

Helpful Tips As We Return Back To School

Back to school season is in session. Except this year, families aren't just dealing with a summer hiatus — many are facing a year-plus diversion from life and school as we know it (hello, Teams), plus shifting mask guidelines. No amount of typical prep can get us ready for the curveballs this school year may bring.

So, we turned to some experts for five tips on helping your kids carry less of an emotional backpack:

Talk it out. Normalize the idea of going back to school by telling stories of your time at school and your parents going to work back when you were a kid. Read books about school. Take them to the school beforehand (even if it means driving to the parking lot) if possible and talk through how exciting this new adventure will be. “Making these new challenges familiar will go a long way to reduce anxiety,” said Dr. Helen Egger, co-founder, chief medical officer, and chief scientific officer at Little Otter.

Develop rituals. Coming up with routines around saying goodbye can help with separation anxiety. “Predictability lowers anxiety and builds trust and security,” said psychotherapists and parenting experts Heather Turgeon and Julie Wright. This might mean driving a certain route to school, giving five hugs and kisses before they leave, or developing a special wave for saying goodbye. They also suggested having kids and parents draw a picture or write a note for each other during the day to exchange at home.

Empathize. If your kid seems stressed, empathize first. It's tempting to try and fix their worries, but understanding should come before anything else. Turgeon and Wright advised that “Telling your child, ‘You're okay’ or ‘It'll be great’ is not as helpful as, ‘I hear you. It's so different,’ or ‘What else are you thinking about?’ or just nodding and saying, ‘Tell me more about that.’”

Manage your own feelings. “Children pick up on parents’ emotions and concerns like sponges,” said Dr. Egger. “If you express fear about the impending separations, you might be giving your child the message that they, too, should be scared.” Instead, reach out to your partner, friends, or a therapist about your own separation anxiety or other stressors.

Give it time. Many parents and kids will need extra TLC this year. With the shift back to in-person school, Dr. Egger cautioned that kids’ routines like sleeping through the night, getting dressed, or following directions may slip a bit. “Many children will behave well all day at school and then have tantrums when they come home,” she

said. “After ‘holding it together all day’ at school or daycare, the child can let that tension go in the safety of their home.” Some turmoil is normal. But if a child’s anxiety goes on for more than a month, becomes intense and distressing, or causes them to avoid activities, you may need to do deeper work to address these issues.” Your pediatrician can suggest a specialist.

It’s been a tough year to be an adult, so it’s no surprise that it’s been hard to be a little one too. The transition back to ‘normal’ may take time and patience. But going back to school in-person should eventually give both parents and kids a renewed sense of independence and freedom.

If you believe your child requires added support, please don’t hesitate to contact the mental health professionals at your school.