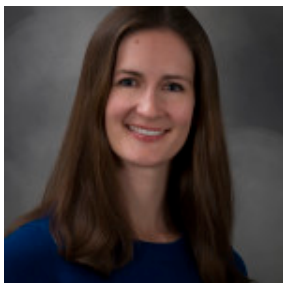


Opinion: Making school less stressful

By Tracy Protell

Most kids and parents have a mixture of excitement and nervousness about starting a new school year. This is normal. However, parents can help ease the transition from summer vacation to the school routine. Here are some tips to prepare you and your student for the upcoming academic year.

Bring a little school into summer. Adjust to a school schedule before school starts. A few days before the first day, have your child go to bed early and get up early. For younger kids, “play school” by doing fun structured academic games and activities. For older kids, encourage reading more before school starts.



Tracy Protell

Avoid overscheduling the first few weeks. After school starts, keep some fun outdoor activities going. Spend an afternoon at the pool or beach, or ride bikes around the neighborhood. If you are a busy family, schedule some “outdoor free time.”

Reduce the worry. To handle anxieties about returning to school or a new school situation, parents should calm their own fears or anxieties. Research demonstrates the more anxious parents are, the more anxiety their children show and experience.

Talk about it. Ease your children's fears by talking about their concerns and validating their feelings. Avoid saying "don't worry" or "everything will be fine." Instead, explain how you understand their feelings and that most kids are nervous or worried about the first day. Listen to specific concerns your child has and help make a plan to tackle the worry or perceived problem. For example, if your child says "I won't know anyone in my class," remind your child about making friends last year or identify a neighbor who will be in the same class and arrange a family social gathering. When offered help and encouragement, kids often come up with their own amazing solutions to their problems.

Familiarize with new surroundings. If starting a new school, I encourage families to visit the school and get familiar with the campus. This makes it less intimidating on the first day. If possible, introduce your child to the teacher(s) or the school counselor.

Help your kids with school anxiety. If your child shows school-related anxiety or refuses to attend school, try to keep your child attending daily. Complaints of stomach aches or "I just don't feel good" are often rooted in anxiety and avoidance can increase anxiety. What starts as an occasional request, "I don't feel good; can I stay home today?" can balloon into frequent school avoidance. Instead, rule out serious illness, such as a fever, vomiting, or diarrhea, and then ask your child about school fears or concerns. If it is a serious problem, such as bullying, address immediately with a school administrator.

Keep a positive attitude. If you, as a parent, present the start of school as an exciting time and are enthusiastic about learning, your child is likely to feel the same. Even teenagers listen and emulate their parents' attitudes (though they often try to seem like they aren't). School is a very important aspect of your child's development and future success.

I wish you all a safe and healthy school year.

Tracy Protell is a board-certified pediatrician and child psychiatrist at Barton Health.