repeating yourself.

What I Want My School to Know

You do not have to explain your illness. You can simply describe what school feels like for you right now.

You might want your teachers to know that:

- You may miss school sometimes because you're still healing
- You may feel very tired or low-energy some days

- You might need breaks to stay focused or calm
- Your schedule may change because of appointments
- You may need extra time to finish work
- Loud noises, bright lights, or crowded spaces might be hard
- You are trying your best, even when it doesn't show

If you want to add more, you can write it here in simple words:

What Helps Me Do My Best

Every student learns differently, and recovering students may need small changes to help their brains and bodies work comfortably.

Things that may help you include:

- Extra time on classwork or tests when you're tired
- Having due dates moved back on days you don't feel well
- Getting notes, slides, or recorded lessons when you miss class
- Having a quiet place to work if the classroom feels too loud
- Taking short breaks to rest or breathe
- Getting instructions written down so you don't forget steps
- Doing smaller parts of assignments instead of long tasks

You can choose as many as you want. Or you can write your own ideas:

My Symptoms and How They Affect Me

Sometimes it's hard to explain what you're feeling, especially when adults expect details you don't want to share. These simple sentences help your teachers understand your day better.

My body feels different when:

- Walking long distances makes me tired
- Loud sounds or bright lights bother me
- I need to sit down or take breaks more often
- I feel dizzy, sore, or weak sometimes

My thinking feels different when:

- I lose focus faster than I used to
- I forget steps in assignments
- I understand something one day but not the next
- Reading or writing takes longer than normal

My feelings feel different when:

- I get worried or overwhelmed in class
 - I feel stressed by too much work at once
 - I don't want people asking questions
 - I feel behind even when I'm trying hard
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My School Day Plan

You may not be ready for full days yet — and that is okay. Healing takes time, and you deserve a gentle return.

You can pick a plan that feels safe:

- Starting with half-days
- Coming only in the morning or afternoon
- Coming every other day
- Coming full days but with extra breaks
- Coming full days but with lighter work

You can also choose the types of breaks that help:

- A quiet break in the hallway or nurse's office
- A water or bathroom break
- A short walk to calm your mind
- A "pause break" at your desk

This plan helps teachers understand your limits without needing to ask questions.

My Homework Plan

Homework can feel overwhelming when you're recovering. It is okay to do less for a little while.

You may need:

- Less homework for now
- More time to finish things
- Shorter or broken-up assignments
- Help with long or confusing tasks
- A plan to skip work that isn't essential

Healing is not a race. School should fit around your recovery.

Talking to Friends

Thinking about what classmates might say can be stressful. You get to choose how much you want people to know.

If someone asks, "What happened?" you can say:

- "I'm still getting my energy back."
- "I don't want to talk about it, but thank you."
- "I'm okay, just taking things slow."
- "I'd rather not go into it right now."

No one needs more information than you want to give.

Safety Plan (If Needed)

If you suddenly feel dizzy, stressed, in pain, or overwhelmed, it's important to have a plan.

Adults I should go to:

- School nurse
- Counselor
- My teacher
- Other: _____

Places I should go:

- Nurse's office
- Counselor's office
- Main office
- Quiet room
- Hallway for a short walk

Things that help me feel safe:

- Slow breathing
- Quiet time
- Water
- Grounding exercises
- Talking privately to an adult

This helps you feel prepared instead of scared.

5. FAMILY GUIDE: SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S RETURN

When your child returns to school after being sick, having surgery, or spending time in the hospital, it can be stressful for everyone. You may feel unsure about what school will expect, how much your child can handle, and how to explain the situation without sharing private details.

This guide helps you understand what your child may experience, how to talk to the school, and what steps you can take to make the process smoother for your family. You do not need to be an expert. You only need to know your child — and you already do.

What Your Child May Be Feeling

Even if your child looks physically better, healing can continue for weeks or months. Their energy, thinking, and emotions may change from day to day.

Your child may:

- Get tired much faster than usual, even during simple activities
- Feel overwhelmed in busy or noisy places
- Worry about falling behind
- Be nervous to talk to classmates
- Feel sad or stressed even when things seem fine
- Forget things more easily
- Have trouble concentrating
- Feel embarrassed about needing extra help

These changes are normal. They do not mean something is wrong with your child. They mean their body and brain are working hard to get back to full strength.

How to Talk to the School (Without Sharing Personal Details)

You never need to explain your child's diagnosis, treatment, or medical history. Instead, you can focus on what your child needs at school.

Here is a simple way to communicate:

"My child is recovering and wants to return to school safely. Their energy and focus may change during the day. We would appreciate flexible support so they can stay engaged while still healing."

This kind of statement tells teachers exactly what matters without sharing anything private.

Who to Contact First

Most families begin by talking to:

- The school counselor
- The school nurse
- A trusted teacher
- The assistant principal

These adults can help spread the information so you don't have to repeat yourself many times.

You can say:

"We would like a point person at the school who can help coordinate support so my child doesn't have to explain things again and again."

This keeps communication organized and reduces stress for your child.

What to Expect During the First Few Weeks

The first weeks back can be unpredictable. Some days will feel easier than others. Your child may come home exhausted, emotional, or frustrated. This is part of the adjustment.

You can help by:

- Giving them quiet time after school
- Helping break homework into smaller parts
- Reminding them it's okay to take breaks
- Keeping routines calm and predictable
- Celebrating small steps
- Not expecting them to be "back to normal" right away

Your child's job is to heal, not to be perfect.

What to Do If Things Go Wrong

Sometimes flexibility isn't followed, or teachers forget, or your child feels overwhelmed. You should never feel helpless.

Here is a simple three-step plan for resolving problems:

Step 1: Check in with the teacher

Use calm, clear language:

"We want to work together. These supports help my child access learning while they're still healing."

Step 2: Involve the point person

You can say:

"We need help making sure the plan is consistent across classes."

Step 3: Contact an administrator

If needed:

"We are asking for access and safety, not special treatment."

You are not demanding anything unusual — you are protecting your child's right to learn comfortably.

Understanding Your Legal Rights

Your child may be entitled to formal support through federal laws. You do not need to be a lawyer to access these protections.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act provides accommodations for students with conditions that affect learning. Examples include extra time, modified attendance, or rest breaks.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) under IDEA provides special education services if the condition affects educational performance.

Homebound or Hospital Instruction may be available if your child cannot attend school for an extended period (usually 2-4 weeks or more, depending on state rules).

To request these services: Contact your school's counselor, nurse, or special education coordinator and say:

"I would like to discuss whether my child qualifies for accommodations or services while they recover."

The school must respond and evaluate your request. You have the right to ask for help.

What Your Child Needs Most From You

Your child needs to know that you believe them, support them, and will advocate for them when they cannot do it themselves.

They need to hear:

- "I believe you when you say you're tired."
- "It's okay to go slower right now."
- "You don't have to explain yourself to anyone."
- "I will make sure school understands."
- "Healing is more important than grades right now."

Your calm confidence helps them feel safe.

6. QUICK TIPS FOR EVERYONE

For Students:

- You don't owe anyone an explanation
- Ask for what you need, even if it feels hard
- Rest is part of healing, not laziness
- It's okay if some days are harder than others

For Families:

- You know your child best — trust your instincts
- You have the right to ask for support
- You don't need to share medical details
- Be patient with yourself and your child

For School Leaders

Your leadership sets the tone for how returning students are treated. By creating clear systems, training staff, and prioritizing student wellbeing, you build a school culture where all students can thrive. Remember:

- Proactive support prevents crises
- Accommodations are equity, not special treatment
- Student privacy must be protected
- Consistency across staff is essential
- Every student deserves to feel safe at school

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Created by: Bridge to Health Equity Foundation

Purpose: This toolkit provides practical, compassionate guidance for supporting students returning to school after hospitalization, illness, or surgery. It respects student privacy, honors family preferences, and provides educators with clear, actionable strategies.

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