Back to School Mental Health Workbook



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Welcome to your "Back to School Activity Book"!

Mental health is defined as the "emotions, cognition, and behaviours that vary in response to stress and resilience".[1] This means that when we experience stress, worry, or anxiety, our bodies and minds can sometimes react in unhelpful ways. As you help your child prepare to transition back to school, it's normal to feel anxious for them; this transition can be stressful. This book was created as a way for parents and kids to learn about and practice some mental health strategies that might be helpful for the upcoming school year.

This workbook will include sections where you and your child can:

- Share ideas about what makes your child special or unique
- Review last year's school experience
- Take steps to plan for a successful school year this year

You can set aside some time to sit down together to review this whole workbook, or you can review one section at a time.

This workbook can be completed online using a tablet or keyboard or can be printed out so you can write on it using markers, pencils, or your favourite pen. If your child communicates in another way (such as augmentative communication/AAC), you can transcribe their answers into this book, or just read through the book together. You can add pictures, symbols, or photographs if you like. This is meant to be an opportunity for your child to be creative and have fun.

Part 1 of this Activity Book is designed to help you and your child build self-awareness and emotional literacy through conversation and interactive activities.

Part 2 of this Activity Book can be used to help build your "Backpack" of strategies for supporting your child's mental health and well-being for the school year.

Let's get started.





Part 1: Getting to Know Yourself



All About Me:

This section is an opportunity for your child to share a little bit about themselves. They can add pictures, stickers, or any other extras to better reflect their personality and interests. Guiding questions or "reflections" can help children better understand themselves and build self-esteem.

You may want to share this page or a similar 'All About Me' project with your child's school or teacher so they can learn more about what makes your child unique. For more information about 'All About Me' books, you can visit: connectability.ca/2011/04/15/all-about-me/.

This next section has been designed for your child to complete. Here is an example:

WHAT MIGHT I NEED HELP WITH?	WHAT AM I GOOD AT?
	

ALL ABOUT ME

FILL THESE BOXES IN ABOUT YOURSELF. YOU CAN ADD PICTURES, STICKERS, OR ANY OTHER EXTRAS

WHAT IS MY NAME?

DO I HAVE ANY NICKNAMES?

HOW OLD AM I?

WHAT DO I LOOK LIKE?

WHO IS IN MY FAMILY?

WHAT ARE MY FAVOURITE THINGS?

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS I DON'T LIKE?

WHAT AM I GOOD AT?

WHAT MIGHT I NEED HELP WITH?

Social “Scrapbook”

Some people often find it helpful to review a situation ahead of time. Planning ahead may help your child to know what to expect and feel more prepared. This section will guide you and your child in creating a “social scrapbook”:

- A “scrapbook” is a book of blank or “fillable” pages that people often use to collect pictures or other items (“mementos”) that they would like to preserve or remember.
- A “social story” is a short, simple story that can be personalized and illustrated to help explain or prepare for common social situations.

Using the questions and titles below, you can create a “scrapbook” or homemade Social Story that gives your child information on what to expect when they go to school. Your school support staff or teacher may be able to answer some of these questions, or you can reach out to your school to schedule a classroom visit, meeting, or “virtual tour” if you find that helpful.

This next section has been designed for your child to complete.

This “scrapbook” can help you to explore your school routine and environment before school starts. Your family can help you find the answers to these questions. You can include photographs, maps, videos, or drawings — whatever you find most helpful.

HOW DO I GET TO SCHOOL?



HOW DO I FIND MY WAY AROUND?



For more information on social stories for ‘back-to-school' you can visit surreyplace.ca/resources/tips-for-using-social-stories-to-support-changes-in-routine/



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HOW DO I GET TO SCHOOL?

HOW DO I FIND MY WAY AROUND?

WHERE IS MY CLASSROOM?

WHERE IS THE WASHROOM?

WHERE DO I EAT LUNCH?

WHERE CAN I GO IF I NEED A BREAK?

HOW DO I GET OUTSIDE FROM MY CLASSROOM?

WHO CAN HELP?

WHO IS MY TEACHER?

WHO ARE THE OTHER IMPORTANT ADULTS / STAFF AT SCHOOL?

WHO ARE MY CLASSMATES?

Getting to Know Your Emotions



As you and your child work through what to expect next year, your child may start to have feelings of worry or anxiety. They may or may not know exactly what they are worried about; they just know it doesn't feel "right." As a parent, one thing you can do is support your child in learning skills in emotional literacy; this means learning what emotions are, understanding how they may feel in their bodies, and starting to figure out what works to make them feel better. This section includes activities about identifying and labeling emotions, and identifying "worries" — and begins to introduce coping strategies.

Let's start by discussing characters' emotions in media and/or books. It can be easier for children to understand their emotions once they recognize them in others. Some books you might want to read together:

Early Elementary:

- The Pout-Pout Fish Goes to School by Deborah Diesen
- Llama Llama Misses Mama by Anna Dewdney
- What Riley Wore by Elana Arnold and Linda Davick
- All Are Welcome by Alexandra Penfold and Suzanne Kaufman
- School's First Day of School by Adam Rex and Christian Robinson
- The Day You Begin by Jacqueline Woodson
- A Letter from Your Teacher on the First Day of School by Shannon Olsen



Older Elementary/Middle School:

- Judy Moody was in a Mood by Megan McDonald
- Amina's Voice by Hena Khan
- Other Words for Home by Jasmine Warga
- The World Needs More Purple Schools by Kristen Bell and Benjamin Hart
- The Magical Yet by Angela DiTerlizzi
- Your Name is a Song by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow

Some movies or TV shows you might want to watch together:



Early Elementary:

- Daniel Tiger's Neighbourhood
- Sesame Street
- The Berenstain Bears Go to School: youtube.com/watch?v=4FrOysJYILU
- Back to School with Franklin: youtube.com/watch?v=Nyrn_prvr08

Older Elementary/Middle School:

- Arthur Back to School: youtube.com/watch?v=7KBUBeaNxUg
- The Healing Powers of Dude (Netflix Original): How Anxiety Feels | The Healing Powers of Dude | Netflix After School - YouTube
- Young Sheldon: Young Sheldon: First Day of High School (Season 1 Episode 1 Clip) | TBS – YouTube

As you watch TV or read a book together, it's important to talk about what the characters are experiencing.

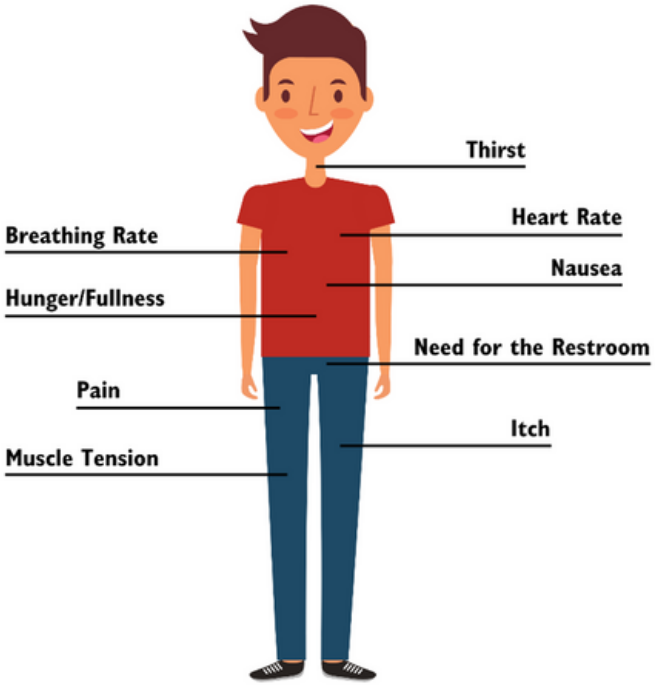
Here are some questions you might want to ask your child:

- How did the character feel about going to school?
- Do you think they felt angry, sad, scared, excited?
- How did you know they were feeling that way?
- What did they do to feel better?
- What could they pack in their backpack that would help them?

Internal Awareness

Once children understand what emotions are, they can start to identify them in themselves, but first, they need to understand what these "feel" like in their bodies. Sensations coming from inside our body can tell us what our body needs and how it feels. Understanding these sensations is called "interoception," [2] and it can help us understand what our body needs. For example, if we are hungry, our stomach might feel empty or "grumbly," or if we need to use the restroom, we might feel tight or full in our bladder. Internal sensations can also give us clues about our emotions. For example, if we are feeling nervous or excited, our heart might be beating quickly, or our breathing may be faster than usual.

Here are some examples of sensations you may want to think about as you help your child do a body "check-in":



Paying attention to our "internal sensations" (interoception) helps people figure out what's going on in our bodies, and then we can connect these sensations to a feeling or emotion word.

For more information and resources related to interoception, see:

youtube.com/watch?v=A0zbCiakjaA&t=19s

kelly-mahler.com/what-is-interoception/

Let's practice!
This next section has been designed for your child to complete.

The following activities have been modified from various sources, including The Coping Cat [3] Workbook and Creative Interventions for Children and Families. [4]

I felt happy at school when _____

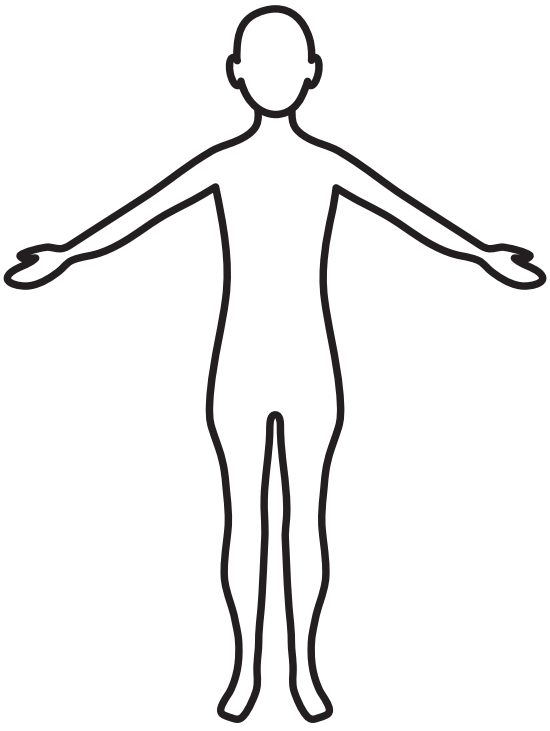
_____

_____

What was happening?

What thoughts were you having?

What did it feel like in your body?



I felt sad/angry/worried/scared at school when _____

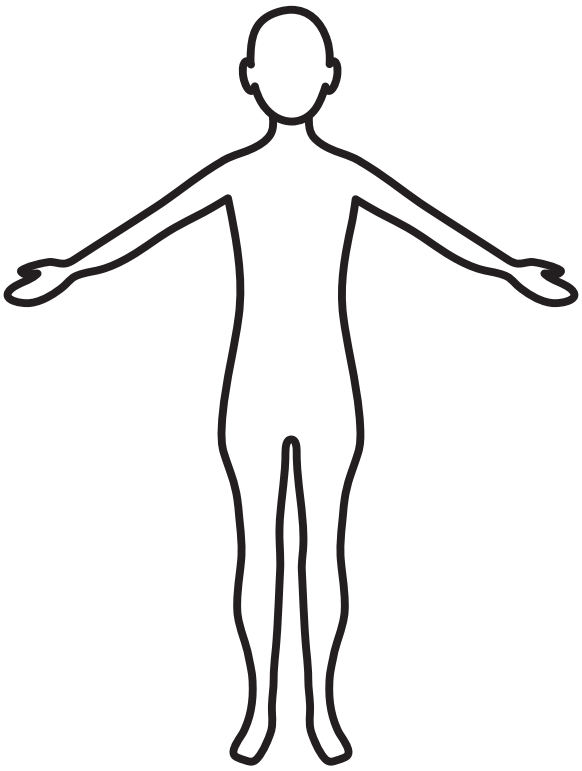
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What was happening?

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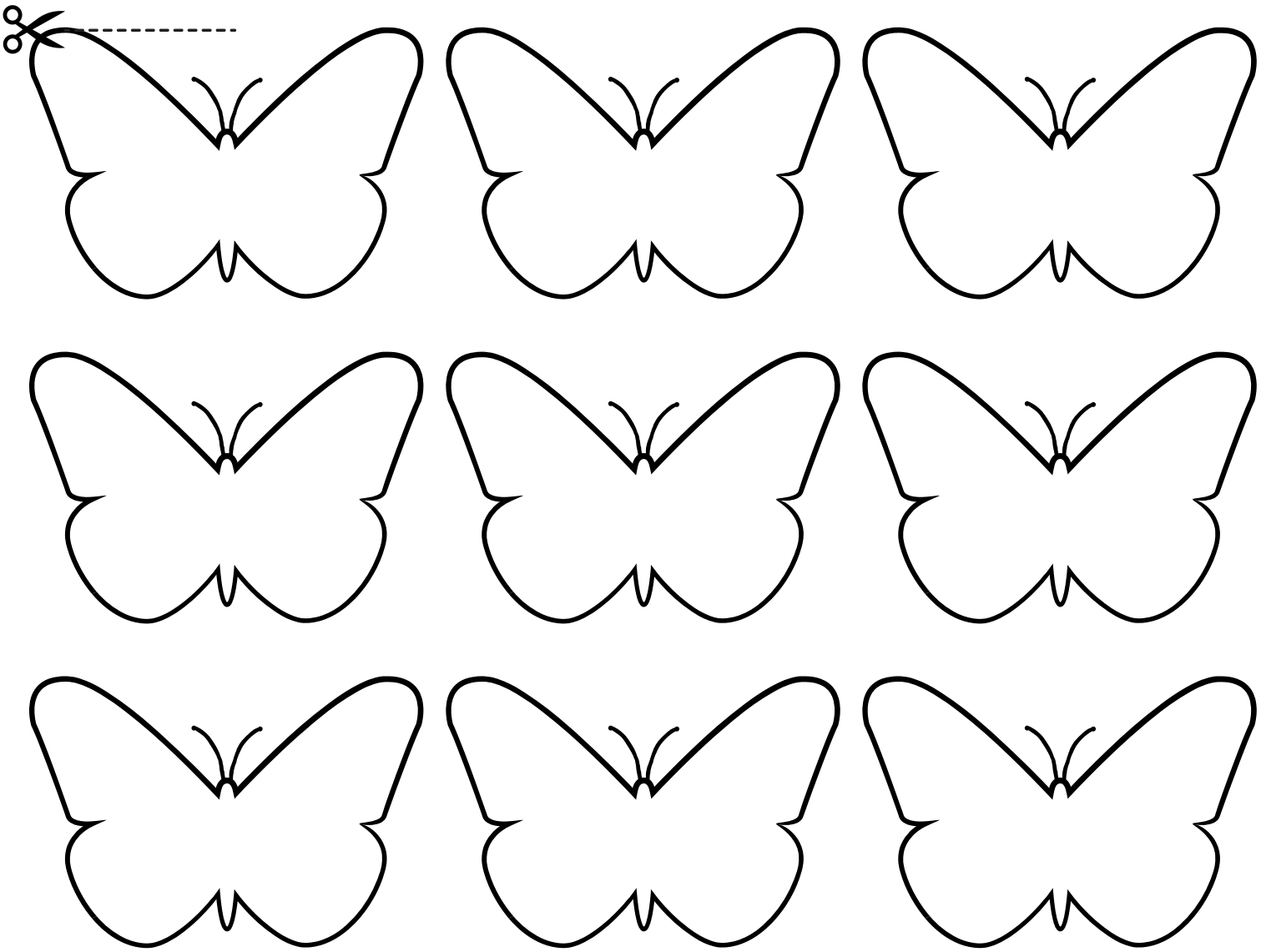


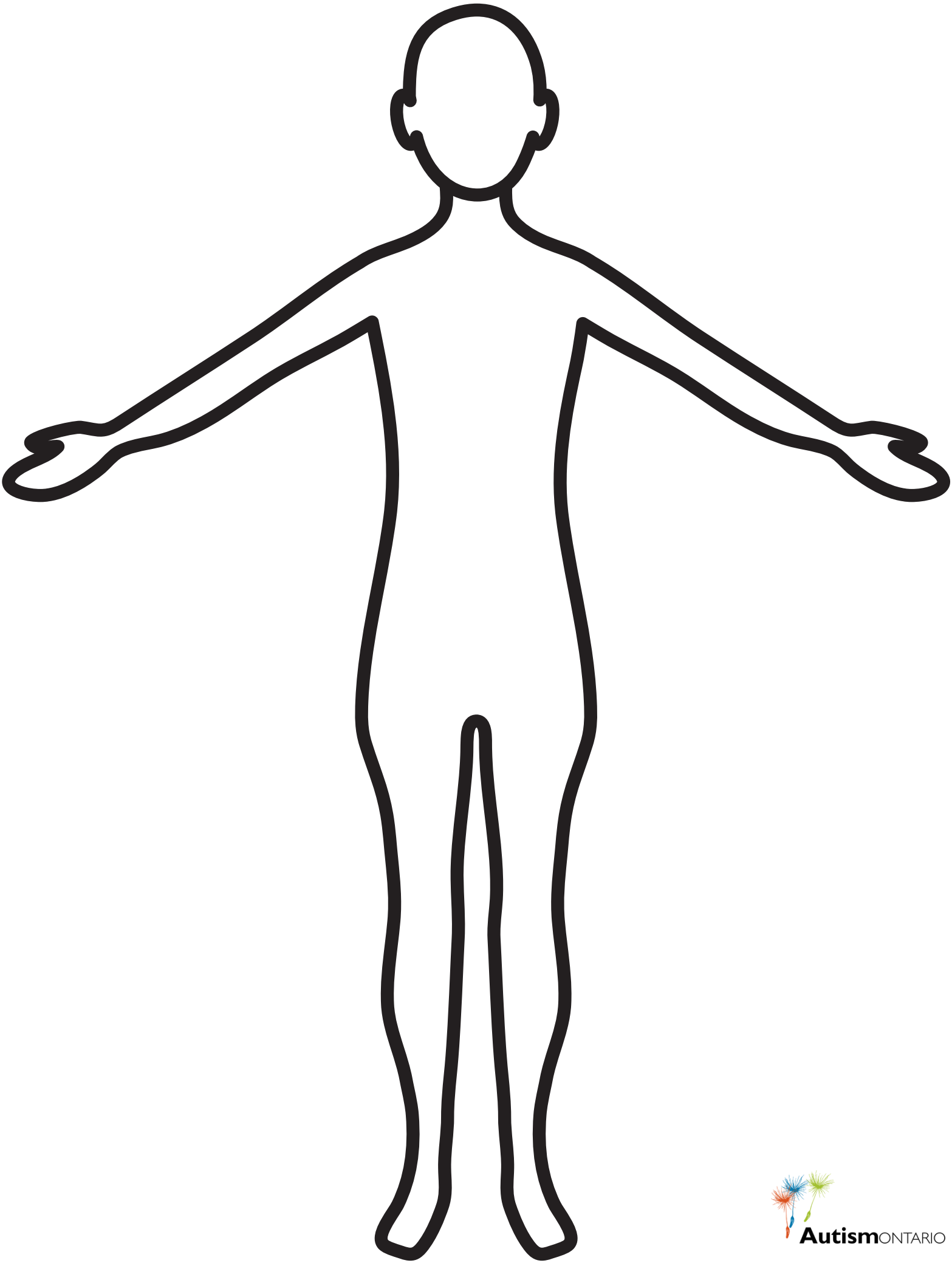
All these experiences are important to talk about with your child. It's important that they understand that the human experience includes all the emotions, not just the "happy" ones. It can be helpful for you as the parent to provide examples of your feelings as well.

Bonus Exercise

If your child identifies different emotions and experiences well, they might be ready to label specific worries. You can talk about what worries your child has and where they "feel" their worries in their bodies.

Have your child write or draw their worries in these butterflies. Then, they can cut them out and glue them onto the "body" on the next page.





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Part 2: Building Your "Backpack"



Year in Review:

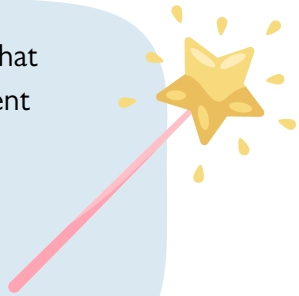
This section allows your child to reflect on their last school year. Reflecting — and remembering — what happened before can help you and your child identify some strategies that may be helpful this year, or ones that weren't helpful and might need to be adjusted.

You may want to share this section with your child's school or teacher if they are unfamiliar with your child or new to your school.

Here are some questions you can ask your child, or they can fill out this section on their own:

What went well last year? What was your favourite thing about last year?

If you had a magic wand, what would you like to be different about this year?





What could you do to make this happen?

What are you most looking forward to this year?

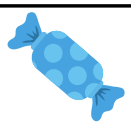
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Sensory Tools

Some people like to use sensory tools to help them stay calm and regulated. Your child's school may have some of these tools they can try, or you can bring your own from home. You may want to put your child's sensory tools in a special box, bag, or backpack so your child can take them with you when you go out in the community. Here are some examples of things that you might want to try.

This next section has been designed for your child to complete.

First, draw a line to match the sensory tool with the sensory need.

I like to suck or chew on things	
I like to put things in my mouth	
I find certain lights or sunlight too bright	
I have a hard time sitting still on a regular school chair	
I like to wiggle my feet while sitting	
I like the feeling of something heavy on my body	
I like to keep my hands busy	
I find it too loud sometimes	

Second, draw a circle around each sensory tool you would like to include in your "backpack"

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Mindfulness Strategies

Mindfulness is an approach to mental health where people are trained to pay attention to the moment and bring awareness to their bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and senses. This section introduces 3 types of mindfulness strategies that might be helpful for your child when they are feeling overwhelmed or anxious.

Grounding techniques help people reconnect with the present moment and focus on the sensations in and around them. This grounding technique — called the 5-4-3-2-1 technique — is very common and your child is directed to bring their attention to each of their five senses (sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste). Not every child will benefit from identifying each of the senses, or they might not need all 5 every time. For example, they may focus on 5 things they can see and 4 things they can touch because hearing, smelling, and tasting only increase their stress. Be flexible and listen to what your child needs most; you're the expert!



Give it a try! What did you think? What did your child think?

These next strategies combine both breathing and visualization. Taking deep, controlled, breaths brings more air into the body and helps calm your body and nervous system. Deep breaths are magical because they reduce stress and anxiety more quickly than any other strategy. There are lots of different breathing techniques available online, but here are two that we like.

The first breathing exercise is called 'Calm Down Cocoa' and involves using your hands to pretend to be holding a hot mug. You can show your child how to take a deep breath in through their nose, pretending that they are smelling the sweet chocolate smell, and then as they take a deep breath out through their mouth, they can pretend to be cooling down the cocoa to drink it. Another fun exercise is to pretend that, on the exhale, they are moving the imaginary marshmallows around on the top.

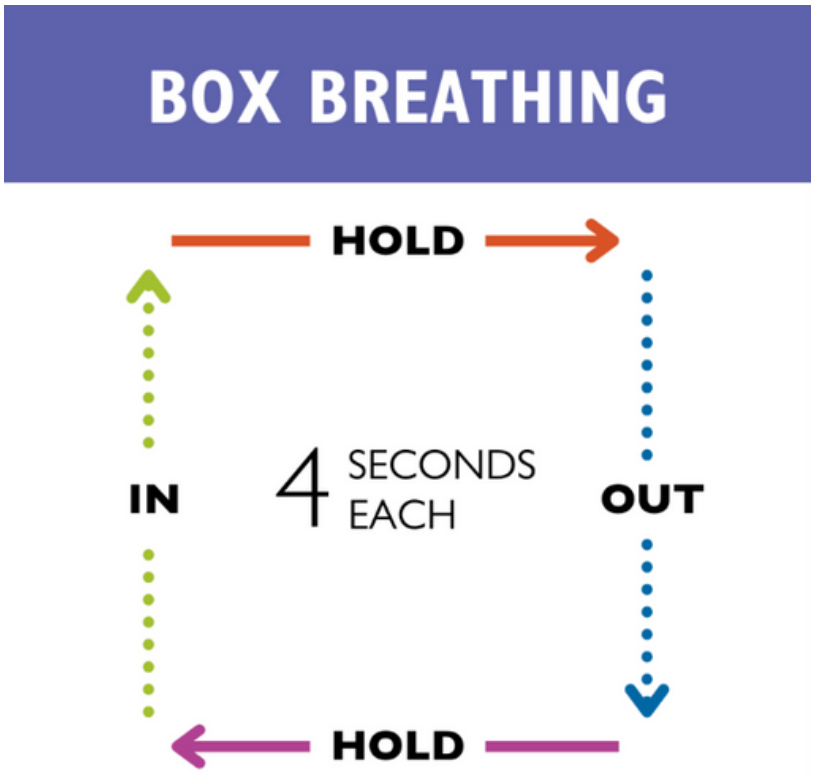
Sometimes strategies like this feel too "abstract" or "pretend" for children, so it may be helpful to actually have a hot mug of cocoa to practice on



Give it a try! What did you think? What did your child think?



The second breathing exercise is called 'Box Breathing', and it involves taking a deep breath through your nose, holding that breath for 4 seconds, exhaling for 4 seconds, holding that for 4 seconds, and inhaling again for 4 seconds. It can be helpful to have your child use their finger to trace the box as they do the breathing to help remind them what step they are on. Sometimes 4 seconds is too long for some children; they can try 3 seconds if it's feeling like 4 is too much.



Give it a try! What did you think? What did your child think?

Planning for Success

Planning ahead can be an important way to protect your family's mental health. When we have a plan already in place, sometimes unexpected challenges can feel a little more manageable. Students and parents or caregivers may want to work together on setting up a plan for staying organized during the school year. This might look like creating a family calendar, daily schedule, homework log, or agenda. Your child's school may also have a system they use, such as a communication book or app. You can revisit this plan throughout the school year to make any changes or updates.

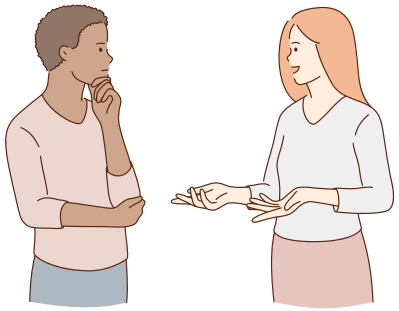
Questions to discuss as a family might include:

What will our daily routine look like? How will we communicate if there is a change in routine?
For example, what is the plan if the student is being picked up from school early for an appointment?

How will we communicate with teachers and school staff if we have questions or need clarification?
For example: Do we send an email? Is it okay to call the teacher directly?







How will we keep track of important dates like school events or assignments?
For example, will we use a family calendar to show activities and important appointments?

For more ideas on how to communicate with your school team, check out the 2022 'Back to School' webinar series Part 1, Part 2



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Families may want to set aside time for regular "check-ins," where students and parents or caregivers can share questions about schoolwork and assignments, or simply debrief about their day at school. Some students may need some time to do something they enjoy after school (like listening to music or cuddling with a pet), or may need to "recharge their batteries" with a snack or rest before they are ready to talk about school. Going for a walk or drive together can sometimes be a good opportunity to check in. Other students may prefer to "check-in" via text or messaging rather than having a face-to-face conversation.

For more information and resources related to school and homework, please see: hmilestones.org/resources/tool-kits/homework-tool-kit



We hope this activity book has been helpful in planning ahead for this school year. Feel free to come back to these activities throughout the year. We have also included some resources you might want to check out for more information and ideas. Happy Back to School!

Additional Resources

Autism Ontario Webinars and Resources

- Self-Regulation and Well-Being with Stuart Shanker: autismontario.com/node/470
- Exploring the Senses webinar series: autismontario.com/node/876
- Back to School Part 1: Strategies to Prepare for School Routines with Kristin Gunby and Bethany Brewin: autismontario.com/node/896
- Back to School Part 2: Strategies for Connecting with your School Team with Tracie Lindblad and Danielle Nolan: autismontario.com/node/899

Other Online Resources

- How to Support a Mentally Healthy Back to School for your Child- School Mental Health Ontario: smho-smso.ca/online-resources/tip-sheet-how-to-support-a-mentally-healthy-back-to-school-for-your-child/
- School Mental Health Backpack- School Mental Health: family.cmho.org/school-mental-health/
- Student Wellness Resources- Kids Help Phone: kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/going-to-school-50-student-wellness-resources
- School Mental Health Ontario- Parent Activities: smho-smso.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/EDMH-ParentActivities-FINAL-EN.pdf
- The ABCs of Mental Health- York Region District School Board: yrdsb.ca/student-support/mental-health/abcs-mental-health
- Cosmic Kids- Start School with a Smile: mailchi.mp/cosmickids/your-cosmic-kids-back-to-school-toolkit?e=f76b2144e5

AIDE Canada Resources

- Treating Mental Health Conditions in Autistic Individuals: A Toolkit for Understanding Approaches to Mental Health Care: aidecanada.ca/learn/mental-health/treating-mental-health-conditions-in-autistic-individuals-a-toolkit-for-understanding-approaches-to-mental-health-care
- From Just Surviving to Thriving in High School: aidecanada.ca/resources/learn/education/from-just-surviving-to-thriving
- Understanding Education Rights in Canada: A toolkit for parents in the autism community: aidecanada.ca/resources/learn/community-inclusion/accessing-education-for-children-and-youth-with-autism-and-or-intellectual-disability-seeking-to-ensure-educational-needs-are-met
- Mental Health and Sensory Challenges for Teens: aidecanada.ca/resources/learn/mental-health/mental-health-and-sensory-challenges-for-teens

Books for Parents

- The Whole-Brain Child by Daniel J. Siegel: drdansiegel.com/book/the-whole-brain-child/
- Brain-Body Parenting by Mona Delahooke: monadelahooke.com/brain-body-parenting/
- Start Here: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children and Teens Through Mental Health Challenges by Pier Bryden and Peter Szatmari
- Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life by Stuart Shanker: library.aidecanada.ca/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=2008&query_desc=any%2Cwrdl%3A%20Stuart%20Shanker
- Workbooks for Children/Teens
- The Neurodivergent Friendly Workbook of DBT Techniques Using Dialectical Behavior Therapy to Manage Anxiety, Stress, Autism, ADHD, and Promote Well-Being: amazon.ca/Neurodivergent-Friendly-Techniques-Dialectical-Well-Being/dp/B0B8R6DVZF/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1685645358&sr=8-2

Children's Books on Emotions, Anxiety, Worry, and Self-Esteem

- Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside
- Franklin and the Thunderstorm by Paulette Bourgeois and Brenda Clark
- Giraffes Can't Dance by Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees
- Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst
- Franklin's Bad Day by Paulette Bourgeois and Brenda Clark
- The Colour Monster by Anna Llenas
- In My Heart- A Book of Feelings by Jo Witek
- For more books and ideas, check out amightygirl.com

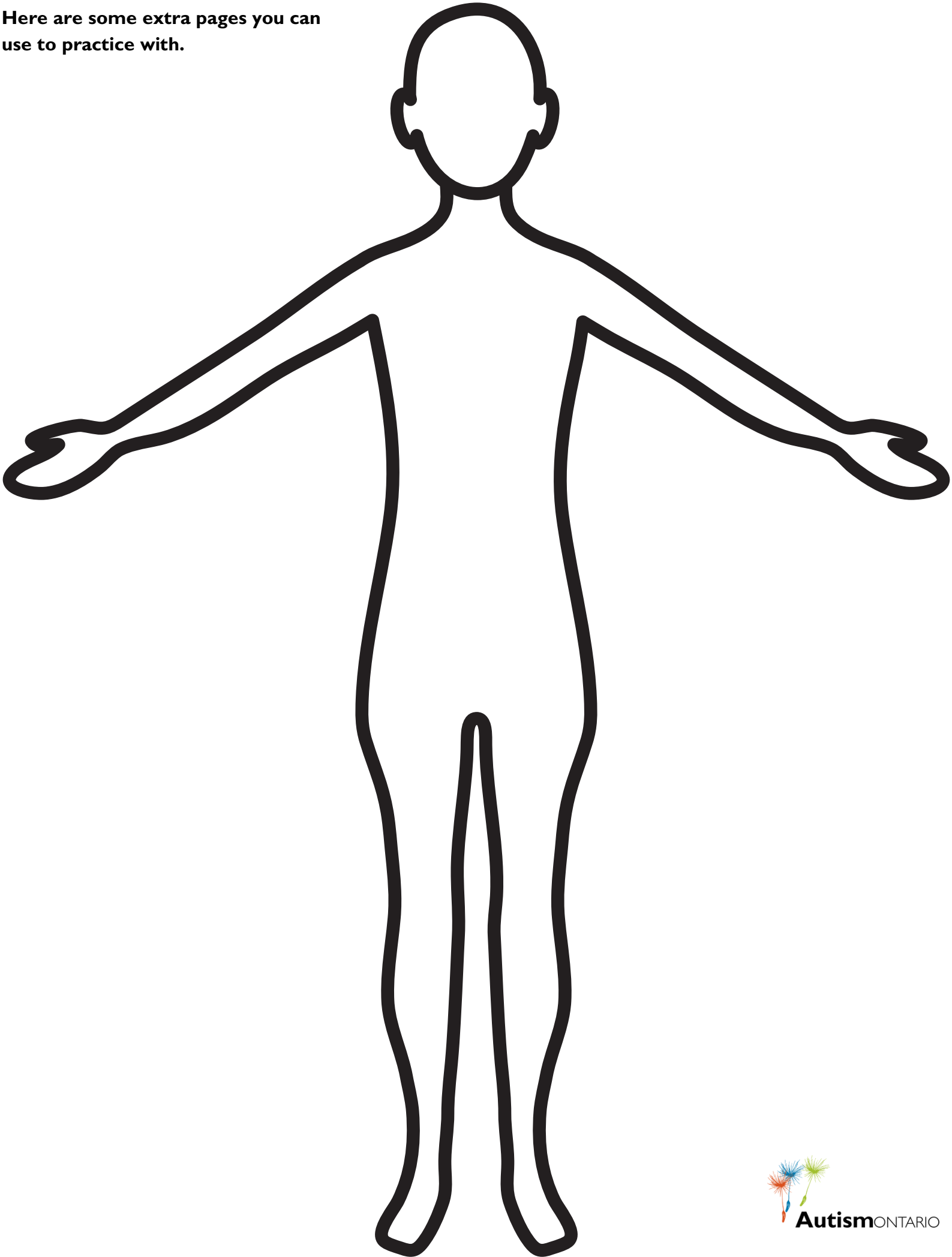
Resources on Mindfulness

- I am Peace by Susan Verde
- I am Yoga by Susan Verde
- Cosmic Kids Yoga (YouTube)
- Bedtime Explorers (podcast)
- Little Renegades- Mindful Kids cards

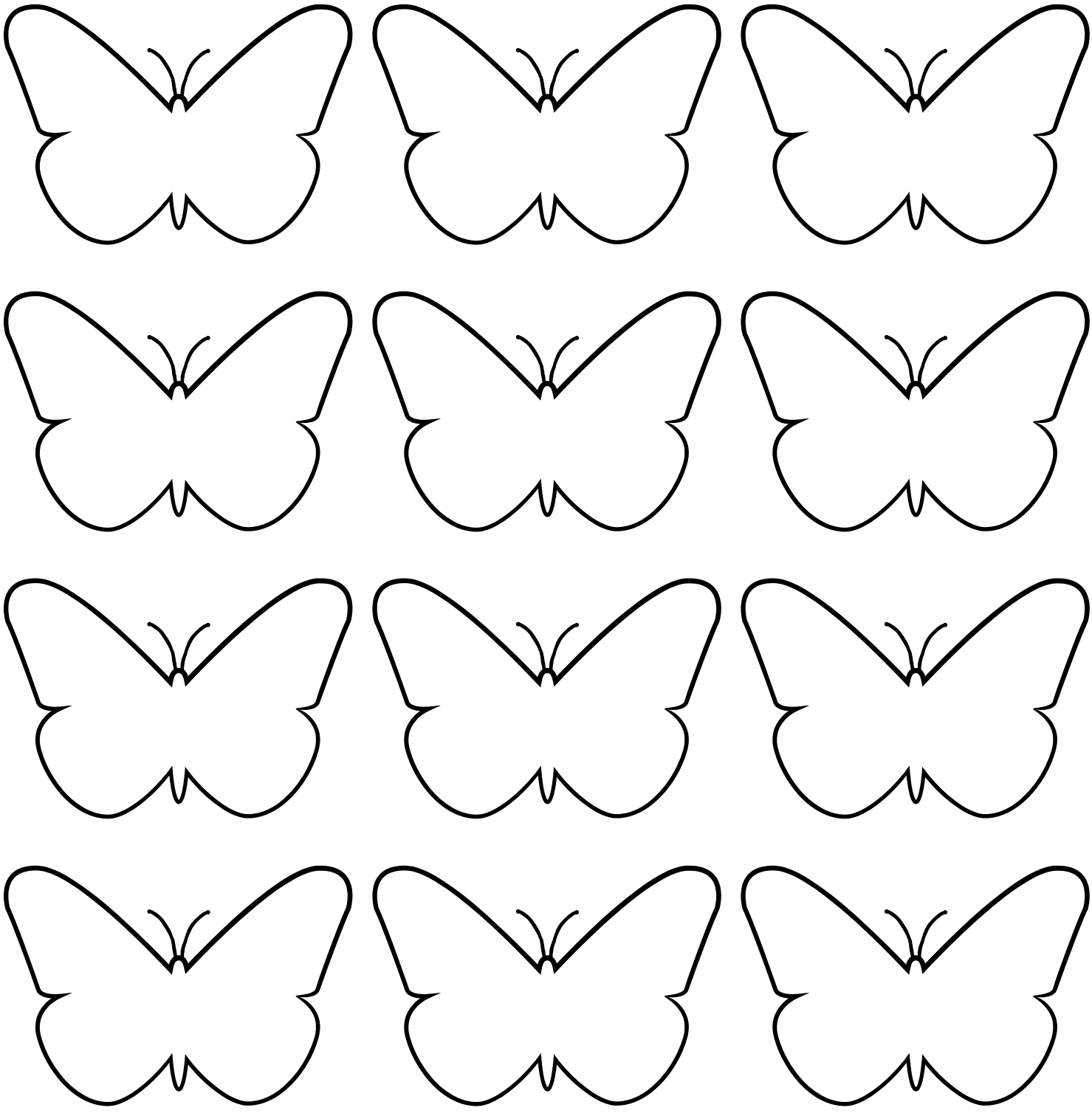
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3. Kendall, P. C. & Hedtke, K. A. (2006). Coping Cat Workbook 2nd Edition. copingcatparents.com/Books_and_Resources
4. Lowenstein, L. (n.d.). Creative Interventions for Children and Families. lianalowenstein.com/article_journals.pdf

Here are some extra pages you can use to practice with.



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