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Back-to-School Anxiety: Dr. Carly Orenstein with Morris Psychological Group Offers Tips for Patients

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Anxiety about the first day of school is not limited to kindergarteners and children starting a new school. Younger children, even those with a year or two of school behind them, may experience a new or repeat bout of separation anxiety, and children of any age are often apprehensive about the unknown – a new teacher, new classmates and new academic challenges. “Anxiety is normal and understandable at any time of change or transition, including the beginning of a new school year,” says Dr. Carly Orenstein of Morris Psychological Group. “Children worry about things that are unfamiliar and about things they haven't mastered yet. 'What if I don't know the answers? Will my teacher be nice? Who will I play with at recess?' Parents should be alert to the signs of anxiety and help children overcome their worries with some simple strategies that will ease the transition into the new year for the whole family.”

Children will demonstrate their anxiety in different ways. Many will ask questions that reveal what is bothering them – questions about the bus, the classroom, the teacher, their classmates, the new things they'll be learning. Others will exhibit changes in behavior as the first day of school approaches – nervous habits, such as biting their nails or pulling their hair; trouble sleeping; complaints of ailments such as stomach aches or headaches; or uncharacteristic changes in temperament, such as irritability or clinging. “It's important for parents to recognize their child's anxiety, assure him that his nervousness is normal and encourage him to give voice to what concerns him,” says Dr. Orenstein. “But rather than simply assuring him that there's nothing to worry about, that everything will be OK, it's better to address his specific concerns – to plan or problem-solve by discussing what to do if, for example, he misses the bus or can't hear the teacher from the back of the room.”

Dr. Orenstein recommends additional planning strategies for parents and children that can relieve back-to-school anxiety:

- Visit the school: Try to arrange to visit the new classroom, meet the teacher and, especially if the child is new to the building, tour the school a few days before school starts. Review the location of the restroom, playground, cafeteria and lockers or coat closet so she is comfortable in the environment. Refresh her memory by walking or driving to school a couple of times or talking about the bus ride.
- Arrange play-dates: If your child hasn't seen classmates over the summer, try to get them re-acquainted before school starts. If the school makes class lists available and many of the faces will be unfamiliar, a get-together with one or two children before the first day can ease the transition to a new year.
- Prepare the whole household for back-to-school: For a week or so before school starts, adjust bedtimes and waking times to correspond to the school schedule. Shop for clothes, if necessary, and school supplies; stock the kitchen with lunch items. Decide with your youngster where homework will be done, clear the area of distractions and make supplies handy. When school starts, reduce morning scrambling by laying out clothes, packing the backpack, setting the breakfast table and making lunch the night before.
- Make the first week special: If at all possible, arrange work schedules so a parent or close caregiver can spend more time at home, especially in the morning and after school. Younger children might like to have a favorite item in the backpack; a note or picture tucked in with lunch can be a comforting reminder of home.

Most children get over back-to-school jitters within a couple of weeks. If symptoms persist or he is resistant to going to school, a conversation with the teacher is appropriate to determine if there's something going on in the classroom that is contributing to the youngster's anxiety and to work together to try to put him at ease. “School presents children of all ages with a wide range of challenges,” says Dr. Orenstein. “Every child's school career will have highs and low points. Anxiety about the unknowns that face each child at the beginning of the school year are normal and can be managed and alleviated by staying closely attuned to the child's feelings, encouraging him to talk about them, and supporting his efforts and successes.”

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