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HOPEforNutley.org

NEWSLETTER



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Coping with Back to School Anxiety

Anxious feelings are normal and expected in children and teens returning to school, changing schools, or for first-timers starting kindergarten. This transition can be stressful and disruptive for the entire family. In the days leading up to school, your anxious child may cling, cry, have temper tantrums, complain of headaches or stomach pains, withdraw, plead or bargain, and become irritable or angry.

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 teacher and what if s/he is mean?*
- *Will any of my friends be in my class?*
- *Are my clothes OK?*
- *Will I look stupid?*
- *Who will I sit with at lunch?*
- *What if I miss the bus?*
- *What if math is too hard for me?*
- *I can't remember anything I learned last year!*
- *What if something bad happens to mom or dad while I am at school?*

Although it is normal for your child to have worries, **it is crucial to have your child attend school.** Skipping school will only increase your child's fears because s/he never gets a chance to find out if his/her worries are valid. Furthermore, when children and teens stay home because of anxiety, they 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

- Learning basic skills like reading, writing, and mathematics

5 Steps To Deal With Back-to-School Worries

Step 1 Take care of the basics: Ensure your child is getting enough sleep, eating regular meals and healthy snacks and has daily exercise. When your child's mind and body are nourished, tackling school worries is easier. Plus, your child will be more likely to listen to you, and cope better when you insist on school attendance, if s/he has had a good nights sleep and a decent breakfast.

Step 2 Provide empathy: Listen to your child's concerns. *What is s/he worried about? Why does s/he expect that to happen?* Let your child share his/her fears and talk about what's on his/her mind. There may be good opportunities to simply listen to your child when you are in the car, standing in line at the store, at bath-time or during dinner. For some kids and teens this "casual" method of talking feels less intense and makes it easier for them to express themselves. For others, a private time with undivided attention feels better.

Step 3 Problem solve: Once you know what's bothering your child, you can start to develop a coping plan. Anxious youth are often poor problem solvers and doubt their ability to cope. Addressing your child's fear head on, by creating an active plan with concrete solutions, will significantly reduce the worry. 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.

Step 4 Focus on the positive aspects: Once you have an understanding of what your child is afraid of, and a coping plan to address these fears, you can encourage your child to re-direct attention away from the worries towards the positives. Ask your child, "*What are three things that you are most excited about on your first day of school?*" Most kids can think of *something* good, even if it's just eating a special snack or going home at the end of the day. Chances are the fun aspects are simply getting overlooked by repetitive worries.

Step 5 Pay attention to your own behavior: For parents of younger children or children starting at a new school, 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 calm you can model, the more your child will believe s/he can handle this new hurdle. 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/her to stay home. Instead, in a calm tone, say: "*I can see that going to school is making you scared, but you still have to go. Tell me what you are worried about, so we can talk about it.*"

School Preparation Timeline (You may not need to take all of these steps)

1-2 weeks before school:

- Gradually return your child to a school-day sleep and wake routine. If your child has been going to bed several hours later than usual and sleeping in during the holiday, roll the clock back by 15-30 minutes daily. For example, instead of going to bed at 11pm, help your child get to bed by 10:45pm on day 1, by 10:30pm on day 2, etc. Do this until your child is in bed and asleep at a reasonable time, and is able to get up and out of bed at the expected morning time, consistently. You may also need to ask everyone in the family to adjust to the new schedule, so your child isn't the only one making changes.
- Ask your child to help plan school lunches for the first week. You can go to the store together to shop for these items.
- Create a list of school supplies together and plan a fun shopping trip.
- For younger children, go to the schoolyard and play a few times before the first day of school. This can help your child feel more comfortable in his/her surroundings, making the transition back to school a familiar one.
- Teach and practice coping skills for your child to use to address specific worries. A complete list of tools can be found in My Anxiety Plan (MAP).

2-3 days before school:

- Go to school several times – walking, biking, driving, or taking the bus. For young children taking the school bus, describe and draw out the bus route, including where the bus goes and how long it takes to get to school. Talk about bus safety.
- For new students, take a tour of the school. Most schools are open a few days before the official first day as teachers are setting up their classrooms. “Peek in” and ask for a quick look around. Show your child the classrooms, the cafeteria, and the bathrooms. If possible, meet your child’s teacher with your child present.
- Ask your child to help choose what s/he wants to wear on the first few days.
- Together with your child, pack up the schoolbag the night before, including a special toy or comfort item for younger children who are nervous about separating. A reassuring note in a child’s lunch can also help ease separation anxiety.

The first day of school:

- Prepare a favorite breakfast to make the morning more fun.
- Decide who will take your child to school if this is an option. Having your child go to school with a friend for the first couple of days may feel less scary, or driving your child for the first week until s/he feels confident to take the bus.
- If your child has a history of separation anxiety in other settings, tell the teacher. Most teachers are experts in this area and have years of experience! You can also watch this helpful animated video about the *do's and don'ts* of managing separation anxiety:

- Most importantly, praise and reward your child for brave behavior. You might plan a fun meal at the end of the first day or week to celebrate your child's success. Use this time to listen to all your child has experienced in his/her first day/week.

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