

Helping your child cope with back to school anxiety

A practical guide for parents and carers



Worries are common

It's normal for your child to be anxious during times of transition or change. Uncomfortable feelings often occur when children and teenagers are going back to school, or when first-timers are starting kindergarten. This transition can be stressful for the entire family however there are things you can do to help alleviate the stress and anxiety your child may be feeling during this time.

In the lead up to the first day of school, your anxious child may complain of headaches or stomach pains, withdraw from normal family activities, and become sullen or irritable. They may be frequently tearful and cling to you more often than usual.

Anxious children and teens worry about many different school-related issues. This often includes worrying about being away from their parents as well as "fitting in," who their teachers will be, and finding new friends.

Some common worries include:

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

Although it is normal for your child to be anxious about going to school it is essential that they do attend.

Strategies to manage anxiety

How to alleviate back-to-school anxiety

Here are some back-to-school strategies that can help alleviate anxiety in the lead up to the first day of school:

Look after the basics

It's difficult to cope with stress when we are tired and hungry. Anxious children often forget to eat, have poor appetite, and don't get enough sleep. Therefore during this time, pay close attention to your child's eating and sleeping habits and provide frequent and nutritious snacks. It can also be helpful to establish regular routines, so that life is more predictable for your child. These routines can involve schedules for hygiene, eating, rest and play, and morning and bedtime habits.

Encourage your child to share feelings and concerns

Let your child know that it is normal to be worried in the lead up to the first day of school. Before and during the first few weeks of school, set up a regular time and place to talk. Some children feel most comfortable in a private space with your undivided attention (such as right before bed, or during mealtime), whereas teenagers often feel more comfortable with some sort of distraction to cut the intensity of their worries and feelings (such as driving in the car, or taking a walk).

Problem-solving is more effective than reassurance

Children often seek reassurance that bad things won't happen in order to alleviate their anxiety. However it is more effective to encourage your child to think through potential situations and find ways to solve his or her concern, than to simply say "don't worry" or "everything will be fine." For example, in discussion with your child, you could say; "If (this situation) 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. You will also be giving your child the tools he or she needs to cope with an unexpected situation that may arise.

Role-play with your child

Sometimes role-playing a hypothetical situation with your child can be very helpful in providing him or her with the confidence they need to handle a particular situation. For instance, 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 remain calm.

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See the bright side

Encourage your child to redirect 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. However children take their 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 and only once! Ensure you don't reward your child's protests, crying, or tantrums by allowing him or her 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.

Timeline leading up to the first day of school

You may find the following timeline useful in the lead up to the first day of school although you may find that not all the steps are necessary depending on the confidence of your child.

At least one week before:

It's a good idea to start your child on a school-day routine – waking up, eating, and going to bed at regular times. This helps your child to become familiar with the new routine so that when the first day of school arrives there are no unexpected surprises. Explain that everyone in the family needs to adjust to the new schedule, so he or she doesn't feel alone with these changes.

For older children who may have difficulty getting out of bed, give them an alarm clock, and let them practice using it. Ask your child to help prepare 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 how to do calm breathing.

Strategies to manage anxiety

A couple days before school:

Go to school several times – walking, driving, or taking the bus. For young children, drive along the route that the school bus will take - 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 tuckshop, and the bathrooms. If possible, meet your child's teacher with your child present.

The night before the first day of school:

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. 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 in helping children adjust to the new environment. Most importantly, praise and reward your child for their brave behaviour!

When professional counselling can help

While many children adjust to the school environment fairly comfortably, it is a reality that many others find it incredibly difficult. It is not uncommon for some children to simply refuse to go to school. Left untreated, a child with school refusal will fall back academically, suffer social isolation and be at risk of developing mental health problems, such as obsessive compulsive disorder, social phobia, panic attacks and depression as an adult.

School refusal is also traumatic for parents, who usually have no idea how to deal with a child who suddenly won't get dressed, get in the car or go into school. In these circumstances professional counselling can be beneficial. Treatment options vary from helping the child relax and develop their coping and social skills, to counselling involving cognitive behaviour therapy and medication for anxiety and depression.

If you feel your child may benefit from professional counselling, please feel welcome to call Life Resolutions on 1300 668 256 for further information.



About us

Life Resolutions is Australia's largest network of qualified psychologists. With practices in most Australian main centres and specialists in Child Psychology, there is no problem too big or too small that we haven't heard before. Through the process of therapy, we help people from all walks of life to overcome adversity and to go on to lead happier, healthier and more fulfilling lives.

Further help and information:

Life Resolutions

National Support Centre: call 1300 668 256 or visit www.liferesolutions.com.au