Back to School Anxiety

How to help kids manage worries and have a successful start to the school year

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The start of the new school year is exciting for most kids. But it also prompts a spike in anxiety: Even kids who are usually pretty easy-going get butterflies, and kids prone to anxiety get clingier and more nervous than usual. Parents feel the pain, too: Leaving a crying child at preschool isn’t anyone’s idea of fun. And having to talk a panicked first grader onto the bus or out of the car at school can be a real test of your diplomatic skills.

Kids who normally have a little trouble separating from mom and dad will see their anxiety peak during times of stress or transition, notes Rachel Busman, clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. The start of school may be especially challenging for kids who are entering a transition year, she adds — going into kindergarten, into middle school, to a new school. It can also be stressful if there’s a change in your child’s social support system — maybe a good friend has moved, or has a different teacher this year.

For most kids the new-school-year worries will fade and the anxious behaviors will be transient, Dr. Busman adds. The goal for parents is to be supportive without exacerbating your child’s worries. Here are tips for helping nervous kids have a successful transition back to school.

Take your own temperature

For parents, the start of the year can be anxiety inducing, too, Dr. Busman notes. The pressure’s on you to reinstate routines after the summer break and arrange for new activities and schedules, not to speak of facing the resumption of homework.

Dr. Busman recommends taking your own temperature to make sure you’re not passing on stress to your kids. And to enable you to manage your own stress, she says, it’s important not to take on more commitments than the family can handle comfortably. “I think there’s a contagion effect that we have to be careful of,” she adds.

Listen to worries

When kids express anxiety about going back to school — a new teacher, increases in homework, making a team, a friend crisis — do listen seriously.

Rather than dismissing these fears (“Nothing to be worried about! You’ll be fine!) listening to them and acknowledging your child’s feelings will help him feel more secure. And if he wants to, you can bolster his confidence by helping him strategize about how to handle things he’s concerned about.

But keep in mind that kids often want to be able to talk about something they’re upset about without expecting you to fix them. Your job is validate their feelings (“I know that’s hard”) and demonstrate confidence that they can handle the situation.

Don’t ask questions that suggest you expect kids to be anxious (“Are you worried about having Mr. Connelly for math?”) but check in with them in a more casual way. “It doesn’t have to be a half-hour discussion,” notes Dr. Busman, “but in the car on the way to get a new backpack, you might ask “Do you know what you’re going to be learning in math this year?” Kids often say more when there is less pressure to “have a talk.”

Do some test runs

If you anticipate that your child will be seriously nervous on the first day, it helps to give her time to get used to the new school or new classroom in advance. Go to the school several times before school starts, and do as much walking the halls as you can, to locate her classroom, the lavatory, the cafeteria, the playground. Repetition is good; going by again just to ask a question at the office, or drop off a form, gives her more chances to get comfortable being there.

If you can, introduce her to her teacher. Let her practice staying in the classroom a few minutes while you walk down the hall to drop off a note the nurse’s office.

Even driving to the school on the weekend and having her practice getting out of the car at the drop-off point can help her get familiar with that routine.

“Any opportunity for exposure, for repetition, for mastery is going to help her do what we call ‘coping ahead,’ ” Dr. Busman notes.

Let someone know

If your child needs extra support to make a successful transition, let someone at school know — his teacher, an aide, the school psychologist or the school nurse. You want to communicate that your child is looking forward to school and is excited — you’re sure he’ll be fine — but he will be much more comfortable if he can meet the teacher briefly and see the classroom before the crowded, chaotic first day, when all the other kids will be there.

You’re not asking for a lot — just a little exposure that will set him up to succeed. And you’d like the staff to be alert to signs that he might need an assist.

Arrange for a hand-off

If you think your child will be reluctant to separate, it’s very helpful to have someone primed to meet and engage her when you arrive. The teacher may be too overwhelmed to pay special attention to your child, Dr. Busman notes, “but maybe she has a buddy in the class, or you could ask an aide, the nurse, the school psychologist, to plan for a handoff.”

What you want that person to do is not to talk about or dwell on her anxiety, she explains, but to engage your child in some activity. Asking the child for help is a good way to do that — “Can you help me carry all the magnet tiles over to this bin?”

Giving the child a role is transparent, Dr. Busman notes. “They’re not pretending the parents aren’t leaving, but they’re helping your child get involved in the classroom, be part of the community. Kids for the most part love to please adults and want to be part of the activity, so it can really help take their minds off anxiety.”

When separation problems persist

Leaving a child who is crying or whining at school is a tough thing for any parent to do. “But most kids are pretty resilient,” Dr. Busman notes, “and we don’t want to underestimate their ability to cope. Most kids recover quickly once mom or dad leaves.”

If your child’s teacher reports that she bounces back and participates enthusiastically in activities during the day, the best way to help her get more confident about separating from you is not worrying too much about her complaints.

“It’s not being a bad parent to ignore a little bit of whining or reluctance,” says Dr. Busman. “It will actually help a child move beyond it if you give more attention to things that you do want to see her do.”

You want to give specific praise for brave behavior. For example, remind her you will be back to get her and tell her things like, “Great job coming to preschool today. When I pick you up I hope you’ll tell me something fun you did.”

“The way we as adults interact and react is so important: a little bit of active ignoring, a little bit of positive attention and a lot of encouragement,” Dr. Busman notes.

If kids continue to have full-blown separation problems, and fears that something bad will happen to their parents interfere with their ability to function in school, they should be evaluated by a mental health professional.

Stomachaches and headaches

Anxiety about school sometimes takes the form of headaches and stomachaches in the morning that kids say make them too sick to go to school. If your child develops a pattern of these symptoms, it’s important to get your child checked out by a pediatrician; you don’t want to overlook a medical problem.

But if the pattern persists, going to school may be the problem.

The most important thing a parent can do when kids resist going is to continue sending them to school anyway. This may be difficult, but if we allow children to avoid situations that make them anxious, we can inadvertently reinforce that those situations are indeed dangerous or scary.

But if a child continues to complain about physical symptoms, it’s also important to investigate what might be causing anxiety. It could be sign of an anxiety disorder, or another problem at school. For instance:

* [A child with OCD](http://childmind.org/article/what-does-ocd-look-like-in-the-classroom/) might avoid going to school because it’s hard for him to manage his anxiety there
* [A child who’s been bullied](http://childmind.org/article/how-to-know-if-your-child-is-being-bullied/) may be afraid to go to school because his tormenters are there
* [A child with separation anxiety](http://childmind.org/article/what-is-separation-anxiety/) might be afraid something terrible will happen to mom if they’re apart
* [A child with an undiagnosed learning disorder](http://childmind.org/article/supporting-the-emotional-needs-of-kids-with-learning-disabilities/) might be avoiding shame and embarrassment

School refusal

When stomachaches and headaches and other reasons not to go to school — or to go late or leave early — become persistent, a child may have developed what’s called [school refusal](http://childmind.org/article/when-kids-refuse-to-go-to-school/).

“Everyone resists going to school once in a while, but school refusal is an extreme pattern of avoiding school that causes real problems for a child,” says Dr. Busman. School refusal is distinguished from normal avoidance by a number of factors:

* How long a child has been avoiding school
* How much distress she associates with attending school
* How strongly she resists
* How much her resistance is interfering with her (and her family’s) life

If a child’s resistance to school is overwhelming and prolonged, she should be evaluated by a mental health professional, and it’s good to proactive rather than waiting months for it to pass. “Unfortunately, the longer a child misses school, the harder it is to get back in the routine,” Dr. Busman notes, “because being absent reinforces the anxiety that is keeping her away.”

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