

Calming First-Day Kindergarten Anxiety

Back-to-school anxiety is normal and understandable. Many kids may feel anxious about going back to school after a long summer break. Others may feel nervous about starting school for the first time. Whichever the case may be, parents can help ease the transition to back to school with these simple strategies.

Organize your home for back to school. A great way to ease some of your child's anxiety about going back to school is by getting your home ready for the transition.

Strategies such as making school lunches the night before or establishing a comfortable homework area can help make kids feel more in control and relieve some of their anxious feelings.

Help your child feel more comfortable about his new school environment. One of the things that can cause back to school anxiety for kids is not knowing what to expect. Help your child become more acclimated to new routines and unfamiliar surroundings by doing the following:

- **Take him for a visit to the school.** If your child is starting kindergarten or first grade, he may be uneasy about going into a new building. Older grade-schoolers may be nervous about being in a new classroom or meeting a new teacher. To alleviate some of these concerns, ask your school about arranging a visit to school and meeting the teacher before school begins.
- **Make a couple of drives back and forth from home to school.** Whether your child will walk, take a school bus, or be driven to school by mom or dad, helping him become familiar with the route to and from school will make considerably ease back to school anxiety. Even if your child is already familiar with the route to school, making a pre first-day run will remind him where school is, and help him feel more connected to where he will go on the first day back to school.
- **Go over the basics.** Where will he hang his jacket? Where will he go to the bathroom? Where will he eat lunch? Knowing the answers to some of these questions will help make your child feel more comfortable in his new classroom.

Highlight the things that make school great. There are lots of attractive factors that can make school very appealing for kids.

For starters, there's the swag -- fun new school supplies and clothes. There will also be friends she hasn't seen and things she may have missed about school -- or can look forward to if she's starting school -- such as the playground or making arts and crafts projects.

Arrange some playdates. Help your child re-connect with old friends or make new ones before school starts. Try to get a class list if possible and set up some playdates with familiar pals as well as kids he may not be familiar with. If he is anxious about not being in the same class with old friends, reassure him by letting him know that he can have regular playdates with his friends after school so that they can stay connected.

Remind her that she's not the only one who may be nervous. Let your child know that the other students are likely to be just as anxious as she is about the first day of school. Reassure her by telling her that the teacher knows that the children are nervous, and will probably spend some time helping the students feel more comfortable as they settle into the classroom.

Try to be home more during back to school time. Right before school starts and during the first days back, try to make it a point to be present at home for your child and support him through this transition back to school. If you work away from home, try to arrange your hours so that you are able to drop your child off at school and are home in time for after school or an early dinner. If you stay at home, try to focus more on your child and put everything else on the back burner. Spend some time talking to your child about his day such as what he liked and what he might have questions about. By giving your child more attention, you will help him feel more secure about his connection to you and home, and help him navigate back to school time.

Make sure she gets enough sleep and eats a balanced diet. Getting adequate sleep and eating a healthy diet -- especially a protein-carbohydrate balanced breakfast -- is important for brain function, mood and the ability to focus and pay attention in school.

Downplay the milestone. Ratcheting up expectations and highlighting the first day of kindergarten as a really big deal with a capital "D" is likely to backfire if all the fuss makes your child more nervous than he already is.

Instead, try to compare kindergarten to something he is already familiar with, such as preschool or even a kids' music class he may have enjoyed. Explain that

kindergarten will be a place where he will make friends and have fun, just like he may have done with groups of kids before. And as tempting as it might be to record your child's first day at kindergarten, do leave the video camera at home.

Read a book together about starting school. Reading about other children who might have fears and anxiety about starting school may be comforting to kids who are experiencing the same feelings.

Try to minimize your own anxiety. Just as it's perfectly normal for your child to feel some anxiety on the first days of kindergarten, it's absolutely normal for you to feel anxious when you see your child upset. And it's also understandable that you may experience some frustration when you see other children playing happily and your child is still clinging to your legs for dear life.

But here is the most important thing for you to remember: Your child will adjust to his new classroom eventually. It may take some kids a bit longer than others, but the fact is that it will happen, especially if you respond with understanding and patience and keep your eyes on the prize: a happy child who loves going to school and seeing his friends (it will happen!).

Don't stay too long. Reassure your child that you will be back and say a quick goodbye.

Lingering will only make it more difficult for your child to see you go, and she will cry harder the next time because she will see that it's an effective way to get you to stay. As wrenching as it may be for you to walk away while your child is crying, chances are that she will be playing happily soon after you are out of sight. But don't sneak out as this may undermine your child's trust and could worsen separation anxiety.

Identify his anxiety. What exactly is he afraid of? Talk to your child and find out what he is worried about. Is he concerned that you won't return? Is he afraid that someone will be mean to him? Or that he won't know where the bathroom is or that he won't know what he's supposed to do? Once you establish what his specific fears are you will be better able to address his concerns and work with your child and his teacher to find ways to handle them.

Have faith in the teachers. Your child will hardly be the only one in the classroom who experiences separation anxiety, nor will he be the first one the teachers have had to comfort after mom, dad, or a caregiver are gone. Experienced teachers will be ready with morning routines, songs, games, and other fun activities to get your child into the swing of things while she adjusts to her new surroundings.

Send along a favorite comfort object. If your child has a favorite lovey, ask your child's teacher if you can send it along. Most schools have a policy of allowing kids to bring such objects to school but restrict them to cubbies or backpacks and only let kids take them out during rest time. In many cases, just having a favorite comfort object nearby can give kids a sense of security.

Don't put a time limit on how long it should take. For some kids, first-day kindergarten anxiety may not last beyond a few days if they happen at all. For others, tears and school fears may go on for weeks. Just as each child has his own individual set of experiences and personality and anxiety that may be influencing his feelings about starting school, the time it takes to adjust to school will vary from one child to another.

Before you know it, your reluctant kindergartener will look forward to seeing his friends at school and participating in the activities and games in class. Whether your child's kindergarten anxiety lasts a few days or a few months, it will be a phase she will go through as she grows into a confident grade-schooler.

Keep an eye on his school anxiety. You know your child best. If you sense that his back to school anxiety may be rooted in something more serious, such as an anxiety disorder or a problem with a bully, talk with your child, your child's teacher, and the school counselor.

And remember to try to get yourself relaxed as much as possible. Back to school time can also be a hectic time for parents, so taking care of yourself by eating right and getting enough sleep and exercise is a good idea during this transitional phase back to school.

Try to remind yourself that any anxiety or stress you or your child may be feeling is only temporary. Before you know it, your family will be back in the back to school groove, and you'll be sailing smoothly into the fall semester.