

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. 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:

- *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 mom or dad while I am at school?*

Although it is normal for your child to have worries, **it is crucial to make your child attend school.** Avoidance of 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



Most importantly, anxious children and teens who miss school cannot gather evidence that challenges their unrealistic and catastrophic fears!

How 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.

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. During this time, you also need to build in regular routines, so that life is more predictable for your child. These routines can involve the morning and bedtime habits, as well as eating schedules. See [Healthy Habits for the Home](#)

Encourage your child to share his or her fears.

Ask your child what is making him or her 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. Some children feel most comfortable in a private space with your undivided attention (such as right before bed, or during mealtime). Teens often welcome some sort of distraction to cut the intensity of their worries and feelings (such as driving in the car, or taking a walk).

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!" Instead, encourage your child to think of ways to solve his or her 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 (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 might arise. See [How to Address Excessive Reassurance Seeking](#) for more details.

Here's a sample script for engaging your child in problem-solving and planning (instead of giving reassurance):

Role-play with your child. Sometimes role-playing a certain situation with your child can help him or her make a plan, and feel more confident that he or she 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. For more information on role-playing, see [Helping your Anxious Child Make Friends](#)

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 allow 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 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 he or she doesn't feel alone with these changes.

- For older children who having troubles 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 [How to Do Calm Breathing](#) and [Developing and Using Cognitive Coping Cards](#)

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. 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!**

Children and Adolescents with School Anxiety and Avoidance Behavior

Strategies for Parents

Possible Symptoms of School Anxiety/Avoidance Behaviors

- Upset about school more often than other children their age
- Child's feelings/attitudes towards school have negatively changed
- Child avoids certain aspects of school, (i.e. gym class, certain teachers)
- Certain behavior patterns only occur on school days
- Child exhibits stomach aches, headaches, throwing up, etc. especially on school days
- Child struggles with social skills and peer relations
- Child struggles completing academic tasks and becomes easily overwhelmed with home and school assignments

Strategies and Interventions

1. Make school attendance mandatory unless your child has a fever or contagious illness. Avoid calling your child out of school unless absolutely necessary. Children cannot deal with their school issues unless they are present at school. A child's anxiety will increase the more school is avoided.
2. If child refuses to attend school, contact school personnel and report child's refusal to attend school, even if it results in an unexcused absence. Allow the child to have consequence from school for unexpected absence.
3. Establish and maintain open communication with school personnel regarding your child's feelings about school, difficulties with school, etc.
4. Create an environment at home that fosters structure and consistency. Expectations should include rules, chores, privileges and limits. This will allow children to learn to structure themselves, as well as understand rewards and consequences. Likewise, expectations should be clear regarding school attendance and homework, as well as privileges and consequences given for not meeting expectations. Based on research, structure, routine and consistency work to alleviate anxiety in children.
5. Routine is essential for children with school anxiety/avoidance issues. A daily schedule that is followed consistently through the eyes both when the child is in school, as well as, out of school is beneficial.
6. Encourage children to enroll in school extracurricular activities to feel more connected to school. Have child choose at least one activity per school term.
7. Provide positive feedback for successes made at school.

8. Seek support from school and/or external resources when your child first starts displaying symptoms of school anxiety /avoidance.
9. If patterns of academic failure are present, psychological and/or neuro-cognitive assessment and/or intervention may be needed due to possible learning disabilities or neuro-cognitive deficit issues that may be present.
10. Negative peer relations may result in school avoidance/anxiety issues. Contact the school social worker if your child is struggling with peer relations, i.e. bullying, difficulty getting along with peers, etc. Therapeutic intervention on the school level may be needed.

AMITA Health
Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital
1650 Moon Lake Blvd.
Hoffman Estates, IL 60169

References

- AMITA Health Alexian Brothers **School Anxiety/School Refusal Program** – 847.755.8516
- ***Don't Try Harder Try Different***. Author: Patrick McGrath, PhD
- ***How to talk so Kids will listen and Listen so Kids will talk***. (2002). Authors: Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. Publisher: Collins.
- ***Kids are Worth It: Giving Your Child the Gift of Inner Discipline***. (2002). Author: Barbara Coloroso. Publishers: Collins. New York, NY
- ***Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles: Winning for a Lifetime***. (2001). Author: Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. Publisher: Collins. New York, NY
- ***Parenting with Positive Behavior Support: A Practical Guide to Resolving Your Child's Difficult Behavior***. (2006). Author: Meme Hieneman, Karen Childs, and Jane Sergay. Publisher: Brookes Publishing Co. Baltimore, MD
- ***Setting Limits with your Strong-Willed Child: Eliminating Conflict by Establishing Clear, Firm and Respectful Boundaries***. (2001). Author: Robert J. MacKenzie. Publisher: Three Rivers Press
- ***The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children***. (2001). Author: Ross Greene. Publisher: Quill Books, division of Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. New York, NY
- ***When Children Refuse School, A Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Approach***. Authors: Christopher A. Kearny and Anne Marie Albano. Publisher: Oxford University Press. New York, NY
- Illinois State Board of Education. <http://www.isbe.state.il.us>

Illinois School Code – Compulsory Attendance (105 ILCS 5/2601)
Sec. 26-1. Compulsory school age-exemptions. Whoever has custody or control of any child between the ages of 7 and 16 years shall cause such child to attend some public school in the district wherein the child resides the entire time it is in session during regular school term.

For more information, call 855.383.2224 or visit AMITAhealth.org/behavioral