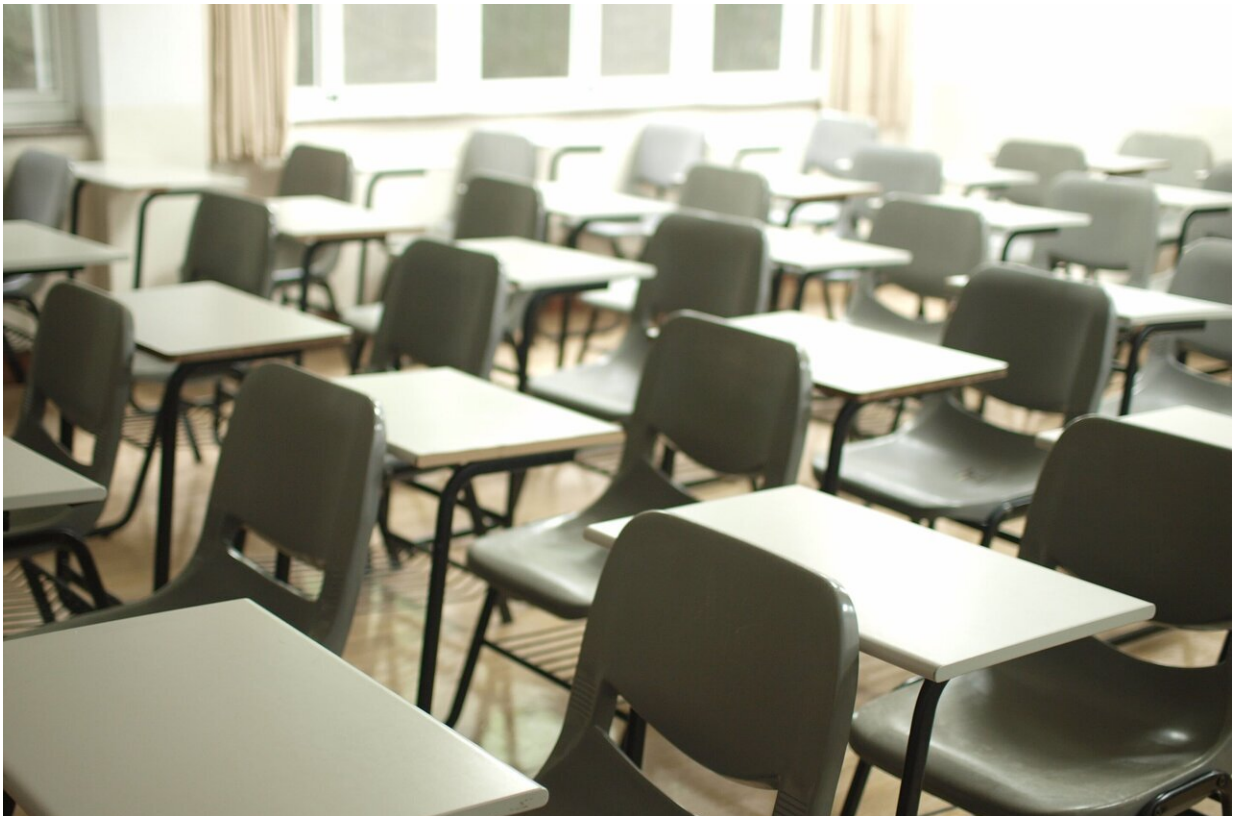


# Handling back-to-school anxiety in a pandemic

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Back-to-school jitters are normal every fall. But as families prepare for the beginning of the 2021–22 school year, these run-of-the-mill worries are colliding with fresh uncertainties about the ongoing COVID-19

pandemic, leaving kids and parents more anxious than usual.

Parents can use many strategies to help their [children](#) handle this challenging situation, according to Elizabeth Reichert, Ph.D., clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences.

"I often talk to parents about being the lighthouse in their child's storm, the light that shines steadily in a predictable rhythm and doesn't waver no matter how big the storm is," Reichert said. "Their job is to be that lighthouse."

Reichert spoke with science writer Erin Digitale about how parents can help ensure that budding students of any age—from preschool to high school—are ready to handle anxieties as the [school year](#) begins.

## **1. What are some concerns kids may have?**

Reichert: Lots of things come to mind. Many kids are going to a new school for the first time: Maybe they're starting middle school, preschool or kindergarten. Those are big transitions in nonpandemic times. With the pandemic, we might see more stress in kids of all ages.

Children may have concerns specific to the pandemic, such as the mandate that California students must wear masks while indoors at school. Kids who are more anxious may ask a lot of questions: "How am I going to keep my mask on all day? What if I want to take it off? What are the rules around it?" They may have increased fear of getting sick, too.

For some children and teens, it will be the first time they've been in close proximity to groups of people in a very long time, which brings up concerns about social interactions. For kids in middle and [high school](#), social dynamics are especially important. They've just had a year and a

half of navigating their social lives in the virtual world, and now they're re-navigating how to manage social dynamics in person. Social interactions may feel more emotionally draining.

Also, not all kids are the same. With virtual learning, some children really struggled to stay engaged and motivated, grasp the material, and remain connected with friends and teachers. But there were other children, often those who were shyer or had difficulties in large-group settings, who thrived. For those more introverted kiddos, if they've been in a comfort zone at home, going back to large groups may be a more difficult transition.

## **2. What signs might parents see that children are feeling anxious or otherwise struggling emotionally?**

Reichert: This depends on the age of the child. Among little ones, parents may see increased tearfulness about going to preschool or day care, clingy behavior or regression in milestones such as potty training. With [school-aged children](#), parents may see resistance to going to school, oppositional behavior, and somatic complaints such as stomachaches or headaches. That's going to be really tricky to navigate because schools now have strict guidelines about not coming to school sick. For teens, there may also be school refusal and withdrawn behavior, such as staying isolated in their rooms, or more irritability and moodiness. Risky behavior such as substance abuse may also increase.

Parents can expect some distress and worry during the first few weeks after any transition—especially now, when children are being asked to do many new things all at once. That can affect energy levels and emotional reserves. But if there is a major change from a child's or teen's baseline behavior that doesn't dissipate after a couple of weeks—such as a teenager who is withdrawing more and more and refusing to engage in

typical activities, or a child who is progressively more distressed—that is a red flag. Parents may want to consider seeking help at that point.

### **3. What proactive steps can parents take before school begins?**

Reichert: Parents can start talking about going back; listening to what's on their child's mind; and engaging kids in the fun components of returning to school, such as picking out school supplies or a new T-shirt—something they can get excited about. They can also walk or drive by the school or visit its playground to build excitement. It may also be helpful to start practicing saying goodbye and leaving the house, encouraging independent play, and helping children adjust to being away from their parents.

If bedtimes have drifted later during summer vacation, parents can shift the family schedule during the week or two before school starts to get back in the habit of going to bed and waking up earlier. They can also reestablish other pre-pandemic routines that worked well for the family.

### **4. If a child still feels distressed, what should parents do to help?**

Reichert: If a child remains anxious, there are key steps parents can take. When our children are upset, our natural is instinct to remove the distress they're experiencing. But the first step is not jumping straight to problem-solving.

The first step is to listen, to create space to hear the kid's concerns. Acknowledge what they're feeling even if you don't agree with it. The child should feel that they're being heard, that it is OK to feel what they are feeling, and that they have space to talk to Mom or Dad.

Once parents have a better sense of what's going on, they should try to work collaboratively with the child to figure out a plan. They can ask: What does the child feel like they're capable of doing? What can Mom or Dad do to help? Who else could help—a friend, sibling, another family member? If, for example, a child refuses to go to school, [parents](#) can say, "How can we make it feel easier?" while also communicating to the child that, ultimately, it's their job to go to school. By creating small opportunities for getting through difficult situations and coping with their worries, children will build the confidence and the independence they need to feel more in control and less afraid. It's important to remember that children are resilient and adaptable, and, for many, after a period of transition, they will find their groove.

Parents can also elicit the help of the school and teacher. Teachers know this is a big transition for kids, and they are gearing up to help.

## **5. Parents feel anxiety about this transition, too. What healthy coping strategies can they use to make sure they manage their own stress instead of expressing it in ways that may increase their child's distress?**

Reichert: Parents are the biggest models for our kids. If our kids see us really anxious about something, they're going to feed off that. Parents need to be mindful of their own emotions so they can self-regulate and become present for their child.

We want to be steady sources of support for our children. It's also fine to say we feel worried or we don't know the answer, because that shows it's OK to feel those things. The problem is when our worries get too big, when we're no longer calm or we are saying and doing things we don't want to model for our children.

It's essential to find moments for self-care. Taking even just a couple of deep breaths in the moment, taking a bathroom break, getting a drink of water or doing other things that create a brief transition for yourself, a moment to regulate your feelings, is helpful. Think back to what worked for you before the pandemic, and try getting even a small inkling of that back, such as five minutes a day of moving your body if exercise helps you. This is not only important for you as a parent, but it also shows your child that you have strategies to take care of yourself.

We can also invite our children into healthy coping activities with us: A parent can say to a [school](#)-aged or older child, "I'm feeling pretty stressed about this, and for me, going for a walk helps me clear my head. Do you want to go for a walk with me?" Parents and young kids can blow bubbles together—small kids enjoy it, and you can talk about how big breaths for bubbles help everyone feel better.

Provided by Stanford University Medical Center

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