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Tips for Parents:

Lessening back to school anxiety

In the next several weeks children will be returning to school for a new year of study. Many look forward to starting, but a number of kids approach this time with trepidation, fearing the unknown, and not looking forward to returning to school. Many children experience increased anxiety in daily life, and returning to school only exacerbates the problem. They are fearful and have many questions, including how to navigate a new school, who their teachers will be, will they know any other children, and how they will be traveling to and from school.

Parents can do a number of things to help alleviate a child's anxiety:

1. **If your child is starting a new school, attend an orientation with your child where the school can be toured. Children often worry about finding their classrooms and fearing getting lost. Aside from seeing classrooms, children would benefit from seeing the gymnasium, library, cafeteria, nurse's office and counselor's office. Some children are comforted to know that there is a place they can go if their anxiety exacerbates. If possible draw a floor plan for your child so that they can visualize how they will navigate the hallways.**
2. **Arrange to meet your child's teacher(s). A teacher will feel less like a stranger if a child is already introduced to him or her before the first day of class.**
3. **Traveling to and from school can be a stressor. If your child will be walking to school, plan the route to school and do trial runs back and forth. If your child will be taking a bus, see if a trial bus ride can be arranged. If not, talk with your child about who will walk them to (and from) the bus stop, the location where the bus will pick them up, how long it will take to get to school, and how to speak with the bus driver in the event their anxiety increases.**
4. **Be aware of your mood and level of anxiety. Children are acutely aware when parents appear nervous and can feed off this negative energy. Avoid negative statements in front of your children about school. For example if your child is assigned a teacher you are not fond of, refrain from verbalizing this in a negative way. Doing this can cause your child to dislike a teacher before they ever meet.**
5. **Listen to your children. Talk about returning to school and allow them to express their thoughts and fears. Answer their questions openly and honestly.**
6. **Be positive about the new school year. Make an adventure out of shopping for new clothing and school supplies.**
7. **Children are often fearful of not having any friends in school or in any of their classes. Role-playing can be useful in teaching children how to initiate a conversation with someone new and how to respond to questions.**
8. **Discuss contingency plans with your child in the event of a crisis. Anxious children sometimes feel abandoned when they are in school and are afraid of not being picked up or of missing the school bus. If a child is fearful of a major school incident occurring, parents can discuss a contingency plan with them.**

If your child is still experiencing increased anxiety, a visit with a qualified mental health professional may be necessary. There is no way to guarantee that your child will be anxiety free but some pre-planning can be very helpful in lessening a child's fears.