



My Family | Back to School

Regardless of whether or not you have children, it is hard to miss the annual flurry of activity that surrounds 'going back to school'. At this time of year many people are reminded of the feelings of their own school days – anticipation, anxiety, excitement... and dread.

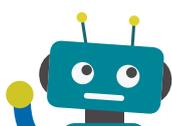
The following tips might help parents trying to prepare themselves and their children for going back to school, but can apply to us all in trying to organise things in a way that minimises anxiety.

Preparation

Preparation Getting everything ready, and involving your child of whatever age in this preparation, is very beneficial. Involving your child teaches them the skills of organisation. It encourages them to take responsibility for themselves and gives them a sense of independence; and it stops you as a parent, feeling you are doing it all yourself! Preparation usually involves school books and uniforms, but on a daily basis it also can involve lunches or getting books and clothes ready for the next day. You don't have to have children to know that it can be quite reassuring going to bed and knowing everything is set up for the morning – all you have to do is wake up!

Routines

Establishing a routine might sound boring, but it is one of the most effective ways to manage anxiety. Often over the summer months, parents and children have enjoyed flexibility – staying up later with no rush in the morning. There can be resistance from children and parents – to the idea of trying to keep times organised. Knowing what is expected, though, can help everybody get used to it. Start working on the routine a few days beforehand. Establish a bedtime. Count down to this time. For example, if bedtime is 8:30pm, at 8pm say 'bedtime in 30 minutes', at 8:15pm say 'bedtime in 15 minutes'. Your child will have time to get used to the idea, and will be less likely to start a battle at bedtime. Likewise, in the morning countdown to the time when your child has to leave. For example, 'We need to be going in 30 minutes... 20 minutes...10 minutes...' etc. For younger children, this helps ease them through the transition, and for older children it helps them to learn how to organise their time. It works too for adults by managing anxiety about being late.





New People & New Situations

Children of every age (and adults) worry about new situations, new people. ‘Will they like me?’ ‘Will I get lost?’ ‘What if I need to go to the toilet?’ They might sound like small concerns, but they can cause a lot of anxiety. Reassuring your child (and yourself) will help to manage this anxiety. Saying things like ‘You’ll be fine’, ‘You’ll be able to work it all out’, ‘It might be difficult to begin with, but it will get easier’ can all help your child (and you) feel calmer. Talking about school after the day can also be useful. Asking your child (or yourself) ‘What was the best thing and worst thing about the day?’ helps to recognise that it is not all bad. Older children especially can get into the habit of the ‘I hate school’ refrain, so this question acknowledges that they might not like all of it, but that there generally will be something about their day that they enjoyed.

Fitting In

Perhaps an issue that increases with age, the need to fit in and belong is often hugely stressful. This manifests itself in worry about ‘how do I look?’

Children (and adults) worry about what they wear, how their hair looks, make-up, and body image. These concerns are traditionally associated most with teenage girls, but whilst this might be the most obvious group, boys, younger children and adults alike struggle with feeling at ease with their appearance. It is tied in with issues of self-esteem and identity.

There is considerable pressure on girls to emphasise their sexuality in the way they present themselves and communicate. For boys, achieving average height and a sufficiently developed physique by the mid-teens is often equated with their masculinity. Sarcastic or critical remarks about appearance are damaging, and often cause much distress. Instead, if you are a parent of a teenager, try getting hold of some photographs of you at school. Besides giving you both a laugh, you can use these photos to start a discussion on how you both cope with anxieties about your appearance.



Am I Good Enough?

School, like the workplace, can be a very competitive environment. Children and adults can get stressed about the workload or the increasing level of difficulty of new tasks. Fear of failure and fear of ‘looking stupid’ seem to be universal. Reminders of academic and or personality strengths can help. Let your child (or yourself) know that there is more to them than an ‘A’ grade. Whilst it would be nice to always get A’s, being realistic is important too. Getting things wrong, or not doing well, rather than being the time to sink into despair, can be the catalyst to ask the question ‘What do I/you need to do differently?’

