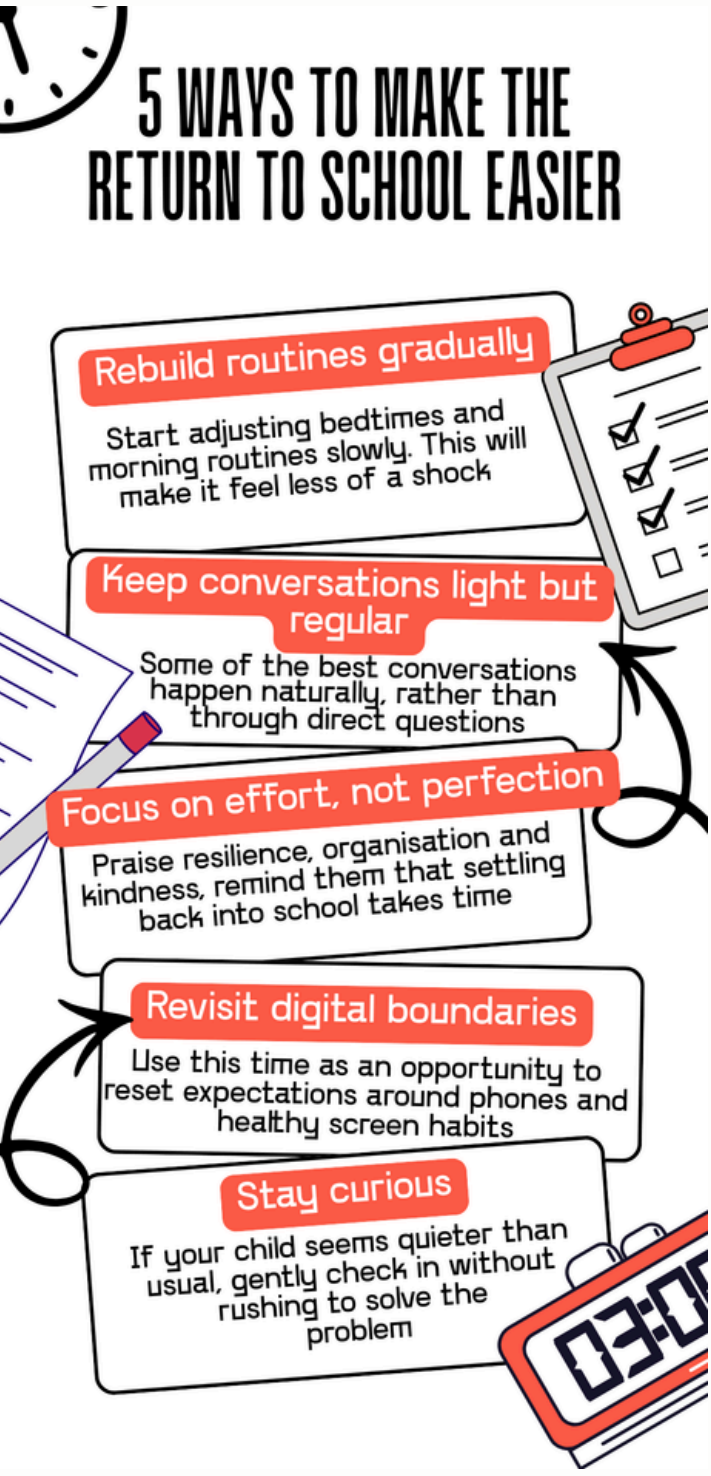
SPOTLIGHT ON SAFEGUARDING

WORKING TOGETHER TO KEEP OUR YOUNG PEOPLE SAFE

September 2026 | Secondary | What parents and carers need to know about: Back to school | Online challenges



When might your child need extra support?

It's normal for children to take time to settle back into school but if changes such as persistent low mood, withdrawal from friends, refusing to attend school, changes in sleep or appetite, frequent headaches or stomach aches or becoming unusually emotional continue for more than a couple of weeks, they may need some extra support. If you're concerned, speak our pastoral team.

Supporting your child's return to secondary school

Returning to secondary school after the summer is about much more than going back into the classroom. Young people may be adjusting to changes in friendships, new teachers, increased expectations and the social pressures that often return as group chats and social media become more active again. These worries don't always sound like 'I'm anxious.' Instead, they may show up as irritability, tiredness or reluctance to talk. Understanding that these feelings are common can help parents respond with reassurance and support.

Digital safeguarding focus

For many families, the summer holidays bring a more relaxed approach to technology. Children often spend longer on their devices, stay up later, use social media more frequently and become more active in group chats. While this can be part of enjoying the break, it can also mean that routines and boundaries have gradually slipped. As we get into the new term, it's a good opportunity to reset your family's expectations around technology so that devices support learning, sleep and wellbeing rather than becoming a distraction. Consider revisiting expectations around:

- **when phones are put away**, particularly during homework, family time and before bed
- **screen time during the school week**, ensuring there's a healthy balance between technology, schoolwork and other activities
- **group chats and social media**, including how to manage upsetting messages and the importance of leaving chats that no longer feel positive
- **getting help**, making sure your child knows they can always come to you or another trusted adult if something online makes them feel worried or uncomfortable.

A few simple conversations at the start of term can make it much easier to establish healthy digital habits that will support your child throughout the school year.

Supporting your child if they're feeling anxious

Remind them that:

- most students have worries, even if they don't show them
- friendships naturally change over time
- new routines usually feel easier after the first couple of weeks
- asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.

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Online challenges: Helping your child make safe choices

Online challenges have become a regular part of many young people's online lives. While some are harmless and encourage creativity or fundraising, others can involve risky behaviour, dangerous dares or pressure to do something simply because 'everyone else is doing it.' Social media platforms are designed to promote popular and engaging content, meaning children may see the same challenge repeatedly, making it feel normal or expected. For teenagers especially, the desire to fit in, gain approval from friends or increase likes and views can sometimes outweigh their judgement of the risks involved.

Understanding why young people take part

Most young people don't join dangerous challenges because they want to get hurt. Instead, they may:

- want to fit in with friends
- feel pressure not to miss out
- think the risks have been exaggerated
- want attention, likes or followers
- believe 'it won't happen to me.'

Helping children understand these influences is often more effective than simply telling them not to take part.

What parents can do

The most effective protection is regular conversation rather than one big talk.

Try asking questions such as:

- "What's the latest online challenge?"
- "Why do you think people take part?"
- "How would you know if something had gone too far?"

Approaching the conversation with curiosity rather than judgement makes it much more likely your child will talk openly.

Digital safeguarding focus

Many online challenges begin with a message in a group chat or someone encouraging others to join in. Remind your child that they never have to take part in something just because friends are doing it or because they're worried about being left out.

Encourage them to:

- think about the real-world consequences before taking part
- avoid sharing dangerous challenges with others
- leave conversations that encourage risky behaviour
- tell a trusted adult if something makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

If you are concerned

If you're worried that your child has taken part in a dangerous challenge or is being pressured online, speak to them calmly and without judgement. If needed, seek support from school, our pastoral and safeguarding team are here to help.