

How To Help Kids Handle Back-To-School Jitters

Dr. Shannon M. Bennett, site clinical director of the Center for Youth Mental Health, provides strategies for reducing students' stress and anxiety.

While many students are eager to return to the classroom this fall, for many others school causes feelings of stress and anxiety.

"Back-to-school jitters are very common, and a mild to moderate amount of anxiety and excitement about going back to school is normal and should pass relatively quickly once the new school year becomes routine," says Dr. Shannon M. Bennett, the associate director of the Center for Youth Mental Health at NewYork-Presbyterian. "If the anxiety persists or becomes more interfering in the child's or family's life, that's when we would recommend seeking out an assessment or additional support. For youth who have an anxiety disorder, going back to school can be challenging."

"Common triggers for anxiety are transition, changes in routine, or starting something new, and back to school incorporates all three," she adds. "There are lots of different types of anxiety and school can tap into many of them." Dr. Bennett says anxiety disorders are the most common type of childhood mental health diagnosis, affecting 8 to 10 percent of school-age children (ages 5 to 12 years). Some studies suggest as many as 1 in 3 adolescents has an anxiety disorder before age 18.

The silver lining: If your child is dealing with anxiety, there are practical tips for managing these feelings and well-studied treatment methods, Dr. Bennett says.

How can parents help soothe first-day jitters in their school-age kids?

I think it's always helpful to prepare in advance. Touring the school before the school year begins and meeting your child's teachers could help familiarize students with their surroundings once school starts. If your child is going to be attending a new school, you can try to connect them ahead of time with another kid or group of kids who're going to be in the school. What's more, getting your child acquainted with the physical sights and sounds and smells can help their body be less on guard when they enter this new environment.

Talk to your kids about what the routine will be like. If there's a new schedule, go over what's involved and discuss what classes they will be taking, so they can have some sense of knowing what's to come. This helps with the unknown and the unpredictability of it all.

Finally, focus on the things that can be exciting about going back to school and starting a new year. This might be learning new things, getting new school supplies, new clothes, new books, and making new friends. I think it's always good to focus on a child's strengths and focus on the positive when facing an anxious situation.

What treatment is available to kids for whom these tactics don't work well enough to offset their anxiety?

The type of therapy we recommend for youth with anxiety is called cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT. It's an evidence-based treatment that focuses on teaching youth strategies for managing anxiety and not avoiding situations that cause them to feel anxious.

One straightforward, yet effective, strategy is deep breathing. Deep breathing can be done anytime, anywhere by taking a few slow deep breaths to help to calm one's body down and regulate the nervous system. Kids can practice it in the evening, in the morning before school, and in the classroom. It can also be helpful before taking tests.

The C, or the cognitive part of CBT, has to do with our thoughts and focusing on realistic thinking. This involves challenging the worries we might have — whether it's some catastrophic thought or overestimating the chances that something



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bad might happen — and replacing them with more realistic thoughts and expectations. For example, if a child is worried about failing a test, being laughed at on the first day, or that something bad happened to their parent while they were at school, we ask them to estimate the actual probability of these events happening, or we have them reflect on past experiences to determine if this is a realistic or likely thought.

The most powerful method we encourage kids to do, the B, in behavior therapy, is what we call exposure therapy, which is not avoiding the people, places, or things that trigger anxiety. We teach kids that it's OK to do something that makes you feel nervous, and that it is likely that the more times you try it, the easier it will get. Often, we can break situations down into smaller steps if needed, and then gather the evidence from each step that if you've tried something new or scary before and your worst fears did not come true, you can feel more confident that the next step will be OK as well. And maybe even rewarding or fun!

What else can kids do on their own to cope with their anxiety?

Youth and parents can put together a list of what we call positive coping statements or positive self-statements that are grounded in evidence or realistic thinking, which can help kids weather their anxiety. This could be "I can do this, there are people there to support me," or "I've tried new things before and it went OK." These realistic coping statements can be helpful for kids to have in a list to keep in their pocket so they can look at that on the first day of school if they're feeling nervous.

Mindfulness meditation is also very good for anxiety. There are a lot of mindfulness apps and programs that kids can try on their own. Mindfulness is focused on being in the present moment. When we're anxious about something that could happen in the future, or we're stuck on something that already happened in the past, mindfulness helps us to focus on what's happening in the present moment, and become better able to tolerate the feelings we find there.

When should parents get their kids extra help in dealing with anxiety?

When anxiety is making life difficult for a child or for their family, or has persisted for several weeks, I recommend meeting with a psychologist, child psychiatrist, social worker, or other mental health professional for an assessment and potentially for treatment if recommended. If anxiety progresses to the point of panic attacks or is really impacting a child's mood, I recommend seeking help sooner rather than later.

I'd also seek help quickly for a child who is refusing to go to school. The longer a child stays out of school, the harder it becomes to return. Similarly, if a child doesn't want to go on play dates or is avoiding after-school activities or other positive social and academic activities, this can be a sign that additional help is needed. The avoidance caused by anxiety robs children of the opportunity to learn that they can handle a healthy dose of stress. They also miss out on not just the academic lessons of school but also the social and life lessons that kids gain from going to school and being around peers. Youth who chronically avoid school may fall off the trajectory of development that their peers are on, and miss out on potentially fun and developmentally important activities as well.

Do you have any other advice for concerned parents?

It's important to remember that though anxiety is a natural emotion, sometimes it can become too intense and too interfering, necessitating help. We have very good treatments for anxiety disorders in youth. It's good to know, as well, that kids are not alone if they're feeling anxious and that it's OK to seek help and the right kind of treatment.