

Back-to-school anxiety: Seven tips to help children cope

August 25 2023, by Trudy Meehan and Jolanta Burke



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Going back to school after the summer holidays can be a big deal. For some children, it means moving into a new classroom with a new teacher. Others will be going to a new school altogether. Change can be exciting, but it's often scary, too.

Your child might be feeling a version of the "Sunday scaries" we sometimes experience when the weekend's over—a miserable anticipation of the boring old routine starting back again. Or they might be experiencing more significant emotional distress, perhaps wanting to avoid [school](#) altogether.

If your child is feeling fearful and anxious about the return to school, you may be unsure how to help them. This can be an upsetting and challenging situation for you as a parent or caregiver, too. Here are some steps to take to help your child with their return to the classroom.

1. Let your child know you hear them

It might be tempting to dismiss your child's fears with a quick reassurance that everything will be OK. But it is more helpful to let them know that you understand and believe them, and that you will work with them as they get back into the school routine and do whatever you can to support them.

This can help your child move on from negative emotions and towards [solving the problem](#) with you.

2. Find out what's worrying them

There are [various reasons](#) why your child might not want to go back to school. They might be trying to avoid something negative: [bullying](#), a difficult environment [created by teachers](#), struggles interacting with their classmates or [academic pressure](#). They might have [neurodevelopmental issues](#), such as autism, ADHD or dyslexia, that make school difficult, or a mental health issue such as anxiety.

Or they may be worried about leaving the home they've got used to

spending all their time in over the summer holidays, and having to learn instead in a bright, noisy environment that may be overwhelming. They might be feeling some [separation anxiety](#), wanting to stay close to you. Finding out what in particular is worrying them will help you work out a solution—perhaps with the assistance of a teacher or other professional.

3. Let them know it's OK to feel scared

If your family is experiencing back-to-school anxiety, both [you and your child](#) may be feeling a little bit inadequate and ashamed of these feelings.

But this fear is not a sign of weakness. It's an understandable challenge, with a genuine cause, that you and your child have the capacity to understand and overcome. By going through this challenge and facing it with the right support, you and your child can end up [feeling more capable and more resilient](#).

4. Take things step by step

Going straight back into school—seeing classmates and teachers again all at once—might be a lot to handle. You could set up a play date or social meet for your child with a few school friends in the days before school starts, so they can catch up before the first overwhelming day.

Perhaps your child might find school easier to cope with if they went to a few of their preferred classes first, and then built up to full attendance. Breaking a task down into bite-size chunks and focusing on small successes that you can [link together](#) over time can make a big hurdle—like the return to school—more manageable.

5. Focus on sleep

Sleep routines probably went out the window over the holidays, and everyone at home will struggle to deal with earlier bedtimes and morning alarms.

Teenagers, in particular, will find it difficult—a shift in [sleep patterns](#) from puberty can push the time they feel ready to sleep later by [as much as two hours](#). Unfortunately, though, this doesn't reduce the [amount of sleep](#) that they need (about [nine hours](#) a night).

But sleep is important for mood and academic performance. Try to be kind and compassionate with yourself and everyone else in the house, and see if you can all get to bed at least 15 minutes early in the week before school starts.

If you can't manage this or if it's already too late, there are other ways to [improve sleep](#). Exercise during the day, cutting [caffeine intake](#), reducing evening screen time, and even missing some [extracurricular activities](#) at the start of the school year might be helpful.

6. Pay attention to your own mood

Try to reduce your own negative talk about the return to school. If you're unhappy about going back to the school routine, then it's likely your [children](#) will follow your lead.

Try to avoid negative conversations, in real life or online, about going back to school. If you can't manage to be positive, and there's another adult in the house or family, you can ask them to support you by being positive and acting as a counterbalance to your anxiety or [negative thoughts](#).

7. Encourage optimism

Practice thinking optimistically with your child. Before going to bed each night, you could both write down three things you are [looking forward to](#) the following day—seeing friends, an after-school club, a favorite meal. This can help you both balance out the [negative emotions](#) you might be feeling about the day ahead.

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