



Employee NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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Tips For Easing Back-to-School Anxiety

By Dr. Stephanie Larsen

As summer ends, a mix of emotions can fill households. While some parents eagerly anticipate sending their kids back to school, and some kids look forward to reuniting with friends and teachers, this time of year can also be met with anxiety and frustration.

Common anxiety may manifest in physical complaints, such as headaches and gastrointestinal problems. You may notice your child or teen become more agitated or noncompliant as the school year rapidly approaches. Other children may revert emotionally and demonstrate an uptick in separation anxiety. Others may be running down a laundry list of the negatives of school. Regardless of how your child approaches this upcoming transition, here are some helpful tips for starting a great school year.

Listen and Validate

The first step in addressing back-to-school anxiety is to genuinely listen to your child's concerns. This might seem like the most obvious step, but it can also be the most difficult. Validate their feelings and fears without trying to immediately fix the situation. By showing empathy and understanding, you create a supportive environment where your child feels comfortable expressing their emotions. This can be as simple as saying, "I know this is hard for you going from such a fun and free summer to the busy school day, it feels a bit frustrating and like you don't have much control right now."

Collaboratively Problem Solve

Identify specific anxiety triggers and work together with your child to find solutions. By involving them in problem-solving, you can help empower them to feel more independent and confident in handling challenges. Building these skills will ultimately contribute to their success in school and beyond.

This may look like acknowledging and validating their concerns and then asking them what they think could help reduce their anxiety. For example: "Hey, I know you're already thinking about being nervous tomorrow morning, but what might make you feel a little less nervous. Any ideas?" You may be surprised with what they come up with! And if they are frozen in anxiety and not able to problem solve, you can offer options and discuss how those choices may influence their feelings or anxiety.

Get into a Routine Early

Ease your child back into a school routine at least a week before classes begin. Gradually reintroduce early mornings and consistent evening schedules. This may include laying out clothes the night before, getting up at the same hours as school and completing evening routines. For children with high anxiety, practice the school routine in detail, including potentially driving to the school and discussing drop-off scenarios. Remind them of positive and familiar experiences from the past to build reassurance.

Give Your Child Choices and Make it Fun

Empower your child by allowing them to make choices related to the upcoming school year. Let them pick their

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outfit for the first day or a favorite accessory if they have a uniform. Plan a special breakfast and dinner menu. Consider positive reinforcements for getting through the initial jitters, such as a treat at a coffee shop the first day or a fun weekend activity. Having something that excites them will help them manage their anxiety. Our brains have trouble identifying the difference between anxiety and excitement. If they have something to be excited about, there's a high chance they will relabel anxiety as anticipation for the upcoming event.

Provide Confidence Boosts

Help your child focus on their positive personality traits. Encourage them to verbalize their strengths, like being a good friend, a flexible problem solver or a strong and fearless individual. Reinforcing these qualities helps them feel stable in an unpredictable world.

Watch Your Own Anxiety

Children often model their behavior after their parents. Be mindful of how you manage your own anxiety, especially when it comes to your child's back-to-school worries. Demonstrate confidence and offer support, but if you have concerns, seek help privately to maintain a positive outlook for your child. Show them healthy coping skills and positive self-talk through your actions and anxiety management.

This may look like you:

1. Identifying anxiety about an upcoming work meeting and explaining how you experience those feelings.
2. Describing what the discomfort is telling you and how it is helping you prep by spending time gathering material or practicing your speech.
3. Demonstrating some positive self-talk the morning of the meeting. You may say something out loud like, "I can do this. I've been nervous before, but my boss always appreciates what suggestions I bring to the table, and they wouldn't have asked me to present if they didn't have confidence in me. I know this!"

Seek Help

If your child's anxiety becomes overwhelming, or begins to interfere with their daily life, consider seeking professional counseling. Many professionals

are available to provide support and help your child build the necessary skills to manage anxiety effectively. Additionally, work with your child's school to identify potential support systems, such as a desired teacher hand-off or a gradual transition plan. School officials can also assist in creating an accommodation plan if necessary.

As the upcoming school year approaches, it's essential to address and manage back-to-school anxiety effectively. By listening to your child, collaborating on solutions, establishing routines and providing confidence boosts, you can make the transition smoother and more successful. Remember, seeking help from professionals or the school when needed is a proactive step toward supporting your child's well-being and academic success.

Together, let's create a positive and anxiety-free school year for your child!

References:

<https://www.nami.org/anxiety-disorders/tips-for-easing-back-to-school-anxiety/>