

15 Tips for Helping Your Child with School Anxiety

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For many children, the end of summer vacation brings normal nervousness about the beginning of school. However, for some children, this anxiety can be more overwhelming and they may need some extra support from caregivers (and therapists/counselors). Remember that your goal should always be to help your child get through the situation that is causing anxiety; allowing them to avoid the anxiety trigger will only lead to greater problems later. Here are 15 strategies that may help your child better manage school anxiety at the start of school and throughout the year:

1. Talk about it: Start a conversation with your child about how they are feeling about school. Listen to what they are worried about. Talk about how the previous school year went and what they are expecting for this year. As the year progresses, make sure you are taking the time to really be available and listen to how things are going. If you get stuck in the rut of “How was school?”...Fine,” then try to ask more detailed questions (e.g., “What was the best and worst thing today?...Who did you play with today?...What was your favorite subject today?”). If your child worries a lot, consider implementing “worry time” each day so that they always have a time to talk about what’s on their mind, and then encourage them to put aside the worries during the rest of the day.

2. Validate feelings: Be sure that you are reflecting and validating your child’s emotions as they talk. Statements like, “You sound really worried” and “I can understand why you would feel that way” can go a long way toward helping your child feel supported and calming the intensity of the feelings. Well-meaning adults often want to skip to the pep talk and encourage kids to be excited about school. However, it can be very frustrating to children when they are simply told “Don’t worry” or feel that an overly-cheerful parent is ignoring their anxiety.

3. Think it through: Help your child to identify the worried thoughts and then turn them into more balanced thoughts. I often ask kids to look at the anxious thought and ask, “Is this thought true and is this thought helpful?” Some thoughts may not be true (e.g., “I won’t have any friends”) and you can help your child challenge them by identifying the evidence against the untrue thought (“You had friends last year”). Some thoughts may be true (e.g., School is going to be hard”) but unhelpful to focus on, so you can help your child to either distract themselves from these thoughts or replace them with a more helpful, balanced thought (“School is challenging, but if I work hard and ask for help then I will be able to do it”). Help your child distract from negative thoughts by remembering positive memories from last year and identifying what they can look forward to this year.

4. Share your own experiences: Parents can share their own experiences from when they were in school. What were you nervous about as a child in school and how did you get through it? What challenges did you have in school? How do you manage stress and anxiety now in your life? These stories can help your child feel that you understand and teach them how to get through the difficulty.

5. Create a plan: Some worries are best addressed by helping your child to have a plan about how they will handle the problem if and when it comes up. For example, if you have a child that is worried about not getting picked up from school, talk about the plan of where they will wait to be picked up, who they would get help from at school if you were running late, and how to call you. If your child is worried about dealing with a bully, go through the steps of what to do when someone is mean and identify who to ask for help so that they feel prepared to handle this. This strategy is especially important if your child has severe anxiety with panic attacks; talk through the plan of what to do and where they can go for a safe place to calm down, then make sure to have the teacher and school counselor on board with the plan.

6. Set up routines: Put routines in place that help take out the stress of getting ready for school, such as choosing clothes the night before and planning your morning routine (create a visual schedule for younger kids). An anxious kid might be slow to get ready in the morning or easily upset by small frustrations, like not being able to find a shoe. And a parent that is feeling chaotic or rushed is only going to add a child's anxiety. In addition, the predictability of routines is very comforting to many children, especially those with anxiety or special needs. Also consider some of the routines that help your child feel loved, like saying "I love you" at drop off, a secret handshake, or notes in their lunchbox.

7. Make it special: Think of ways to make the beginning of school a special occasion – a fun one-on-one trip to get new clothes and supplies, a favorite breakfast, or a special treat after the first day of school. This will help your child have something to look forward to and help them enjoy the experience of going back to school.

8. Meet the teacher and tour the school: Especially when your child is going to a new school or had a bad experience with a teacher the previous year, this can provide a lot of reassurance. If your child has some challenges that will need extra support, you can often arrange a meeting with teacher to discuss what has been helpful in the past. Kids will feel better about the year knowing the teacher is prepared to help them. When kids transition to middle school and have to start switching classes, it can help with the anxiety about getting lost if they are able to go and practice finding their classrooms.

9. Stay calm: Remember that kids easily pick up on the emotions of their parents. If they can sense that you are anxious, your child will feel more nervous. And I often hear from kids that they are afraid to tell their parents something because they don't want them to "overreact." The more calm that you can stay, the more you will be able to communicate to your child that things are ok and safe and the more you will be able to help them problem solve and address their fears.

10. Draw a picture: Drawing is a great way for kids to work through their feelings. Some prompts to try: draw what you expect the first day to be like, draw what the best possible day at school would be like, draw your worry as a monster and draw you defeating him, draw a happy memory about school, draw yourself handling the problem well, draw a safe and relaxing place that you can imagine when you get worried, or draw yourself as a brave superhero.

11. Practice deep breathing: We often tell kids to take a deep breath to calm down, but they don't always know how to do this well or remember to do it in the middle of a crisis. That's why it can be very helpful to practice several times when your child is already calm. Have your child place their hand on their stomach and then take a slow breath in to fill up their stomach like a balloon. Then have them slowly let the air out like

they're trying to blow a bubble. Count slowly to 4 as they breathe in and count to 4 as they breathe out. Repeat at least five times. Lori Lite has some cute books that help kids practice relaxation skills like deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation as part of a story.

12. Use progressive muscle relaxation: Even very young kids can learn to recognize that their body feels tense when they are anxious. Progressive muscle relaxation can help them to relax these muscles and feel more in control. Starting with the toes, tense each part of the body as you take a breath in and count to 3, then let the breath out and relax. Repeat with legs, abdomen, hands, arms, shoulders, and face. Identify a couple that they could do in class without anyone noticing, like toes and hands.

13. Send a comfort or sensory object to school: Taking a favorite small toy, wearing a special bracelet, carrying a special stone in their pocket, or having a stress ball can provide a sense of security and give them a grounding object to hold on to when they start to get anxious. Even high school kids have told me how helpful this can be for them.

14. Read a book: For very young kids who are just starting school, books about going to school can help them know what to expect. For slightly older kids, you can look for books about kids that overcome similar challenges as that faced by your child.

15. Debrief afterwards: After school starts, be sure to make time to talk about how it went. Did any of their worries come true? Did things go better than expected or worse? How were they able to successfully manage and control their anxiety? And remember that especially for kids with a lot of worry, no matter how the day went, you should find some example of positive coping to point out to help them recognize and build their capacity to self-regulate.