

Helping Your Child Cope with Back-to-School Anxiety

Anxious feelings are normal and expected during times of transition or change. This is especially true for children and teens going back to school, or for first-timers starting a new school. This transition can be stressful and disruptive for the entire family! Prior to the first day of school, your anxious child may cling, cry, have temper tantrums, complain of headaches or stomach pains, withdraw, and become sullen or irritable.

Worries are Common. Anxious children and teens worry about many different school-related issues, such as teachers, friends, fitting in, and/or being away from their parents. Some common worries include:

- Who will be my new teachers?
- What if my new teachers are really strict?
- Will any of my friends be in my class?
- Will I fit in?
- Do I look OK?
- Will I look stupid?
- Who will I sit with at lunch?
- What if I miss the bus?
- What if I can't understand the work?
- What if I forget my planner or homework?
- What if something bad happens to my mum or dad while I am at school?

Although it is normal for your child to have worries, it is crucial to make your child attend school. Avoidance of school only increases and reinforces your child's fears over the long-term, and makes it increasingly more difficult to attend. Besides missing school work, children and teens that stay at home because of anxiety miss:

- Valuable opportunities to develop and practice social skills
- Important chances for success and mastery
- Being acknowledged and praised for talents
- Fostering close friendships with classmates

How To Deal With Back-to-School Worries!

Below are some general strategies parents can use to deal with back-to-school worries.

Most importantly, anxious children and teens that miss school cannot realise or challenge their unrealistic and catastrophic fears!

Look after the basics

Nobody copes well when they are tired or hungry. Anxious children often forget to eat, don't feel hungry, and don't get enough sleep. Provide frequent and nutritious snacks for your child. During this time, you also need to build in regular routines, so that life is more predictable for your child. These routines can involve the morning and bedtime habits, as well as eating schedules.

Encourage your child to share his or her fears

Ask your child what is making him or her worried. Tell your child that it is normal to have concerns. Before and during the first few weeks of school, set up a regular time and place to talk. Some children feel most comfortable in a private space with your undivided attention (such as right before bed, or during mealtime). Teens often welcome some sort of distraction to cut the intensity of their worries and feelings (such as driving in the car, or taking a walk).

Avoid giving reassurance...instead, problem-solve and plan!

Children often seek reassurance that bad things won't happen in order to reduce their worry. Do not assure them with "Don't worry!" or "Everything will be fine!" Instead, encourage your child to think of ways to solve his or her problem. For example, "If (the worst) happens, what could you do?" or "Let's think of some ways you could handle that situation." This gives you the opportunity to coach your child on how to cope with (and interpret) both real and imagined scary situations. You will also be giving your child the tools he or she needs to cope with an unexpected situation that might arise.

Focus on the positive aspects!

Encourage your child to re-direct attention away from the worries, and towards the positives. Ask your child, "What are three things that you are most excited about at school?" Most can think of something good, even if it's just eating something they like at lunchtime or going home at the end of the day. Chances are that the fun aspects are simply getting overlooked by repetitive worries.

Pay attention to your own behaviour

It can be anxiety-provoking for parents to hand over care and responsibility of their child to teachers. Children take cues from their parents, so the more confidence and comfort you can model, the more your child will understand there is no reason to be worried or anxious.

Be supportive yet firm

When saying goodbye in the morning, say it cheerfully – once! Ensure you don't reward your child's protests, crying, or tantrums by allowing him or her to avoid going to school. Instead, in a calm tone, say: "I can see that going to school is making you anxious, but you still have to go. Tell me what you are worried about, so we can talk about it." Chances are, your child is anxious about something that requires a little problem-solving, roleplaying, planning, and/or involvement from the support of school.