

Managing Fears

Following are some situations that may present challenges or cause fear for children when it's time to go back to school. Suggestions are given for how you may be able to help.

Fears or challenges	What you can do to help
Change. Moving up a grade brings changes, but a new school can be an especially big adjustment, whether that's due to a move to a new area or just a shift from elementary to middle or middle to high school.	Let your child know that for everything they're feeling, there is someone else feeling the same way. Nerves are normal when facing something new. You might share stories of your own experiences. Remind them of new things they've tried and managed in the past and that being new doesn't last long.
Unknowns , such as who their teacher will be, where their classroom is or whether they will fit in. Even something that may seem insignificant to you may be a worry for them.	Help fill in the blanks. Visit the school at least once before classes begin. Talk about what is worrying them as often as they need to. You can acknowledge their fears but also be sure to share your confidence that they will manage. You may want to problem-solve together and work on strategies for concerns that they can't solve in advance. Also create some balance by talking about what might be positive and fun in this new year.
Getting lost/finding their way. They may worry about being late for classes or not being able to find classes at all.	Attend open houses or school orientations with your child so they can practice finding their way around before school starts. Locate bathrooms, the cafeteria and bus stop. Have them practice opening their locker a few times.
Social difficulties – a history of not fitting in, being shut out or not having many friends. Perhaps they were picked on or bullied.	Encourage your child to get involved in school clubs or activities. It's easier for kids to make friends if they have something in common. Involvement can also help them gain confidence and enjoy school more. If bullying has been an issue, Problem-solve with your child to come up with ways to manage difficult situations. Role-play and rehearse. Seek professional help if needed.
Making the grade. A new year can bring a fear of more difficult homework or harder classes. Even students who have done well in the past may worry that they won't be able to keep up the same level of performance.	Set realistic expectations together for the year. Help them recognize their unique talents and establish achievable goals. Also, help your child find things they are good at outside of school. This may relieve some of the pressure.

Separation anxiety

It's natural for young children to feel some anxiety when their parents leave them. Some children can struggle more than others. They may cling, cry and refuse to let a parent leave. Or they may complain of feeling sick so they can stay home. This can be very stressful for both the child and parent. Separation anxiety usually becomes less of a problem as children get older. Here are some tips for easing separation anxiety.

- Practice being apart from each other well before the start of school. Have your child stay with a relative or caregiver for brief periods at first, and gradually for longer periods.
- Get them involved in play groups or other activities and gradually remove yourself from being present at these activities.
- Avoid repeated exposure to violence in the media or video games. It can increase their fear of something bad happening to you or them and lead to separation anxiety.
- Take them to the school and/or bus stop a few times before the big day and walk them through what will happen when that day arrives. Make sure they have a chance to meet the teacher and find their way around.
- Story books about going to school can help young children visualize how the day may unfold. They may want to read them over and over.
- You may be able to arrange a play date in advance with one or two children from your child's class so that they'll see a familiar face on the first day.
- Alert the teacher(s) and support staff. Let them know what you have been doing at home to reassure your child. Try to arrange a hand-off to someone who can give your child one-on-one support as you leave.
- Some children find comfort in bringing a special object from home with them for the first few days of school.
- Keep your attitude positive and encouraging. Reassuring them that "everything will be fine" isn't as helpful as acknowledging that it can be scary, but that you are confident they will get through it.
- Develop a good-bye ritual. After the ritual, leave quickly, without fuss or delay.

Don't give in and let them stay home.

Avoiding school can reinforce their fears because they won't have a chance to get past them. If necessary, it's better to go into the school with them for a little while, and then gradually taper the time that you're there.

Back-to-school fears and separation anxiety usually fade in the first few days or weeks of school. For some children it continues. They may show this fear in other ways, such as poor sleep, complaining of stomachaches, or acting out. If issues continue into the second month of school, it may signal a problem. Call your EAP to request a telephone consultation with a trained professional.

References

American Psychological Association (APA). (2023, July 17). *Back-to-school can be a stressful time. How to help your kids transition.* <https://www.apa.org/topics/children/school-anxiety>
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