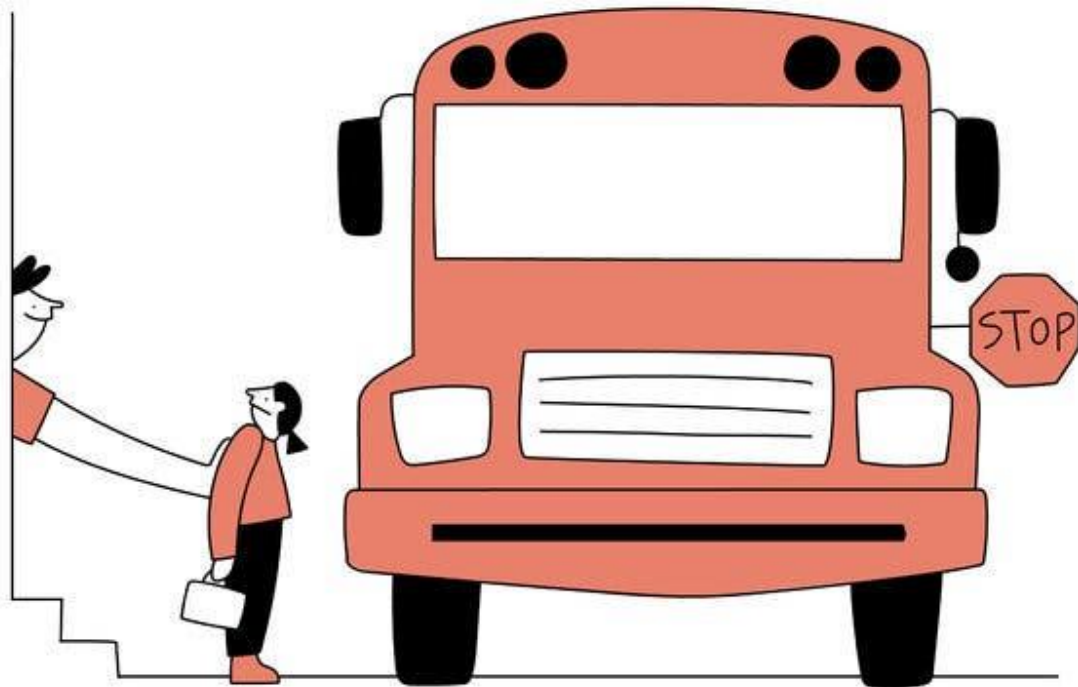


5 Tips for Taming Back-to-School Anxiety

After months at home, some children may feel anxious about going to school or camp. Here's how to smooth the transition.



Credit...Cécile Gariépy

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By **Christina Caron**
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[Across the country](#) many students are [finally starting to learn in person again](#) and [summer camp](#) slots are already filling up. After spending so many months sequestered at home, having these outlets can feel like a relief — but they can also seem daunting to young children who are reluctant to leave their parents and unsure of what to expect.

“What underlies anxiety is uncertainty,” said Mary Alvord, a psychologist in Maryland who specializes in treating children and adolescents with anxiety disorders and behavioral regulation problems. “And it has been uncertainty for over a year now, almost at every level.”

If you are concerned your child might have trouble adjusting to school or camp, experts recommend using these strategies to help them adapt.

Recognize and validate what your child is feeling.

Young children and some kids with special needs may not have the vocabulary to express how they feel. Look for behaviors that indicate they are feeling anxious, like crying, irritability, stomachaches or clinginess, Dr. Alvord said.

It is important for parents to acknowledge and validate these feelings. Dr. Alvord suggested a potential script: “I know it’s been hard, I know you like it at home. I know there’s a lot of things you don’t know and it may be scary.”

You can also mention various reasons that a child might feel upset, for example: “It may be hard because you’ve never been there before you don’t know the kids, you don’t know the teacher.”

Then end on a positive note: “I know you can do it and we’re going to figure out ways to help you.”

Catherine Halberg, a school psychologist at an elementary school in Shelburne Falls, Mass., has been amazed at how resilient the kids in her school have been when coming back for in-person learning, even the youngest ones who had never been in the building before.

“I think the biggest issues with the lack of social connection are going to be seen much more in middle school and high school,” she added.

Try to [keep your own worries or anxieties in check](#) as well. It’s OK to acknowledge your own fears, but use that as an opportunity to model positive coping skills. You might say, for example, “Sometimes I feel nervous about doing new things too, but when I find myself feeling anxious, I stop and take a few deep breaths and it helps calm me down.”

Introduce your kids to mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the experience of being open and aware in the present moment, without passing judgment or letting the mind wander. Being more mindful is something that both grown-ups and children can practice, and it can help children identify and cope with tough emotions that they might experience during the first days of school or camp.

To get started, think about what your child is likely to be feeling during those initial days or weeks, then give them something they can do to make them feel better, advised Mary Louise Hemmeter, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University.

For example, if you think your child might feel scared, tell them they can ask to sit with a friend or ask the teacher if they can sit near her in class. Just don’t forget to give the teacher a heads-up.

Ann Densmore, an educational psychologist who has consulted at private and public schools for more than 25 years, said several kindergarten teachers she knows recommend parents show their kids a three-minute video titled [‘Just Breathe,’](#) by Julie Bayer Salzman

and Josh Salzman. It shows how some children use mindfulness when they get angry or anxious.

One little girl in the video compared these complex feelings to a jar full of glitter and water when it's shaken. "That would be how your mind looks, and it's like spinning around and then you don't have any time to think," she said. After identifying these feelings, the kids describe how they try to find space to be alone and relax, and to take deep breaths, which helps them to calm down.

"I think kids just need that mental downtime more than they did before the pandemic," Dr. Densmore said.

Establish a new routine.

If your children have been going to sleep later than usual during the pandemic and waking up late, start them on a new schedule at least a couple of weeks ahead of school or camp, the experts said.

Build a morning routine that feels comfortable, safe and nurturing. Consider incorporating something calming, like reading a book together.

"The last thing you want to do is get the child to school anxious just because the morning has been a hassle," Dr. Hemmeter said.

On the first day of school or camp — even if it's just the first full day transitioning away from a hybrid schedule — try to mark the transition in a special way, Ms. Halberg said. Consider getting a new outfit or backpack, for example, or cooking a favorite breakfast.

Or you can create a new routine by giving your child a memento to take to school each day. You can take a picture of yourself, for example, and put it inside a locket or glue it on a piece of paper that gets tucked inside their lunchbox, Dr. Densmore said. She recalled one little boy who kept a small rock in his pocket that his mother had given him.

Caitlin Smith, 43, a mother of two in Concord, N.H., said that when her daughter was entering kindergarten, they picked out matching butterfly bracelets.

"Any time she missed me she could touch it or look at it and know that I had the same thing and that I could do the same if I was missing her," Ms. Smith said. "It was just kind of a nice way to stay connected."

You can also put a visual schedule in your child's backpack to help them know what to expect, Dr. Hemmeter said.

Talk to the teacher ahead of time to find out what the school day will look like, then use simple pictures, drawings or words to illustrate each activity of the day. The final picture would be of yourself or whoever will be picking up your child at the end of the day.

Communicate with your child's teacher.

It's important to chat with the teachers and support people who have been providing services to your child during virtual learning: What recommendations do they have to support your child's return to school?

In addition, Dr. Hemmeter said, prepare information to send to your child's new teacher and consider writing it from the child's perspective. For example: "Things that you should know about me: When I get scared, I often cry. Things that help me when I am scared include: having someone read a book to me, finding a friend to work with or working on my iPad."

Ask your teacher about what the drop-off will look like. If you get to school and need to drop your kids off at the front door instead of their classroom, you don't want that to be a surprise. See if you can arrange a short tour of the classroom ahead of time and describe the rules about distancing, hand washing and so on.

If your child has an Individualized Education Program, which is a plan that provides support to children with disabilities, contact your child's I.E.P. team. Dr. Hemmeter suggested finding out how the team can support your child's return to school and whether there is a need to meet ahead of time.

The website [Autism Little Learners](#) has multiple [illustrated explanatory stories](#) that are useful for any child, and includes subjects like going back to school.

Don't talk about school too often or too early.

As school approaches, you can start discussing what your child's classroom and schedule will look like, but try not to bring it up too often.

"I believe in not preparing kids too soon," Dr. Densmore said. "Don't tell them over and over again for weeks on end or they will start thinking about it a lot."

But every child is different, she added. Some children, for example, might need a little more preparation if they did not attend preschool during the pandemic and will be attending kindergarten for the first time in the fall.

One way to prepare for school, aside from talking or reading about it, is to organize small play dates with other kids who will be attending your child's school or summer camp. That way, they can look forward to seeing a few friends on the first day.

"The good news here is children are innately social," said Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a professor of psychology at Temple University and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "We are the most social species on the planet. Once we get a taste of what it's like to be with people again, we are going to eat it up."

Christina Caron is a reporter for the Well section, covering mental health and the intersection of culture and health care. Previously, she was a parenting reporter, general assignment reporter and copy editor at The Times. @cdcaron