

Helping children manage back-to-school anxiety

August 30 2013, by Cheryle Rodriguez

For children, August means the end of summer and the start of a new school year. That can make many kids nervous and worried.

Michael Southam-Gerow, Ph.D., professor of psychology and pediatrics, Department of Psychology in the VCU College of Humanities and Sciences and co-director of the Anxiety Clinic at VCU, spoke with VCU News about children's [school](#)-related [worries](#) and the steps that parents can take to help ease back-to-school anxiety.

Why do kids get so uptight about going back to school?

Children, like [adults](#), tend to do best in situations with good levels of controllability and predictability. For the most part, we all like homeostasis. Times of transition tend to decrease controllability and predictability – hence, one reason to get uptight. Also, for some kids, going back to school can mean coping with situations that are challenging for them. For example, some kids may struggle academically or socially. Or, some kids struggle with maintaining focus for long periods of time, as schools frequently require. So, there are a number of reasons why kids may be uptight about going back to school.

That said, there are many kids who are excited to go back to school, or at least not dreading it. As you know, some kids enjoy the academic challenge. Other kids are excited to see their friends. And there are those

[kids](#) who appreciate and do well with the structure that school provides.

What are some strategies for helping kids reduce anxiety about going back to school or going to a new school?

A good transition to school can happen through a variety of strategies. Given what I said about [predictability](#) and controllability, to the extent that a caregiver can help a child prepare for the transition by making aspects of that transition predictable and/or controllable, the better the child will cope.

A few examples are:

- encouraging the child to participate in school supply shopping so that she or he can select special items;
- collaborating with the child to devise a schedule for waking up and breakfast;
- rehearsing a school day by driving over to the school before school is in session so that the child becomes acclimated to the environment and its cues;
- arranging for time with classmates in advance of the [school year](#) so that the child becomes more familiar with them;
- arranging to meet the teacher in advance of the school year so that the child becomes familiar with her or him.

In addition to these active strategies, encouraging a child to verbalize his/her concerns and then talking them through with him/her by providing empathy as well as some gentle and collaborative reframing can also be a helpful approach.

What can parents do if their child is bullied?

Most schools these days have specific procedures and policies about bullying. Parents can make themselves familiar with these policies in advance. Supporting the child is one of the most important things to do. Again, encouraging verbalization, providing empathy and providing perspective can be quite helpful. Also, it can be useful for a caregiver to engage in collaborative problem solving with the child. There is not one answer to most of the problems that children face in school (or outside of school). As a result, flexible and collaborative problem solving can be quite helpful and also models for the child a good approach to many difficult situations.

What are the warning signs if your child is bullied, anxious or depressed?

Unfortunately, there are not any surefire signs that a child is being bullied, is experiencing high levels of anxiety or is depressed. Human behavior, in general, is quite variable and sometimes we can air on the side of overinterpreting normal behavior. That is, one kid's sign of being bullied is another kid's normal expression.

With that said, what we typically suggest that caregivers and teachers watch for are notable changes in behavior, such as going from a normally cheerful child to a more withdrawn and/or angry/sullen child (as one example). One might also look for changes in the way that a child interacts with others, particularly siblings and/or peers. For example, a child who is being bullied may begin to bully those in his/her house (such as a younger sibling). But, in general, what we recommend is to look for shifts and/or changes in behavior that are persistent.

One problem with "warning signs" is that they can be used by parents and others to make typical behavior seem atypical and problematic. It is important to remember that experiences of anxiety and sadness are part

of normal human experience and that learning to cope with these is an important developmental achievement. There has been an increasing emphasis by some to greatly reduce or eliminate the "suffering" of children – that is, efforts by some caregivers are made to protect their children from any kind of challenges where they might experience negative emotions, like anxiety or sadness. Still though caregivers can be watching for changes in behavior that suggest a child is grappling with a stressor that is really taxing his/her coping resources.

What should parents do when a child continues to worry or cry after the first couple of days?

As noted, children learn a lot when dealing with challenging circumstances, like transitions to school. Caregivers can support their children well by allowing them to struggle some and also providing supports and coping guidance when warranted. It is this balance that can be most challenging – knowing when to intervene versus knowing when to let a child struggle a bit longer.

In terms of wondering whether a child's challenges with school warrant professional attention, a good rule of thumb can be to confer with school personnel first. An advantage to communicating with people at the school is that teachers and educators have the great fortune to observe dozens of children every year, whereas parents most often only interact with a small number. Thus, educators and teachers can often provide perspective on an individual child's behavior that a [caregiver](#) often cannot. This is not to say that one should rely solely on a teacher or educator's opinion, but gathering that data can be a helpful first step. If the teacher indicates that the child's difficulties may warrant some further attention, or if the parent believes that is the case, then a professional evaluation can be sought out. Richmond has bountiful resources related to [child](#) anxiety. There are both low-cost clinic options

as well as a number of well-qualified individuals in private practice who take private insurance.

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