

BACK TO SCHOOL JITTERS: HELPING YOUR CHILD MANAGE THEIR ANXIETY

Any time we are about to start something new and strange and we are unsure what to expect or how we will cope, we can feel anxious, excited and/or stressed. A child who may have never attended school will be exposed to many unknowns; new people, new demands, and do so alone and without the immediate presence of his or her family. Under these circumstances, it is normal to feel insecure about how to manage. Middle school and high school students feel anxious about things also, but can express this in different, often more internal and self-conscious ways. Parents can also feel stress both in response to their children's feelings and because of their own experiences at school. These stresses may be even more pronounced when the child is starting school, changing school, or when the family are newcomers. All that being said, our children are remarkably resilient!

HOW TO HELP ALLEVIATE ANXIOUS FEELINGS

Do not tell your child not to worry. Tell them it is normal and okay to feel anxious. Share that even you get worried sometimes when you are starting something new. Encourage your child to talk. Ask how your child feels about the new school year, accept and acknowledge them without judgment, help them to draw or speak their thoughts. Stay calm as children and youth notice their parent's anxiety. Model optimism and confidence. Let your children know you care. Model relaxation techniques, such as: slow deep breathing, taking a walk or being physical active, and get appropriate sleep. Discuss with your child how worry feeds worry and makes one's body uncomfortable. It is important to normalize anxiety – focus on the **physical** feelings not the thoughts one has. Reword feeling anxious to being excited. Help your child recognize it will show up and make your child feel uncomfortable. Tell your child to expect it, welcome it and talk back to it. Use statements like "of course worry is going to be there". Explore times with your child when worry showed up and it was conquered or when they felt that they were not able to do something and yet they did. Allow uncertain and uncomfortable feelings in learning to cope and predict difficulty.

STRATEGIES THAT SEEM TO MAKE SENSE...YET DO NOT WORK:

- **Withdraw** from activity
- **Do not** overthink or over react
- **Avoid** uncomfortable situations
- **Fix** the problem at the moment
- Problem solve from a **defensive** stance
- **Overprotect** your children – remove the barrier
- Offer **stats and data** to reassure
- Planning to avoid or over prepare
- **Analyze** details
- **Promote calmness** before stepping into a situation
- Discuss **WHY** answers
- **Explore** worst case scenarios
- Give '**worry time**' – we'll meet everyday
- Expect perfectionism

- **Assume** your child cannot handle the situation
- **Say** what is the worst thing that can happen (worry is preparing for that)
- **Overemphasize** calmness
- **Expect** calmness before entering the situation

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF ANXIETY?

Preschool and Elementary students

- Restless, irritable, agitated, or resistant.
- Temper tantrums or extreme meltdowns
- May check to see if threat is there or seek reassurance.
- Nightmares or sleep terrors possible.
- Feeling physically ill (e.g., stomach aches).
- Trouble recognizing/verbalizing what they are feeling and why.

Middle/High School students

- Has a more developed ability to internalize the anxiety response.
- Worried, withdrawn, or complain of feeling sick (frequent stomachaches or other physical complaints).
- May have difficulty sleeping and be preoccupied.
- May keep their worries and fears to themselves.
- Anxiety is not only internalized, it may appear as 'acting out' behaviour.



Worry can give a small thing a big shadow.

Swedish proverb

"Talking to people and/or just being with friends often help us manage the effects of anxiety on our lives. Some of us have found that exercise is helpful. Many of us find that changing the way we think about anxiety is helpful."

A student speaking about anxiety

Anxiety Resources:

Children's Mental Health Ontario -

<http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca>

eMental Health -

<http://www.ementalhealth.ca>

Anxiety BC -

<http://www.anxietybc.com>

School Mental Health Assist -

<http://smh-assist.ca>

Kids Help Phone -

<http://www.kidshelpphone.ca>

The ABC's of Mental Health (Parent/Teacher Resources) -

<http://www.hincksdellcrest.org>

