

Get children familiarised with new normal and don't panic, parents urged

KUALA LUMPUR: Parents who are overly anxious about sending their children back to school amid the Covid-19 pandemic should work towards ensuring that their concerns are not passed to their children.

Failure to do so, said experts, could see their children emulate their behaviour and become similarly stressed.

Dr Ruziana Masiran, a psychiatrist at Universiti Putra Malaysia's Teaching Hospital, said children were naturally flexible and adaptive and could adapt to the new normal in school with minimal persuasion.

"They generally listen and respond better to authority figures like teachers instead of their own parents, so teachers will not have much problems in schools.

"However, children look to their parents for guidance and how to react to situations. If they find their parents panicky, stressed or worried about some-

thing, they, too, will follow in their footsteps by modelling the outlook or behaviour."

She said to prepare younger children returning to preschool, parents could apply play-therapy by using dolls or teddy bears to introduce the fact that the children would be going to school under new conditions due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

She said this would also break them in on social distancing requirements during play time and gatherings with friends.

Ruziana said those from Year One to Year Three onwards could be enlightened on the new norms by parents incorporating cartoons, videos and graphics in their explanations.

"For these kids and those older, having steady routines where they watch press updates from the government with their parents on standby to explain the status can help them understand the situation as a whole."

She said for older children, tools such as statistics and graphics on the infection curve and how and why it had to be flattened could be helpful.

Ruziana also said the pandemic would likely create a more resilient and adaptive generation of youngsters with heightened problem-solving skills.

She said the Movement Control Order (MCO) period had, among others, taught them to adapt to remote learning, with many children having learnt how to occupy themselves at home by learning to cook and so on.

Meanwhile, counselor educator Dr Haniza Rais said besides observing their students, teachers in primary schools could kickstart a question-and-answer and sharing session on the first day itself to assess their students' knowledge of the pandemic.

"This would ensure that everyone is on the same page and has the correct idea of what the ill-

ness is and the contingency efforts being taken."

She said teachers should look for signs of changes in their students' behaviour such as withdrawal and disruptive tendencies, which were tell-tale signs that they were undergoing something they could not express.

"They can use art by assigning them to draw Covid-19 (personify the illness) or how it has affected them. If teachers detect something amiss from this or the student's behaviour in class, they can refer him or her to the school counsellor."

She said children, as a whole, were ready, but noted that there would naturally be a degree of anxiety.

"Even adults face problems readjusting to new workplace conditions after working from home."

Haniza said some children had to deal with added pressures from parents losing their jobs during the MCO. A possible spike

in domestic violence cases during the MCO could also affect them.

"Questionnaires and Q&A's can help identify children with these issues before they can be assisted further."

National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) secretary-general Harry Tan said that while teachers and children were eager to get back to school, there was no pedagogical approach to prepare teachers to ease into this new-normal.

"NUTP has embarked on a study on the matter, but has yet to come up with a model classroom in line with the requirements."

Parent Action Group for Education chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, however, believed the issue would sort itself out as children were eager to return to school while parents were also equally keen on routines returning to pre-Covid-19 normalcy.