

Back-to-school anxiety? Here are seven simple solutions

1 September 2017, by Michael Lee Zwiars



Understanding the source of child anxiety is important. Some fears may be easily soothed; others, such as fears of bullying, may require adult intervention. Credit: Shutterstock

School start-up is just around the corner. For most children and adolescents, September is an exciting time of year, with its promise of new friends, new clothes, new teachers and new things to learn and experience.

Given all the changes and unknowns that come with starting a new school year, it is not surprising that children might also experience [anxiety](#). Sometimes it might become intense, or persist longer than is healthy.

The good news is that most young people adapt well and their anxiety reduces to normal levels within the first month of school. As a former teacher, and an educational psychologist, I can offer parents a few suggestions to help this adaptation happen faster.

1. Understand the anxious brain

From birth to age 11 or 12, children's brains grow dramatically and [neuronal connections are made rapidly](#). This allows them to learn from many sources and amass important knowledge and skills

(think about learning to talk, read, write and socialize). After that, the focus of brain development turns to [consolidating and integrating learning](#) while they gain a fuller understanding of the world and how they fit into it.

Whatever stage they are in, children and adolescents are reaching out to explore the world around them, embracing new experiences and facing challenge and change. These new experiences carry with them uncertainty, which has the potential to provoke anxiety.

In its purest form, anxiety is adaptive and helpful. It alerts us to potential risks in the environment around us, helping to ensure that we look before we leap. It keeps us close to those who will protect us. Unfortunately, the brain's alarm system can become over activated and trigger anxiety in unnecessary circumstances, or evoke excessive anxiety that keeps us from doing things in normal daily life.

2. Get a good night's sleep

Excitement and anxiety can affect sleep. Getting a good night's sleep is important in helping us cope with stress. Some children get so worked up that they cannot sleep the night before school, or they wake up early.

In the evening, acknowledge your kids' excitement about school, then try some warm milk (which releases tryptophan to help with sleep). Tuck them into bed to read a familiar story that might even be a little boring. Soft lighting and gentle music can also help. Melatonin is a natural substance that makes them feel sleepy, which can be used for a few nights if needed (consult a pharmacist). Bedtime routines are helpful. And electronics with screens should be shut off [90 minutes before sleep](#).

3. Talk about morning anxiety

Anxiety can present as tummy aches and tears, as well as irritability and avoidance of going to school. It is important to talk with your child about their worries and fears. But do not give in and let them stay home unless there is a really good reason. Staying at home will only reinforce their anxiety and make it worse in the end.

4. Help kids transition

It is normal for young children to experience some [separation anxiety](#), especially if they have not previously had the chance to attend daycare or day camps. In this case, you might need to accompany them to the door of the school or classroom to help them transition to the teacher.

Sometimes, it helps to have another child with them. Your child can meet with their friend before school or even travel to school together, an approach that works well with older children and youth.

5. Figure out the worries

Ask your child what they are worried about. Once you have found out the cause or trigger for the anxiety, you can take steps to respond. Work together with your child to develop a plan that will help them be successful.

Sometimes problems will require adult intervention. The last thing you want to do is send your child off to school when they have real worries about being bullied or physically hurt by peers who have threatened them. Similarly, some youth can feel threatened by certain teachers or school staff who may not be respectful or sensitive to their needs. Of course, the anxieties may be exaggerated or unfounded but real problems should never be dismissed.

6. Deal with your own anxiety

[Parental anxiety can affect children](#). It helps if you talk to your partner or trusted friends about your anxiety. Is this your first child starting school? Try to connect with a more seasoned parent who can help make your journey easier.

7. Know when to consult a specialist

There are some types of anxiety that are more severe and require specialized support and treatment. It is important not to let these run on for too long without intervention, as these types of anxiety tend to persist if they are not treated. Anxiety also tends to run in families.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is characterized by frequent worrying about many topics and situations (including worrying about family members, peers and schoolwork) that provokes an impairing anxiety response. Separation Anxiety Disorder is characterized by marked anxiety at separation from significant adults.

Social Anxiety Disorder is characterized by significant and impairing anxiety and self-consciousness in social situations, which can make it hard to talk or eat in groups. Panic Disorder (rare before age 13) is characterized by an unexpected adrenaline pulse that provokes a strong physiological anxiety response, which can make it difficult to stay in enclosed or public spaces.

Though it is common to experience some anxiety during the first month, most children will make a successful transition. If anxiety continues beyond that, you might need to consult with a specialist such as a child psychologist or pediatrician. An excellent resource that is useful for both transitional anxiety and clinical levels of anxiety is the book [Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child](#).

Help your children to prepare, then you can enjoy the first weeks back at [school](#) just as much as your [children](#) do!

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