



Back-To-School Worries

Helping children cope with starting a new school year.

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Although they might groan about the end of summer and the start of homework, for most children, the beginning of the school year is an exciting time, full of possibilities. Each new school year entails new teachers, new classmates, new experiences...but all this newness brings uncertainty, which means that almost every child will feel at least a tickle of back-to-school anxiety.

Mild symptoms of back-to-school anxiety might include "butterflies in the stomach," spending a lot of time picking just the right outfit for the first day of school, being full of questions, or staying more quiet than usual. More uncomfortable symptoms might include having trouble sleeping, decreased appetite, restlessness or irritability. Severe symptoms might involve tears, tantrums, or even refusing to go to school.

Different ages, different worries

What children worry about varies with age. Preschoolers, kindergarteners, and first graders might have a hard time with separation, especially if they have limited experience being away from a parent. Young children tend to worry about getting hurt and about practical logistics, such as "What if I can't find the bathroom?", "What if I get on the wrong bus?" or "What if I come out of school and my mom/dad/sitter isn't there?"

In a new school, older children might have practical worries similar to younger kids, such as "What if I can't find my classroom?" or "What if I can't get my locker open?" However, they're more likely to have social concerns, such as "Will my teacher be nice?", "What if I don't have any friends in my class?", and "Who will I sit with at lunch?" Older children are also more likely to worry about school performance and the increased work demands in a higher grade. Adolescents tend to worry about how others, especially peers, will evaluate them. Children who are in the youngest grade at a school sometimes fear being picked on or pushed around by the big kids.

If your child seems anxious, it's worth asking, "What are you concerned about?" Children sometimes hear incorrect or exaggerated information from other kids that frightens them unnecessarily (e.g., "All the fifth grade teachers are really mean!", "You'll go deaf if the fire alarm goes off!", or "Everyone in middle school gets bullied!"). You may be able to offer reassurance or correct misunderstandings to put some fears to rest. You may also want to try to have more "hang out time" together, if possible. Our simple presence is comforting and soothing to our children and gives them the opportunity to talk if they want to do so.

Support your child's coping efforts

Here are some more ideas about how to help your child cope with back-to-school worries:

- Acknowledge your child's feelings. Dismissing your child's fears by saying, "Don't worry. It'll be fine" will just prompt your child to argue more that things won't be fine. It's kinder and more effective to acknowledge that your child feels scared. You could say something like, "You're nervous about starting at the upper school," or "You're worried because your friends from last year are mostly in a different class." Just hearing that you understand can often ease the burden of worries for children.

- Provide as much predictability and control as possible. This could mean visiting a new school before opening day, finding a photo of your child's new teacher on the school website, or printing out a floor plan of the school to let your child plan a route between classes. It could mean starting up a regular bedtime routine a few days before school begins, laying out clothes the night before, or helping your child organize school supplies such as color-coded folders for each class. It could mean arranging for your child to walk to school with a friend or encouraging your child to plan an after-school get-together with some buddies.

- Make plans for handling possible rough spots. If your child is worried about a particular situation, help your child figure out a plan for handling it. For instance, if your child says, "What if I have no one to play with at recess?" ask, "What could you do in that situation?" and then brainstorm solutions or offer suggestions, if necessary. Be specific. For example, on the playground, your child could stand in line to use the slides or swings, join a game of basketball, tag, or four-square, or scan the playground for another child who seems to be looking for a playmate. With young children, it may help to point out that teachers, aides, and even the principal will be available to help and to make sure things go smoothly. With older children, you may want to emphasize that other kids will be dealing with the same problems.

- Emphasize continuity. Children often hear, "Things will be a lot different once you're in grade XI!" This can be alarming. Emphasizing continuity, rather than dramatic changes, helps children feel less adrift. Ask your child, "How different are you the day after your birthday compared to the day before your birthday?" The answer, of course, is that although the chronological age has changed, your child hasn't changed noticeably. Moving up a grade works the same way. You may want to tell your child, "Your classmates are the same kids you saw in June. Year to year, there are big differences; month to month, not so much." You could also tell your child, "Just like you managed the transition from first to second grade, and second to third grade, I'm sure you'll manage this transition, too. It's just another step on the same path".

Set positive but realistic expectations.

The most important thing you can do to ease back-to-school worries is to share your confidence in your child's ability to cope. Children tend to look to their parents to help gauge, "How dangerous is this new situation?" If you are calmly optimistic that your child will manage the back-to-school transition, it makes it easier for your child to be hopeful, too.

You may need to help your child accept that sometimes it takes time to get used to new circumstances. For instance, if your child is worried about changing classrooms, you could say, "Right now, the idea of changing classes seems scary, but my guess is that after a few weeks, you'll be used to it, and it will seem like no big deal."

You may also want to tell stories of how your child coped successfully in the past. "Remember when you went to soccer for the first time, and you didn't know anyone? What happened then? Right, you and Brandon got to be good friends." The message to your child is, "You coped then, so you'll be able to cope now."

When my children were younger, I used to tell them at the beginning of the school year, "Somewhere in your new class is a child who is waiting to be your friend. How will you figure out who that is?" This helps children notice and be ready to respond to friendly overtures from classmates, and it sets up a positive expectation about the school year.