

## 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 kindergarten (or returning after a pandemic!). 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:

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| <i>Who will be my new teacher?</i>                                       | <i>What if my new teacher is mean?</i> |
| <i>Will any of my friends be in my class?</i>                            | <i>Will I fit in? Will I get sick?</i> |
| <i>Are my clothes OK? Will I look stupid?</i>                            | <i>Who will I sit with at lunch?</i>   |
| <i>What if I can't understand the new schoolwork?</i>                    | <i>What if I miss the bus?</i>         |
| <i>What if something bad happens to mom or dad while I am at school?</i> |  |

Although it is normal for your child to have worries, **it is crucial to make your child attend school.** Avoiding school will only increase and reinforce your child's fears over the long-term, and make it increasingly more difficult to attend.

Besides missing school work, children and teens who stay 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



### Tips to Deal With Back-to-School Worries!

Below are some **general strategies** parents can use to deal with back-to-school worries, followed by a schedule leading up to the first day of school.

Most importantly, anxious children and teens who miss school cannot gather evidence that challenges their unrealistic and catastrophic fears. Missing school only reinforces how scary it is.

#### 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. Build in regular routines for morning and bedtime habits, as well as eating schedules, so that life is more predictable for your child. Creating automatic habits can lead to less arguing & better compliance.

#### Encourage your child to share his or her fears.

Ask your child what is making them 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 (avoid bedtime talks whenever possible). Some children feel most comfortable in a private space with your undivided attention, while others prefer some sort of distraction so they don't feel centered out, such as while riding in the car, taking a walk or doing chores together.

**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!" You can't make those kinds of promises. Instead, encourage your child to think of ways to solve their 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 both real and imagined scary situations. You will also be giving your child the tools they need to cope with situations that might arise.

Here are some tips to help your child problem-solving and plan:

**Role-play with your child.** Sometimes role-playing a certain situation with your child can help them make a plan, and feel more confident that they will be able to handle the situation. For example, let your child play the part of the demanding teacher or bullying classmate. Then, model appropriate responses and coping techniques for your child, to help them calm down.

**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 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 that the fun aspects are simply getting overlooked by repetitive worries.

**Pay attention to your own behavior.** 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 afraid. 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 them to avoid going to school. 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.*" Chances are, your child is anxious about something that requires a little problem-solving, role-playing, planning, and/or involvement from the teacher. Remember that if a child sees a parent worry about school (or anything for that matter), it will reinforce for them that there is something *real* to worry about!

**Timeline Leading Up to the First Day of School** (You may not need to take all of these steps)

**At least one week before:**

- Start your child on a school-day routine – waking up, eating, and going to bed at regular times. Explain that everyone in the family needs to adjust to the new schedule, so they don't feel alone
- For children who having trouble getting up and out of bed, give them a "big person" alarm clock, and let them practice using it.
- Ask your child to help plan school lunches for the first week.
- Create a list of school supplies together and plan a fun shopping trip.
- Teach and practice coping skills to use when feeling nervous, such as Calm Breathing, Counting, Fidget toys (consider a calming 'tool kit') and how to ask a teacher for help

**A couple days before school:**

Go to school several times – walking, 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. 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 the outfits for the first week of school. Let your child wear his or her favorite outfit on the first day. Together with your child, pack up the schoolbag the night before, including treats. For younger children who are nervous about separating, suggest taking a special object to school that reminds him of home (not a favourite item that can be lost!). Transitional objects like parent & child friendship bracelets, stickers, fidget keychains, or pictures of pets can often help a child get through a day. A reassuring note in a child's lunch can also help ease separation anxiety.

**The first day of school:**

Have your child go to school with a friend for the first couple of days. Tell the teacher that your child is having some separation anxiety – most teachers are experts in this area, and have years of experience! Most importantly, **praise and reward your child for brave behavior!**

*Keystone Child Youth & Family Services based on information from [www.AnxietyBC.ca](http://www.AnxietyBC.ca)*