

Easing First-Day-of-School Jitters

by Carlabeth Mathias, MS, LCSW, LMHC

Mathias Counseling and Consulting

The first day of school can be an exciting, but stressful, time for children and parents alike. Tummy aches, headaches, and tears are typical symptoms of anxiety about a new school or teacher, a different routine, and potential new friendships. Other children exhibit their concerns through anger or sometimes silence. You know your child best. How does he or she usually react in a stressful situation? Watch for those signs and then address them appropriately.

It is important for children to be given “permission” to have mixed emotions and shown ways to express their concerns. Encourage them to talk about their hopes, expectations, and worries. Typically, children think about things such as whether they might get lost in the building, what if they forget their supplies or their lunch box, where the bus will drop them off, how they will they find their classroom, and making new friends. Worries about COVID and its procedures may play a role in your child’s concerns. This year may be especially difficult for some children returning to in-person school from all-virtual school last year.

Sometimes conversation openers such as, ***“You seem kind of worried about third grade. Is there something you are especially concerned about?”*** Or, ***“I remember being scared in ___ grade about _____ (name something you remember being concerned about.) What are you thinking about?”*** Then use your best listening skills to really focus on what might be bothering your child. Be careful not to jump in too quickly to try to “fix” everything or to discount a fear your children have. Let them know it is normal to be a bit apprehensive, answer their questions the best that you can, and offer to get answers for questions you can’t answer.

Another approach is to remind your children of other times in their lives when they have experienced something new and coped well. For example, you might say, ***“Remember when you started swim lessons and were worried about the deep water? You just reminded yourself that it was going to be fun to learn something new and that the swim teacher would be right there with you! And you did it!”*** Children sometimes find it helpful to talk with a friend or neighbor who has just completed the grade they are entering; just make sure ahead of time that child is positive about the experience!

After letting your child share concerns, try to get him or her to focus on some positive aspects of the new year: new friends, many exciting experiences, and lots of new knowledge. Finally, remind your children that the adults at school care about them and are there to help!

Remember: adjusting to change takes time! Be supportive with patience and understanding. Think about how it would feel to change jobs every 12 months --- just when you were beginning to feel capable at what you were doing and comfortable with your boss and co-workers. Now imagine you were only 6 or 8 or 10 years old. ***That’s what it feels like to go back to school!*** If time and support do not diminish the anxieties, be sure to contact your child’s teacher and/or school counselor for help. If challenges persist, consulting a mental health professional may be in order.