

School anxieties are common as the new term begins

By JENNIFER COOPER, Psy.D.

The start of the school year is a time of transition — adjusting to a new schedule, a new teacher, and sometimes a new school can be difficult for both kids and parents. For some kids, school brings anxieties that result in missed days and missed opportunities for learning and social time. If your child is complaining of tummy aches, is clingy, or is fearful, it can be difficult to know what to do. Here are some tips to help you ease your child into a successful school year.

Recognize the difference between anxiety and refusal for other reasons. Kids have multiple reasons for not wanting to attend school; refusal is not always anxiety. Talk to your child, asking open questions that don't supply them with reasons to not attend school. For example, don't say, "Are you scared because someone is picking on you?" Instead ask, "Is there a reason you don't want to be in school today?"

Don't give in to the anxiety. Avoiding school will help your child in the short term, but only make the anxiety worse in the long term.



Most parents will want to comfort their child and make them feel better as soon as possible; however, giving in, even once, makes the behavior more likely to reoccur. Be firm and supportive of their feelings while insisting your child attend school.

Foster positive experiences at school. Help your child view school as a place they want to be. Set up play dates with school friends, talk about favorite things to do

at school, and encourage a positive relationship with your child's teacher. School staffers are important allies for your child; keep both the teacher and school counselor aware of the situation and solicit their help. Having a safe person at school can help alleviate concerns and give the child a place to check in on anxious days.

See anxiety as something to be managed, not eliminated. Help your child learn coping strategies and practice the skills daily. Help your child identify situations that make their symptoms worse; discuss ways the situation can be changed or ways to cope with the situation. Talking about fears helps reduce them and gives you a chance to problem-solve solutions to feared situations. Role play situations and practice coping with stressful events. A comfort object from home may also make your child feel connected to you and your home. Most of all, manage your own anxiety; modeling healthy ways of coping is more powerful than simply discussing them.

Take care of the basics. Proper sleep and good nutrition go a long way in managing anxiety. Anxious kids are likely to miss meals and sleep due to their anxiety. Follow up with your child to see if they ate their lunch, provide a healthy, nutritious breakfast, and set a reasonable bedtime. Bedtime rituals (like reading together) can help ease nighttime issues. In addition, be early to school so that your child is



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not worried about walking in late.

Be realistic in your discussions. If your child is worried that they will not do well on a test and this is a realistic fear, telling them not to worry about it will not help the situation. Talk out what might happen in a worst-case scenario, and how they can survive it. Many school fears are common; talking about how lots of people are afraid of the same situations may help your child feel better.

Encourage activities that will help build self-esteem. Doing things your child is good at and enjoys will help them feel successful and lead to a better self-image. Involve other children from school if possible. Celebrate successes (even small ones) with praise and genuine pride.

Get professional help when needed. Most of the time fears will calm without professional intervention. However, if your child's anxiety interferes with their ability to remain in school, affects life at home more than usual, or gets worse, consult with your pediatrician or a licensed therapist for help. You can also learn more online through the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (www.adaa.org) and the children's topics section of the American Psychological Association website (www.apa.org/topics/children/index.aspx).

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