

Transitions for School

Anticipatory anxiety:

- Learn about the teacher and try to meet her before school starts.
- Write a letter to the teacher about yourself.
- Shop for school supplies together and let them pack them in the backpack.
- Practice writing about your summer adventures and review photos that help recall the fun of the summer.
- Review classroom rules/schedule
- Visit the school and let them see where the bathrooms are, the cafeteria, playground, the gym, lockers, and even draw a map of the school to familiarize them with the environment. Practice school drop offs. Repetition may be very helpful.
- Connect with classroom/school friends in person at the park, on the phone, with facetime/zoom weeks before school starts
- Give them permission to ask as many questions as they need to and help find answers instead of dismissing their concerns. Listen intentionally. Often children communicate the best in a dark room laying on the bed together or riding in the car together at night when face to face interaction is not required.
- Manage your stress by taking care of yourself (first).
- Increase going to bed 10-15 min. Each night until you have returned to the school nighttime schedule.
- Encourage walking if they have been sedentary during the summer. Two thirty minute walks a day can help.
- Connect with the School guidance counselor for support if anxiety persists.
- Teach deep breathing (in for 4, hold for 4, out for 4)
- Rehearse previous successes and develop words of affirmation that he can repeat and read on the bathroom mirror each day. Tools like the “Big Life Journal” and the “Happy Me Journal” can help children (preschoolers-teens) develop positive self talk and recognize damaging negative self talk.
- Problem solve together with excessive reassurance seeking) (asking questions over and over and rewarding brave responses.
- Role play interactions that might occur with teachers, bus drivers, and friends. Allow the child to pretend to be the demanding teacher or the bully. You can use dolls, stuffed animals or puppets to allow the child to communicate.
- Rehearse 3 positives to look forward to with school
- Plan breakfast for the first day of school

Set up expectations the night before:

- Social stories
- Photo stories
- Discuss the morning routines or big expectations
- Problem solving discussions: sounds, crowds, bright lights, busy hallways, distractions, changing clothes for PE, bells ringing fire alarms,
- Have the child participate in setting out clothes, pack a backpack and put it by the door or in the car, pack lunch, set an alarm clock.
- Discuss wake up time and lights out time during school days.

Plan for afterschool down regulation:

- Avoid asking questions immediately until they are ready to talk
- Stop by a playground on the way home
- Plan for crunchy snacks that help self regulation
- Give as much outdoor time as possible with 3D orientation for play
- Reduce expectations for the first 30 minutes after arriving home
- Provide choices (3 is a good number) of fun things to do before/after homework

Making new friends anxiety:

- Practice starting conversations. Use tools like: Let's Mingle conversation starters school edition, Let's talk conversation cards for kids to help kids engage. Another tool to inspire conversation is: Little Talk for parents to use with their children for meaningful conversation.
- Use a Talking stick with your child to teach waiting before interrupting or correcting someone during a conversation.
- Set up playdates prior to school starting
- Assist with transition by connecting with the school online community to connect with other parents in your child's class so your child knows you are connecting with others and that you are making new friends too.

Sensory anxiety:

- Try on all new school clothes (including socks and shoes), take pictures, use a full length mirror in the room for those with poor body awareness. Time how long it takes to get dressed. Choose clothes for the first week of school.
- Go shopping together for snacks and lunch items. Allow the child to participate in the lunch packing.
- Use Lavender on a tissue in the backpack (or a favorite scent that makes them feel calm).
- For fear of the parent not being there to pick them up, have the child set an alarm on the parent's phone for time to leave for school as well as pick up time.

FOR PARENTS:

School anxiety is a physiological response driven by a fear or feelings of danger. Whether the danger is real or not is irrelevant. The child feels the threat and fight or flight is triggered. It can manifest as a tantrum or resistance. They are on high alert and it is hard to feel safe. You can tell them about a time you were nervous or anxious and were able to calm yourself.

Help them understand that their brain is helping to protect them. It's fierce, like a warrior but sometimes it becomes over protective. Sometimes it acts too fast and it makes it hard to calm things down and make great decisions about what to do next. It's handy when you are about to get hit by a car but not handy when things are new like your classroom, friends, teachers and riding on a bus with a lot of people. The bad feelings you have can be powerful but are not always correct. The brain gives your body fuel to make you strong, fast and powerful in case you have to fight or flee and your good decision making part of your brain forgets how to solve the problem. You may have to come in and be the boss. Sometimes slowing down your breathing and breathing from your belly can flip the switch. It relaxes your brain so you can settle down your emotions and get back in control. You can get active for a couple of minutes or go for a walk and use up all the energy your brain just made. If you get sweaty for five minutes, it helps. Then practice talking to yourself, saying "You are brave, you are strong, you're okay. Remind yourself that your friends care about you. Your teacher is on your side. School makes your brain strong and amazing. Today you will have fun. You are probably braver than most people right now because you are worried and you are doing it anyway. (From the book "Hey warrior" for ages 5-12.)

Separation Anxiety

Put a picture of the family in the backpack or write a sweet note in the lunch box. Tell the child what things you will be doing while they are away. Use transitional objects (stone, button, or handkerchief) that they can keep with them in their pocket or bookbag.

COVID Anxiety

Limit news on the TV and internet, screen family conversations about the pandemic, limit social media that highlights fear. Avoid asking leading questions "Are you nervous about going to school?" This indicates to your child that there really is something to worry about. Avoid leading with your own anxiety that will fuel your child's anxiety. Talk about all the ways the school is preparing to keep each child safe.

Use the video "[Just breathe](#)" or the Sesame street app or video: [Breathe, think and do for preschoolers](#) to help children relax and regulate.