

# Back-to-School Anxiety

## Ease Your Child's Back-to-School Anxiety with Expert Tips



### Expert Advice:

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**Your child refuses to go to school when the academic year begins. She has a tummy ache, or didn't sleep enough the night before, or just doesn't feel well.**

Still, she has a good appetite and no fever. You thought she was excited to see her friends on the first day of school; now this. What could be the problem?

Dr. Ioana Pal, clinical psychologist, Stramski Children's Developmental Center, MemorialCare Miller Children's & Women's Hospital Long Beach, encounters this kind of anxiety every school year.

**"I see it often in school-age children," Dr. Pal says. "Not only back-to-school anxiety, but separation anxiety as well. When this continues without resolve, it can lead to other problems."**

Refusal to go to school is a common sign of back-to-school anxiety, but in older children anxiety can appear as irritability or even hostility, she warns. "Kids can become very defiant," she says. "Parents will treat this as a behavioral issue, but it can be the manifestation of anxiety about going to school, meeting new people or encountering bullies. Children also may be nervous about leaving parents and caregivers behind."

A certain amount of anxiety is good, Dr. Pal notes. It pushes us to work hard and meet deadlines. Whether a child's anxiety is healthy or not depends on many factors and paying attention to them is important. There are many things to look forward to in a new school year – playing on the soccer team, being a member of a club, making new friends or finally being in a specific teacher's class. However, when children experience worries and fear, the motivation to experience something new disappears.

Low self-esteem and testing demands, she says, can also increase anxiety. Children can become anxious if they have difficulties believing in their abilities or if they typically require more time to process the information they receive. Therefore, it is important to know a child's learning style and ability to handle pressure to minimize anxiety about school.

• Anxiety in the first few weeks of school is normal, but if the anxiety lasts for more than six months it can become a more concerning mood or anxiety based disorder, Dr. Pal says. At that point, parents should request outside assessment and counseling.

• There are ways in which parents can help children conquer back-to-school anxiety:

- Drive by the school or take a tour and show your child the classroom, the restrooms, the playground and where they will eat lunch.
- Arrange to meet your child's teacher off campus prior to the first day of school. Getting to know the teacher may provide relief.
- Ensure that your child has a support system on campus. Tell them to seek out an older sibling, a school counselor, or a teacher who is willing to listen.
- Reassure your child that school staff have your contact information and can call you as needed. Sometimes knowing that is comfort enough.
- Review the schedule, when and where pickups will occur, and what they can expect on a given school day. Repetition may be necessary for some children.

• Parents who want more information can consult professionals or books. Dr. Pal recommends *"Bullies: From Playground to the Board Room,"* by Jane Middleton-Moz and Mary Zawadki and *"What to do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety,"* by Dawn Huebner.

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