

## Easing Back to School Fears

The new school year is a time of excitement and anticipation, but it can also cause a certain amount of stress and anxiety for both children and parents. Even if your child is not expressing any back to school fears, this does not mean that they are worry free. They may be reluctant to share their concerns because they are embarrassed or because they do not know how to express them correctly. Some children worry that they may not be able to keep up academically. Others worry about information they have heard about their grade or teacher. Unfortunately, older children seem to delight in telling frightening school stories to younger children. Socially, they may worry about friends that are in their class and friends that are not in their class. They may also be concerned about who they will sit near and who they will play with at recess.

Similarly, parents worry about many of the same things their children worry about. As a parent, you may wonder if your child will be comfortable with their new teacher. You may be concerned that your child does not have their closest friends in class. Or, you may be unhappy with some of the peers that are in your child's class. For those who have children with special needs, concerns may revolve around whether your child can manage the curriculum or whether they may get lost in the new routine. If you are starting to become overwhelmed with your own concerns, seek out other adults to talk to. Stay calm, relaxed, and positive around your children. If your child notices you becoming anxious, this will exacerbate their own anxieties.

To help ease your child's fears, first you have to uncover their specific concerns. A good way to start is to ask leading questions, such as, "What have you heard about kindergarten (first grade, second grade, etc.)?"; "What do you think school is going to be like this year?"; "Have you heard anything about your teacher, Ms. Jones?" Many times children will be more willing to share their friends worries and may even disguise their own concerns as their friends. So you may want to ask, "Have your friends told you anything they are worried about this school year?"

Once you've gotten to your child's specific concerns, you can work them through one by one. If your child has heard negative things about their teacher, describe positive things you have experienced or heard about your child's teacher. For a child that is fearful about their academic skills, help them to develop realistic goals that they might have for themselves during the current school year. For children concerned about specific social situations, help them to develop back up plans for any conflicts that they fear may arise. Setting up some play dates will help reconnect them with school friends if they have been out of touch over the summer. You may also want to pass on information to your child's teacher about any specific concerns that your child is having through a phone call, meeting, or quick note.

Dr. Tamar Chansky, author of [Freeing Your Child from Anxiety](#), offers these additional tips and advice for reducing back to school anxiety:

- Normalize their fears -every child is feeling the same thing as they are. Even the teachers feel nervous at first when school starts.
- Share a story of your own about going to school or another new situation. Let your child know that things don't stay new forever. Help them think of a time

when they were faced with something new and got used to it. How long did it take?

- Arrange a pleasant visit at school, such as eating a snack in the playground. At home, play “school”. Switch off roles, letting your child be the teacher and himself/herself.
- Have your child make a list of fears on one side of the page, then help correct the distortions by writing the “facts” on the other side of the page. Fold the paper and keep the facts side up.
- If there are concrete issues, think up specific strategies to address them such as finding the right bus line, or how to find a seat in the cafeteria.
- Turn preparation into a fun and social event -go shopping with friends for school supplies or lunchboxes; decorate books together.
- Work on a backpack -put phone numbers, bus numbers in a safe place. Find a picture or memento of home to take to school.

Remember that some amount of back to school anxiety is normal as with any transition period. All new routines take time with an expected adjustment period for both you and your child. If your child is having significant, persistent difficulty sleeping, giving you a hard time coming to school, asking lots of “what if” questions, crying, clinging, or whining more than usual, feel free to call the Psychologist’s office for further guidance on reducing anxiety.

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