

A Message for Parents - Helping Children “Navigate” Back to School Anxiety

For many children the return to school creates excitement, but for others it may be a source of apprehension and worry. Parents can be instrumental in helping their children manage the transition to a new school year and, at the same time, assist them in gaining important life skills.

Some children openly express resistance to going back to school and/or worries about doing so. Others may display observable signs of anxiety. These signs might include problems falling asleep, physical complaints (stomachaches or headaches), changes in mood, including irritability, changes in behavior, including angry outbursts, withdrawal, and/or increased dependency and clinging.



What Can Parents Do?

Ask & Listen

- If a child acknowledges being worried about starting school, you might ask, *“I wonder what you think starting school will be like”* and listen.
- If you are observing, rather than hearing, the likelihood of back to school anxiety, you might ask, *“I wonder if you are worried about starting school”* and listen.
- Putting anxiety in perspective can be reassuring, e.g. telling children, *“It’s normal to feel nervous in new situations and it really helps to talk about what worries us”*.
- While it is natural for parents to want to immediately reassure children, doing so closes the door to communication and the child’s ability to identify their feelings.
- Expand communication with statements like, *“Tell me more about that”*. *“What else worries you?”*
When parents help children think through issues that promote anxiety, it builds the ability to analyze and plan.

Provide Support

Parents can help children develop a capacity for self-calming and problem-solving by discussing strategies to address anxiety that can be used whenever they feel anxious.

- These might include the creation of statements that promote calm. A parent might say, *“When I get nervous, I tell myself I will be ok, that I can do this.”*
- Demonstration of a simple breathing technique that decreases anxiety, *Take Five*, can be helpful. *“Breathe in, hold it, and then breath out. Let’s do that 5 times.”*

Return to Routine

Routine and structure are highly comforting to children.

- A week or so before school starts, progressively moving up bedtime and awakening earlier by 15 or 20 minutes each day can assist with transition to school.
- A return visit to a child’s school before the first day can be comforting.

Intense and/or Persistent Worries

If anxiety about starting school is intense and/or if anxiety persists after school starts, it is important to inform a child’s teacher(s). If parents have concerns related to the anxiety their children are experiencing, these issues can also be discussed with the administrator, social worker, counselor, or school psychologist in your child’s school.