

How to help kids stay cool about back-to-school worries



No matter the age, some children do feel very anxious about going back to school, especially if it's a new school. (Thinkstock/Thinkstock)

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After 23 years in private practice, children's anxiety tops the list of concerns that parents approach me with. I've heard stories that range from children's fear of dogs and refusing to stay in their beds alone at night to much more extreme worry.

In August, as students creep closer to accepting the inevitability that school is just around the corner, anticipatory back-to-school fretting kicks in.

Here's how to identify your child's anxiety and some strategies you can use to help maintain a sense of calm.

Grade 1: Butterflies

Grade 1 is both exciting and anxiety-provoking. Your child is likely standing tall knowing that he has joined ranks of the older kids. However, he may also be apprehensive about taking on more responsibility and spending recess on a different playground. He may describe his anxiety as "butterflies in my tummy." He may not have much of an appetite in the days leading up to the start of school, may take a longer time falling asleep at night or become clingy. Rest assured that these feelings and behaviours are normal and it's a good idea to tell him so. Share that even teachers feel nervous before school begins again. Go for a walk around the exterior of the school and spend some time in the new playground. If he's especially worried about meeting his new

teacher on the first day, call the school during the last week of summer holidays, when teachers are already back in their classrooms, to arrange a brief meeting between them.

Middle school: Jitters

Even though your child has by now developed a comfortable knowledge of the inner workings at her school, she may still experience anxiety as September approaches. She may have heard negative comments about her new teacher or may be uneasy because she won't know who it will be until the first day of school. Remind her that just because her friend didn't connect with that teacher, doesn't mean that she won't. Maybe share a time when you were biased toward someone before you met and then were pleasantly surprised when you got along really well. Remain positive and encouraging by sharing your confidence that they will work well together and that at the worst, you are always available to help brainstorm solutions to any bumps in the road.

Other than teacher worries, your child may be concerned about her reunion with former classmates, especially if they haven't spent much time together during summer vacation. Anxiety is often expressed in the form of "what if....?" questions such as "what if Angela and Samantha won't let me play with them?" Reassure her that it's normal to worry about this after being apart from her friends for so long. Suggest a play date so that they can reconnect and if she's experiencing physical symptoms, let her know that an upset stomach and queasiness will ease once she settles back into the old familiar routine.

High school: Angst

Grade 9 is commonly the most anxiety provoking step up the academic ladder. Major Eighters become Minor Niners and drop to the bottom rung in a much larger pond. Many are stressed about adjusting to a new timetable, teachers, new students and navigating their way around the school without getting lost. Some may worry about increased peer pressure especially in regards to drugs and alcohol. Teens communicate less about their feelings. They may manifest their anxiety by retreating – spending more time on their computers (if that's possible) or in bed sleeping. They might also become more irritable. If their behaviour appears more surly than usual, rather than taking the bait, approach gently with understanding and compassion. As always, timing is everything with teens so approach with caution in order to elicit the best response. Instead of asking him to turn off the television so that you can chat, which will likely get you nowhere, initiate a conversation while you're walking the dog or when you're in the car together. Rather than asking questions that require only a yes or no response such as "Are you feeling nervous?" say something like "I've noticed that you're quieter than usual. I remember how unsettled I felt at the beginning of a new school year. What's going on for you?"

Recently, my daughter, who too is worried about her transition to Grade 9 next month, shared with me how less frightening the roller coaster rides at Canada's Wonderland are when you're actually on them than when you're watching from the sidelines. "I have no doubt that you'll feel the same about high school," I said. She reflected for a moment and responded with "I hate it when you're right!"

Sara Dimerman is a psychologist, author and mom to two daughters. For more advice, connect at www.helpmesara or on Twitter @helpmesara