

## Back-to-School Anxiety

Stress for Less

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Summer is over and your child's mood has shifted: He is not the happy, carefree kid of a few short weeks ago; rather, he has become irritable, complains about headaches and is having sleep difficulties. Welcome to back-to-school stress.

While they may not show it, most students experience back-to-school anxiety at some level. Seeing your child on the edge of nervousness can be a parentally painful situation. But relax and understand that anxiety is an inevitable part of life in today's society.

In fact, if one does not feel occasional moodiness, that is actually a bigger problem than situational stress. Furthermore, stress can be a positive thing. Good stress motivates and energizes, pushing students to do their best work, and good stress helps kids face challenges and develop strategies for success. Bad stress, on the other hand, causes kids to become overwhelmed: Bad stress is distress. The savvy student, however, can identify and confront these overwhelming feelings, especially if parents provide appropriate support.

The first part of assisting kids to work through their school anxiety is to understand what causes it. Back-to-school stress typically falls into two categories: the 'whos' and the 'enoughs.' The 'whos' are Who will be my teachers?, Who will be in my class? and Who will sit next to me at lunch? The 'enoughs' are Am I good enough to make the team? Smart enough to get good grades? and Cool enough to not be bullied? Kids worry about social/ emotional issues, academics and other things. So what are mom and dad to do?

Most important, validate your child's anxieties and listen to their worries. Empathy goes a long way. Parents often want to solve problems, but all your child may want is a shoulder to cry on. And if that is the case, let the tears flow. That may be just the thing your son or daughter needs to feel better.

One of my personal favorite stress reducers is retail therapy. Create an annual event around back-to-school shopping and include lunch. Over burgers and shakes, discuss opening-week fears and highlight the positive parts of the first few days. Ask about schedules, which classes will be most difficult/easiest, who they want to see, what summer stories they want to share and so on. Many fun activities occur during the first weeks of school, so be sure to mention those, as well.

Sleep training for the start of school also can significantly reduce first-week stress. Most kids have been sleeping late all summer; now they have to get up with the sun, and that can cause excessive irritability. Start waking them at 'normal' time a week or so before school starts. This will acclimate your children to their new schedule, reduce general crabbiness and have the added benefit of making your life a little more peaceful.

Lastly, keep the lines of communication open and be easily approachable during the start of the semester. Consider picking your child up and taking her for an after-school treat where you can 'covertly' inquire about how things are going. The more parents are available, the more your kids will talk.

Whenever there is change, anxiety is normal and it is important for parents to understand that situational stress--or even a little fear--is an appropriate and reasonable reaction to end-of-summer freedoms. If you feel, however, that your child's anxiety is too intense, lasts longer than it should or occurs more frequently than is typical, trust your parental instincts and seek further assistance. School counselors are a great place to start for guidance and professional recommendations. LN

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