

## Q&A: Back-to-school anxiety

August 24 2022, by Stephen Whiteside

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**DEAR MAYO CLINIC:** I have two sons, ages 5 and 14. My eldest is always excited to start school and have new adventures. My younger son will begin kindergarten this year. Although he went to day care part time, he has begun to express concern about being away from me all day and is showing increased anxiety as we talk about school. How can I help

him be less anxious?

ANSWER: Getting ready for a new school year can be exciting for [children](#), parents and caregivers. It also may be a major cause of anxiety or stress.

Most people get nervous when they face change. Whether kids are heading off to [elementary school](#), [high school](#) or college, leaving the safety and familiarity of home can prompt feelings of fear.

One of the most helpful things you can do is reassure your son that what he is feeling is normal. Separation anxiety happens to many people of all ages. Then, as much as possible, help him gradually gain exposure to, and get comfortable with, going to school.

Try to get a sense of what it is about school that makes your son nervous. Is he concerned about making new friends? Is he concerned about the teachers? Is he worried about the class work? Is there something new that may be causing anxiety, like riding a bus? Sometimes just being able to talk about those details and put the nervousness into words can help a child who is feeling anxious.

Continuing to show love, support and warmth can go a long way. Share with your son an experience you had when you were anxious about facing something new. Talk to him about how you handled the situation. Ask your older child to share some experiences and how he overcame his fears. Doing this will let your younger child know that he is not alone in the situation, that it is OK to be nervous, and he can get through it.

Talking to your son about what his school day might be like and preparing him ahead of time by doing things such as visiting the school and meeting teachers can be beneficial. Taking a tour ahead of time of his classroom, the playground and even the bus stop can help. If your son

is nervous about getting on the school bus, call the transportation department to see if he can meet the bus driver early.

Another idea is to find [social opportunities](#) with other incoming kindergarten students. Reach out to parents of children in your neighborhood who will be going to school for the first time. Then plan a social gathering at a local playground.

Also, develop a routine in advance of school. Begin to wake up early and get ready on time. Also, consider practicing some schoolwork. You can get your older child involved in sharing his thoughts about what was the best part of school when he was that age.

Lastly, begin by spending some time away from your son. Maybe it is a 30-minute outing to grab coffee by yourself while your child stays with his older brother or having your child go to a friend's home for an hour. Then slowly increase the time so your son has an opportunity to feel comfortable being away from you for longer periods of time.

All of these steps will help him know what to expect, prepare him gradually for what school will be like and ease the transition. This approach is based on one of the core principles of treating anxiety. That is, when you are frightened of something that is not dangerous, you need to have practice dealing with the source of your fear until it becomes routine or boring. You cannot be talked out of anxiety. You need exposure to, and experience in, dealing with the situation.

If your child is resistant to the attempts you are making, or if his anxiety does not decrease even after you have taken these steps, talk with your pediatrician or primary care provider about seeing a health care professional who can help. Anxiety is a normal part of life that cannot be completely eliminated, but many successful strategies can reduce [anxiety](#) and how often it causes problems.

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