Supporting Youth With School Attendance Challenges: A Resource For High School Professionals

This document is a companion to the webinar entitled "School Anxiety & Attendance Challenges: Practical Strategies for High School Professionals". This webinar can be accessed here. Together, these materials are intended to explain the theoretical foundation of school avoidance and provide a framework for assessing the nature of a student's struggles as well as concrete steps towards successful school attendance.

This framework is comprised of 5 steps:
- Step 1: Identify & gather the team
- Step 2: Assess the struggle
    - 2a) Strengths and what motivates them?
    - 2b) The function(s) & maintenance factors for school nonattendance
    - 2c) Stressors contributing to school nonattendance
    - 2d) History & current severity of school nonattendance
- Step 3: Set the stage for success
    - 3a) communicate with youth/family
    - 3) cover the 3S basics
- Step 4: Develop and Implement
    - 4a) develop fear ladder
    - 4b) plan school re-entry
- Step 5: Communicate & Check-in

Step 1. Identify & Gather the Team

Who is on the student's team?
(Caregivers, school professionals, external mental health professionals)

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Consider: who will the school point person(s) be? They will communicate with family & with external mental health professionals (if applicable)

Coordination is key to successful outcomes!

Step 2. Assess the Struggle

File review of school records & attendance

How many days absent last year?	How many days absent this year?	Relevant notes from school professional who know the youth well?

2a) Assess strengths, protective factors and sources of motivation

Buy in is important (especially if parents have limited influence). We need to understand what matters to the youth. We want to explore: where are they feeling competent? Where do they find meaning & purpose?

What is motivating to the youth?	What area(s) is the youth doing well in?
A particular class? *Seeing friends?* *Extracurriculars?* *Connection with a teacher?* *Leisure?* *Faith?* *Family Connection?*	*Sleep?* *Physical activity?* *Kind/Compassionate?* *Babysitting a sibling?* *Friendships?* *Academics?* *Athletic achievement?* *Community involvement?*

2b) Assess the functioning & maintaining factors

We want to understand: for this youth, what is keeping the school avoidance going?

Conversation with youth, if age appropriate
Start off with: We've noticed that it's been really hard to get to school lately and you've missed [amount]. School is really important and we want to support you to feel good about attending. Is it OK if we ask you some questions that will help us understand how to help?

To get at the function behind the behaviour (Are they avoiding social stress? Academic overwhelm? Fear around separating from parents?)

Is there bullying, racism, or another structural challenge that requires a systemic approach

- *How do you feel about coming to school? What was going on around the time(s) that it was harder to get to school? What is hardest about being at school? Do you have any specific worries about school?*
  Notes:

To get at potentially positively reinforcing activities they may have access to (wifi, preferred activities, screens, phone, etc.)
- *What do you do when you're not at school (during the school day)?*
  Notes:

Conversation with caregiver(s), if possible

To provide clues to worries or other barriers to school attendance and clues about caregiver anxiety
- *What is it like for your child the night before going to school? In morning before school? How distressed are they? How is that for you? How do you respond?*
  Notes:

Similarly to youth, to get at potentially positive reinforcing activities they may have access to (wifi, preferred activities, screens, phone, etc.)
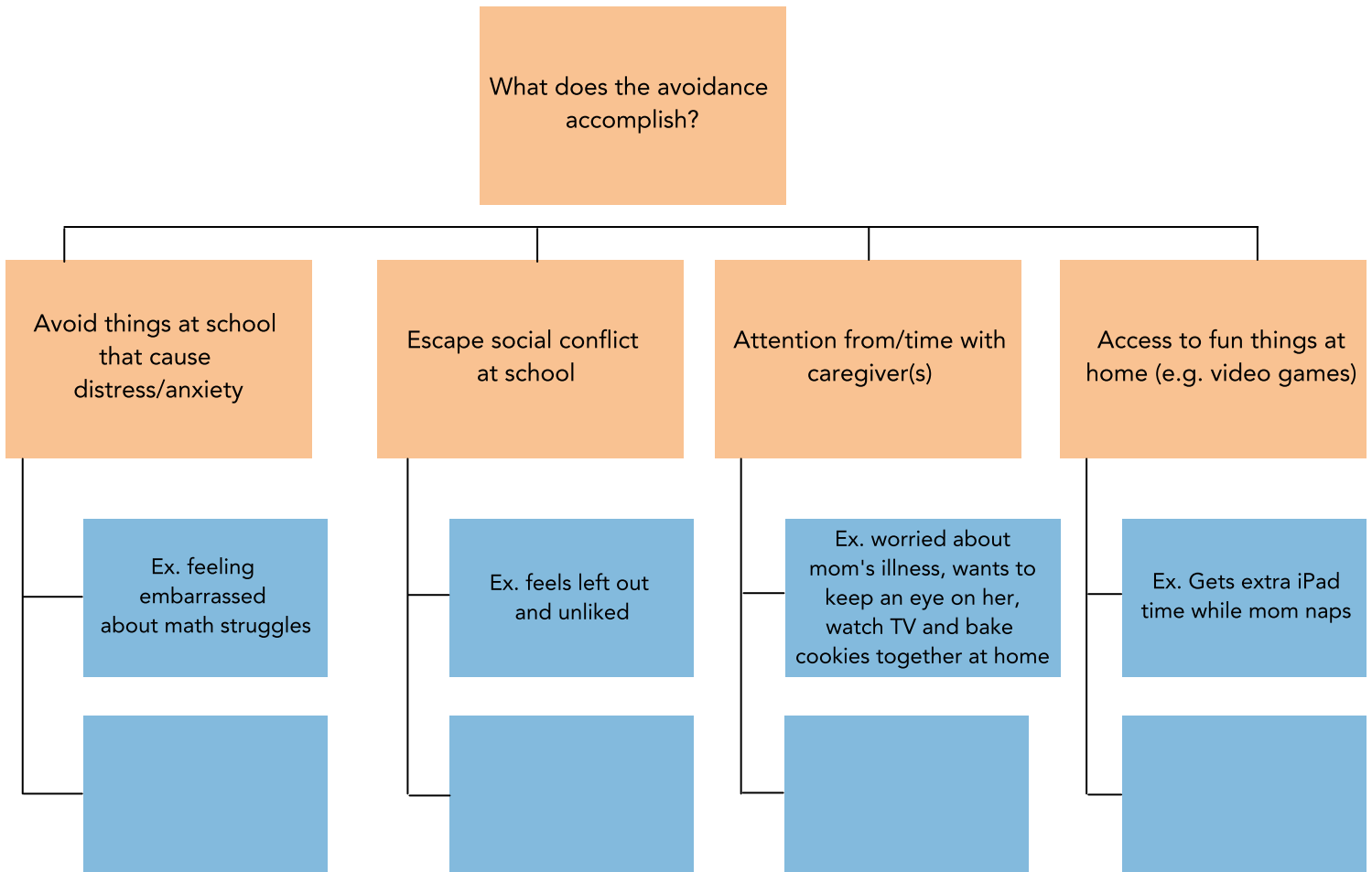*What does your child do at home when they're not at school?*
Notes:

To get at their sleep schedule and whether this is an additional barrier to getting to school on time and feeling rested

- *What time does your child usually go to bed? Wake up? Do they have their phone with them in the bedroom?*
  Notes:

Record the potential functions of school avoidance for this particular student

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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │ What does the        │
                    │ avoidance            │
                    │ accomplish?          │
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Avoid things at school that cause distress/anxiety	Escape social conflict at school	Attention from/time with caregiver(s)	Access to fun things at home (e.g. video games)
Ex. feeling embarrassed about math struggles	Ex. feels left out and unliked	Ex. worried about mom's illness, wants to keep an eye on her, watch TV and bake cookies together at home	Ex. Gets extra iPad time while mom naps

2c) Assess areas that may be exacerbating anxiety

Social	*Worried about fitting in? Conflict with peers?*

Academic	*Embarrassed about learning difficulties? Overwhelmed with workload?*
Organization / executive functioning	*Struggling to remember remote/in-person class schedule? Remembering to check & hand in homework?*
Family / Home	*Conflict in the home? Worried about parent illness?*

2d) Assess the severity

<u>**Circle one.**</u>

- at risk: early and intermittent nonattendance (missing days here and there, mostly full days when attending)
- developing: missing full days with some regularity; intermittently missing partial days
- significant: missed more than two weeks of school consecutively
- long-standing: missed more than a month of school consecutively

If significant or long-standing, is student working with an external mental-health professional? **YES   NO**

If NO, consider such referrals as appropriate, and aim to initiate during Step 3 (conversation with caregivers)
- For youth: e.g., school counsellor, Child & Youth Mental Health
- For caregivers: e.g., Confident Parents, Thriving Kids (Behaviour and/or Anxiety modules), Connect parent group

Step 3. Set the Stage for Success

3a) Communicating with youth/family

Usually the point person will be the one to talk with the youth/family

Sample scripts to validate and encourage:

To caregiver, if appropriate:

"It sounds like [youth] has really been finding it hard to get to school. I'm so glad you're here today. We find that it really takes a team working together to support youth to get back to school, and you're a really important member of that team! We know it can be really hard on families when kids are struggling – it can be hard to know what to do and how best to help. What we're hoping will happen today is to talk a bit more about some of the challenges [youth] has been having, and make a plan for how to get [youth] back to school. How does that sound? Is there anything else you were hoping to cover today?"
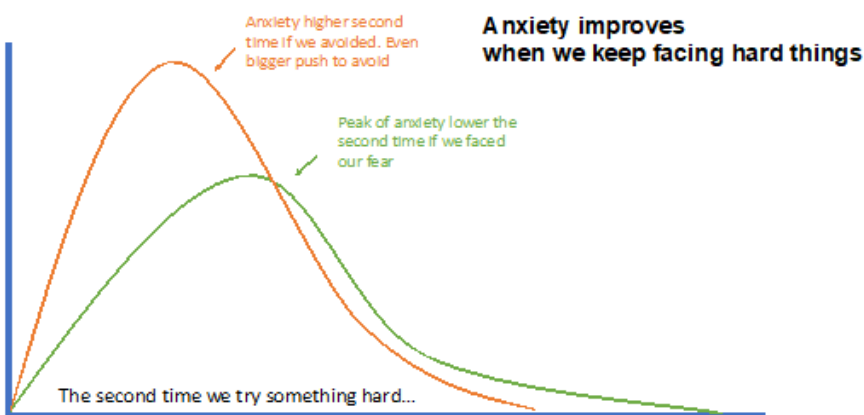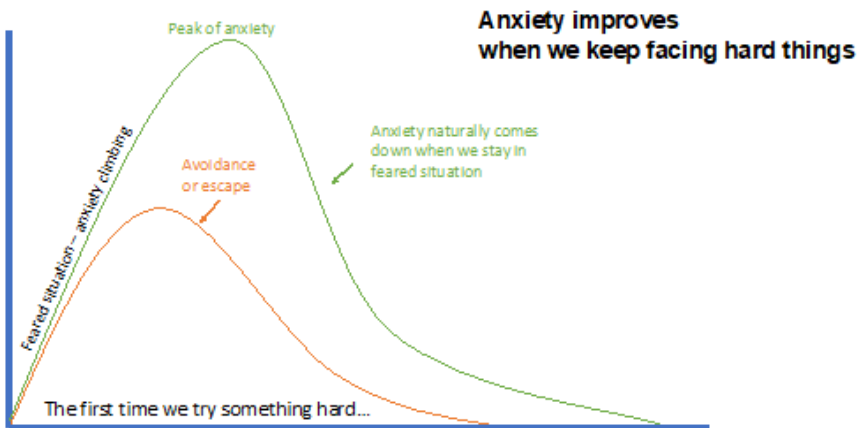
To youth:

"I know you've been finding it really hard to get to school. I'm sorry it's been so tough lately. It sounds like you're struggling with worries about getting to school [and mathematics, being with other kids at recess, etc.]. Thank you for your bravery sharing that with us. We know that when worries are part of the picture, staying away from school usually makes the worries even stronger, and it can be harder to get back when you've been away. Our goal is to work with you on a plan that is realistic and to support you getting back to school.

From the information you and [youth] shared, it really looks like [youth] has been struggling with anxiety about getting to school. We know that when anxiety is part of the picture, 'waiting it out' doesn't usually work all that well. The anxiety can just grow stronger, and it can be harder to get back after they've been away longer. Different kids/teens have anxiety about different things – it sounds like for [youth], the _____ anxiety is the biggest right now, and ____ anxiety is also playing a role. [for example 'social anxiety is the biggest – really those fears about being judged, having to give presentations, those kinds of things. And we know that [youth] also has a harder time with math and writing at school, which probably adds a layer of stress to school as well.] How does that fit for you?"

Is it ok if I talk to you a bit about anxiety and how it works?

Sample materials to provide psychoeducation about anxiety

**Anxiety improves
when we keep facing hard things**

Peak of anxiety

Anxiety naturally comes
down when we stay in
feared situation

Avoidance
or escape

Feared situation = anxiety climbing

The first time we try something hard...

**Anxiety improves
when we keep facing hard things**

Anxiety higher second
time if we avoided. Even
bigger push to avoid

Peak of anxiety lower the
second time if we faced
our fear

The second time we try something hard...

## Sample script for introducing the idea of a stepwise plan

*When it comes to actually starting to get back to school,
we want to make sure we're taking it step by step, and hopefully starting with things that feel easier for [youth], and then working our way up to harder situations as they get more confident and comfortable with being back.*

We'd like to have a meeting with you, [youth], and [school counselor, teacher, etc.] to talk about a team effort to support [youth] getting back to school gradually. When you're talking to [youth], let them know that our goal is to work with them on a plan that is realistic for them. We're here to support and problem solve those barriers that are there.

As mentioned above, consider initiating external mental health referrals if needed

- For youth: e.g., school counsellor, Child & Youth Mental Health
- For caregivers: e.g., Connect parent group

Step 3b) Covering the 3S basics

Sleep

Sports or physical activity

Screen / social media use
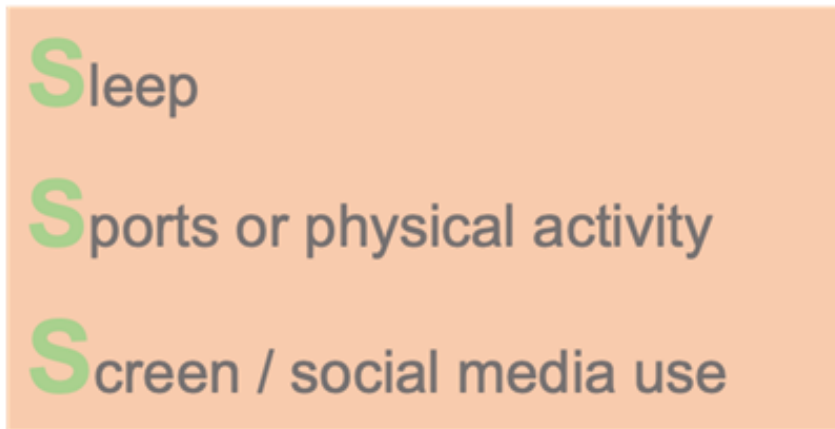
We know that healthy habits in these three areas go a long way towards reducing anxiety & increasing the effectiveness of other interventions.

Sample scripts

What we find tends to work best is a stepwise approach. First we want to talk about barriers to getting back to school on a really practical level. For lots of youth once they stop going to school their sleep cycle often gets out of whack – and it sounds like that's been happening for [youth]. We also know that physical activity is really helpful when it comes to taking the edge off anxiety.

The next step we find really helpful is to make sure that in the daytime, when they're staying home, it isn't too fun…oftentimes when kids stop going to school they're watching shows or videos, or doing other fun things instead of going to school. As we start to talk about a plan for slowly getting back to school, we find it's important to do that at the same time that parents are starting to limit the amount of enjoyable activities they have access to.

Step 4. Develop & Implement Plan

4a) Develop the fear ladder

A fear ladder is a set of increasingly challenging steps toward full re-entry. Often, the school point person can work on this with the child & family. Other times it can be done by the involved mental health professional.
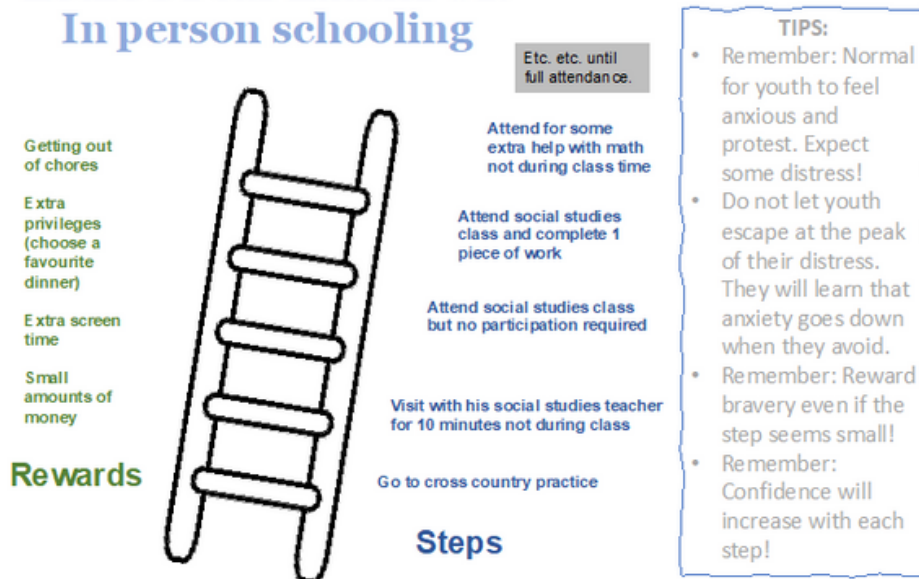
The fear ladder should target & address the functions/maintenance factors that were identified in step 2b). Use the motivational sources & strengths identified in step 2a.

Sample scripts

I hear you that you feel really anxious at school – that sounds incredibly hard and I'm so impressed you've been able to go the days you have. I know you want to get back to school but that feels impossible right now. Why don't we come up with a plan together, and go from there?
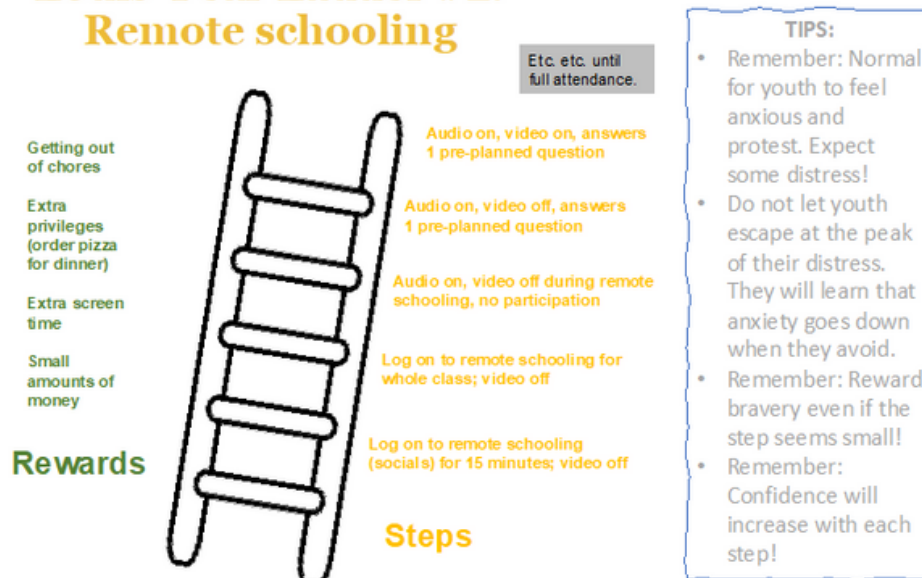
Sample Fear Ladders

Louie's Fear Ladder #1: In person schooling

Etc. etc. until full attendance.

Attend for some extra help with math not during class time

Attend social studies class and complete 1 piece of work

Attend social studies class but no participation required

Visit with his social studies teacher for 10 minutes not during class

Go to cross country practice

Getting out of chores

Extra privileges (choose a favourite dinner)

Extra screen time

Small amounts of money

Rewards

Steps

TIPS:
- Remember: Normal for youth to feel anxious and protest. Expect some distress!
- Do not let youth escape at the peak of their distress. They will learn that anxiety goes down when they avoid.
- Remember: Reward bravery even if the step seems small!
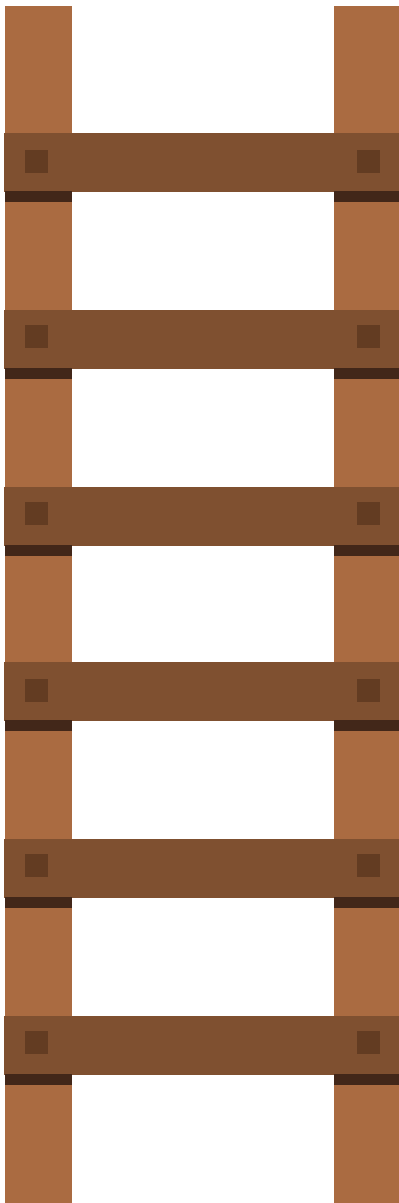- Remember: Confidence will increase with each step!

This will look different for each youth! You do NOT need to plan/share all the steps right away. Remember to link steps to assessment results!

Louis' Fear Ladder #2: Remote schooling

Etc. etc. until full attendance.

Audio on, video on, answers 1 pre-planned question

Audio on, video off, answers 1 pre-planned question

Audio on, video off during remote schooling, no participation

Log on to remote schooling for whole class; video off

Log on to remote schooling (socials) for 15 minutes; video off

Getting out of chores

Extra privileges (order pizza for dinner)

Extra screen time

Small amounts of money

Rewards

Steps

TIPS:
- Remember: Normal for youth to feel anxious and protest. Expect some distress!
- Do not let youth escape at the peak of their distress. They will learn that anxiety goes down when they avoid.
- Remember: Reward bravery even if the step seems small!
- Remember: Confidence will increase with each step!

This will look different for each youth! You do NOT need to plan/share all the steps right away. Remember to link steps to assessment results!

Step:
Reward:

Step:
Reward:

Step:
Reward:

Step:
Reward:

Step:
Reward:

Step:
Reward:

4b) Plan School Re-entry

Key is to make as much of the unknown known so that youth know what to expect (this will vary based on the age of child).

·   Address logistical concerns (e.g. seating arrangement, cover story)

It's really important to talk about what that will look like in advance. It's often good to have a plan for what to say if anyone asks where you've been or why you haven't been at school. Some kids might choose to say that they've been feeling worried, but others might prefer to say that they've been ill or they've been away. It's your personal information and it's up to you to decide. We'll share that information with your teachers so they know the 'story' too. Some kids prefer for their teachers not to say too much when they get back – just 'hi Johnny' – so that there's not too much attention on you. What do you think you would prefer?

4b) Plan School Re-entry

In general, teachers shouldn't draw a lot of attention to them coming back into the classroom
   ·   *Clearly communicate expectations*

For example, "tomorrow you'll sit at your desk but won't have to do any work. Your teacher will say hi but won't call on you at all"

And then eventually:

- Determine what period are they auditing courses for (if appropriate, and if so for how long)
- What work is expected to make up (missed work; going backwards)
- When do expectations for new work start?
- Plan for time at school (how much time? Where? With who?)

Decide on accommodations:
   Think carefully about reducing demands in the stressful areas that you learned about in step 2c).

For example:

"Also we wanted to let you know that the first goal is just getting back to school – not catching up on your work. So if it's OK with you, we'll let your teachers know that they're not to give you any work to catch up on for [amount of days/weeks]. And while you get settled back into being in classes, there also won't be homework for the first little bit. We want to take it step by step! Sometimes certain classes feel easier than others – as you start to get back to school you might want to start with the class that feels the most comfortable, and then work up from there, kind of like climbing a ladder (e.g., not starting with PE if social anxiety)."

- *Document gradual re-entry plan so everyone is on the same page*

Step 5. Communicate & Check-In

- Regular communication with parents/caregivers to monitor progress & celebrate success
- Troubleshoot problems early
- Develop plan for ongoing check-ins to ensure gains are maintained