

Parents' genes may influence children's back-to-school fears

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Many parents may have noticed their children seemed on edge during their first week of school. They may have been agitated, withdrawn or more focused on themselves, rather than what was going on around them. Such behaviours are classic symptoms of high anxiety, says Université de Montréal researcher Richard Tremblay.

Tremblay is a professor emeritus whose area of expertise is childhood psychology and psychiatry, particularly [antisocial behaviour](#). In 1984, he launched a [longitudinal study](#) that focused on the development of children from conception on. Many of the original participants are now in their mid-30s. Thanks in part to funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation, Tremblay was able to build a [mobile lab](#) in 2005 that allowed him to park this study at participants' front door—a convenience that helped ensure their cooperation over decades.

He says the longer timelines of his study gave him the chance to better understand the hereditary and [environmental factors](#) that lead a child to become aggressive, depressed or anxious.

Tremblay says the anxiety young students feel as they return to school is often related to the uncertainties they feel about their new teacher and [classroom environment](#), the kids they'll interact with and whether their [bullies](#) will hunt them down during recess.

"It's a big change in the rhythm of life for everybody, especially children," says Tremblay. "Those who have problems with anxiety often

create worst-case scenarios, almost like horror stories in their minds."

But Tremblay adds that being prone to such back to school horrors is not isolated to the imaginations of young students. Rather, their sky-is-falling tendencies may have been inherited from their [parents](#), he says.

"There is a big [genetic effect](#) in terms of anxiety [behaviours](#)," says Tremblay. "The best predictors of anxiety or depression among children are their parents' own struggles with the same disorders. In other words, if you have a very anxious mother or father, you are at high risk of being an anxious child."

Parents pass their anxious tendencies to children through their genes, predisposing the next generation to bouts of apprehension, says Tremblay. "But a child's anxiety can be amplified by their environment," he adds. "If you're brought up by an anxious mother or father and you're genetically predisposed to these conditions, you will have a difficult time learning how to control your anxiety."

Tremblay outlines the consequences of this increased on-edge behaviour, suggesting the tightly-wound types are more likely to become depressed. They may have serious problems paying attention in school which could eventually affect their scholastic achievement and social relations.

And jittery students often have an additional worry to deal with. Not only are they nervous about going back to school but they tend to be anxious about being anxious once they get there. "It's a meta problem," says Tremblay, referring to how anxiety about one thing can generate anxiety about another.

To deal with such concerns, Tremblay encourages parents to monitor their children's behaviour in the first week of school. "Parents need to think about who their child is, how they're child has coped in the past

and what worked and what didn't," says Tremblay.

He suggests parents who've suffered from [anxiety](#) watch for any behavioural similarities reflected in their children. Once identified, they can use their own memories of how they coped to guide their children through nerve-wracking encounters.

If children aren't able to relax within the first few weeks of school, Tremblay recommends parents seek help from the [school](#), from counsellors or even from the young child's grandparents. He believes they can offer grounded insight into what it's like raising a high-strung kid who then has an anxious child of their own.

"Grandmama knows things that can be very helpful," says Tremblay. "People imagine that new psychological knowledge will solve all their problems but those old experiences are very good."

Provided by University of Montreal

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