

Back to School Anxiety for K-5 Students

As the start of the school year approaches, have you seen your first grader go into meltdown mode at the mention of school, or watched your soon-to-be kindergartner regress back to baby talking and thumb sucking? Rest assured that you're not alone. Each fall, millions of parents deal with their children's beginning-of-the-year anxiety. For younger children starting school—whether it's pre-school, kindergarten, or a transition into the first or second grade—having a grown-up lean down and say, "How exciting, you're starting school soon," can be similar to telling an adult they're going to be scaling Mt. Everest next week!

And the fears children have about school can be very real: they may be apprehensive about separating from their parents, riding the school bus, or meeting a new teacher. The emotions your child experiences before the start of school can also lead to a general sense of anxiety—a feeling most children won't be able to articulate.

It's important to remember that when placed in any new situation, all children (and parents, too) are going to need to take time to adjust. Realize that your child will require a period of time to figure out their comfort zone and what's required for them to fit in to their new environment. Fortunately, there are steps you can take as a parent to make the prospect less daunting—the key is to prepare your child both emotionally and physically so that they can have the best start possible this school year.

Take away as Many "Unknowns" as Possible

One way you can help ease your child's anxiety is to show them what their school year will look like. Anxiety often feeds on fear of the unknown, so try a common sense approach to take away as many of these from the equation as possible. A few weeks before school starts, consider doing the following:

* Talk to your child about what they're going to be doing in the upcoming school year. If your child is starting school for the first time, see if there's a kindergarten orientation or a way to meet their teacher before school begins. Whether they're starting a new elementary school or going back to the same one, go explore it with your child. Review where their class will be, visit the cafeteria, the library or the art room. Take them to the playground (with a friend who'll be going to their school, if possible) to help them get adjusted and feel comfortable at the school. Give your child a "preview" of the new faces and places they'll be seeing. This can help to "right size" the school in your child's mind and take the fear and mystery out of it.

* Many schools post their school itineraries online so parents can review what their children will be learning, what activities they'll engage in, and what fun things they may do during the year. Use this information to get your child excited about school.

* Talk about your own school days, the fun activities you loved, and what made your school experience special. Kids love to hear stories from their parents' childhood because it helps normalize any difficult feelings they are experiencing. (As an added benefit, I've found that these talks with my own children have become a springboard for them to ask questions about their own hopes and fears concerning school.)

"But Who Will I Play with at Recess?"

Many kids, even those aged 7 and younger, initially experience anxiety over how they will handle social situations in the new school year. They may worry that they won't have anyone to eat lunch with or play with at recess, or they might be afraid—and rightfully so—of last year's class bully. Try the following tips to help your child feel comfortable in social settings at school:

* If your child hasn't seen school friends over the summer, it isn't too late to invite them over to help your child get re-acquainted with them and excited for school. Visits to the park, pool, or movies with old friends—and new ones, too—can make your child feel more comfortable when they encounter their peers at school.

* Try doing some role plays with your child to help ease their fears. For example, if you discover that your child is afraid of riding the school bus, set up an area in the house and do a “pretend” ride to school. Take turns being the bus driver, your child, or his or her classmates. Come up with ideas together to make riding the bus a less scary prospect.

* If your child was in school last year, talk to them about any social situations that caused them stress. Reviewing strategies on how to handle bullies or other negative social situations can relieve the tension your child may have prior to school beginning. Remind them of their options when another child is bullying them. For example, they can walk away from the situation, inform the teacher, or yell loudly, “Stop it, I don’t like that!” (And as a parent, don’t forget to talk with your child’s teacher about any classroom policies they might have regarding bullying.)

* If your child bullied others or acted out in the classroom, set up some guidelines for what you expect of him or her socially this year, along with consequences of what will happen if he does not comply. Equally important, create a list of possible rewards for improved behavior. Remind your child that this is a new year and express your confidence that he or she will behave better now that they’re a year older.

If Your Child’s Anxiety Persists

It’s not uncommon to do all the right things and still have a young child who will have a bad case of the nerves—or even more extreme anxiety—before they begin the school year. Many kids will report physical symptoms such as a stomach or head ache. Others will regress to earlier behaviors, including thumb sucking or wetting the bed, while other kids may act out aggressively, fighting a lot with siblings, or talking back to their parents. Keep in mind that the age of your child offers no reassurance that they will experience less anxiety. Whether you have a tender-hearted preschooler beginning school for the first time, or an outgoing child entering first grade, each may experience nervousness and stress at the beginning of school. Here are some ways you can talk to your child to help reduce their fears:

* Know that a child starting pre-school for the first time may experience more anxiety than an older child. In simple terms, tell them that everyone will be new—and is feeling the same way they are! Promise your little one a special surprise after their first day. This can include a small toy, a new book, or special time with a parent. To normalize your child’s feelings, remind them that everyone, including other students and even their teacher, feels a little nervous on their first day—or even throughout their first week—of school. If you can, talk about your own experiences of being scared about school and what your fears were when you were young.

* Allow your kids to talk about their fears and give them reassurance that this is normal. With some kids, you may have to probe a little: Are they afraid they won’t get a nice teacher? Are they nervous about not having any friends? Does the school work scare them? Whatever it is, continue to emphasize that all children have these fears and they are not alone.

* Try coaching your child in problem solving. For instance, if they’re afraid to ask the teacher questions, do role plays together on how to speak up in class. For shy children, you can also practice the art of social skills together: role play introducing yourself to peers, sharing, and using words (instead of hitting, grabbing or pinching) when you interact with others. If your child is scared of school work, talk about ways you will help them when they get home. Let them know how they can work on areas that they struggle with (like reading out loud or spelling) and ask, “What would be helpful for you when it comes to spelling?”

* If the first couple of months of school pass and your child still exhibits signs of difficulty adjusting, begin by talking with his or her teacher to see if there are things you can do together to ease their anxiety. If it still persists, talk to your pediatrician about what your options are.

I also advise parents to make the first week of school a special event for your family. If both parents work outside the home, consider adjusting your work schedule for that first week (if at all possible) to make your child’s transition smoother. Research shows that the first week of school is really tough for kids, no matter the

age. Younger kids going through a lot of new and challenging experiences need to feel secure at the beginning of the school year to help them adjust appropriately for the rest of the year. It would be a good idea for a parent or trusted caregiver to be home after school during the first week to talk with your child, but this may not always be possible. If not, set aside a time in the evenings to discuss how your child's day went and to listen to any concerns. Other ways to celebrate the first week include having family meals together, making your kids' favorite foods for dinner, packing special notes in their lunch, or going out together as a family for ice cream after dinner.

Going to school offers a wide range of emotions for parents as well as children. Whether it's dread or excitement, fear or euphoria, all of these feelings can be bottled up inside our kids. Remember that any one symptom of distress does not cement a child's fate or mean that their school year will be a failure. All kids, at some point in their academic career, will struggle, so try hard not to view their setbacks or anxiety as a permanent threat to their school career. Every year that your child goes through school will be filled with highs and lows, good moments and devastating ones. However, through encouragement, support and keeping your finger on the pulse of you child's emotions, you are laying the groundwork for their future success in school.

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