

Unapologetic Parent: How To Help Kids With School Anxiety

Author Information

The Huffington Post Canada | By Trish Bentley
author social buttons

Article Byline Information

Posted: 09/12/2016 12:01 pm EDT Updated: 09/12/2016 12:04 pm EDT

Kids building castles and digging moats in the sand while humming along to songs they learned at summer camp. It's a typical summer scene that evokes feelings of calmness and ease. Kids tend to have an easier time being present than adults, and don't typically think too long and hard about what is to come. But this isn't always the case when the start of the school year rolls around, and it's time to say goodbye epic summer park sessions, later bedtimes and sleeping in. In fact, returning to school may be [more troubling for some kids than we realize](#), and it can take some time before they adjust to their new routine and environment.

"Families have to adjust to a much more rigid schedule," [Dr. Stuart Shanker](#) explained, a York University professor and Canada's leading expert on [self-regulation](#). "[Sleep habits have to change](#). There are all sorts of new demands — physical, social, emotional, pro-social, and, of course, cognitive. And don't forget the possible effects of getting less daylight and exercise."

[Self-regulation](#) is a term used to describe the brain-body response to stress, including energy expenditure, recovery and restoration. Shanker, who travels across the country speaking to educators on the subject, said that, simply put, "Self-regulation refers to how efficiently and effectively a child deals with a stressor and then recovers."

Talk about stress

September and the return to structure happens to be a stressful time for a lot of people, children and parents alike. Talking openly about what it is that causes discomfort during the transition is key.

"What we have found very helpful for teens is to have parents spend a few minutes talking with them about self-regulation," Shanker said. "Explain what stress is, how it zaps energy and makes it harder to deal with the physical, social, emotional and cognitive stress they can expect at the start of school. Maybe explain what "hidden stressors" are. And then ask them which stresses they think they could reduce, in order to build up the reserves they'll need to get the year off to a great start."

For younger children, however, having long conversations about what could be potentially stressing them out will usually be met with blank stares. These little people need concrete, tangible assistance. There are ways we can reduce certain stressors without them even knowing.

Create visual routines

[Beverley Cathcart-Ross](#), parenting expert, said that children must not be slaves to you, but to a routine. Before I discovered her wisdom, I had been spending mornings repeating myself, asking questions and threatening the loss of this or that. However, once I created a visual board of exactly what needed to be done before the kids would get a "reward" before school, mornings became much more peaceful. Their reward was a little TV if there was enough time, and their motivation to get teeth brushed, hair combed and shoes on was unbelievable. When my son would come to me barefoot and ask, "Can I watch TV now?" I'd point to the image of putting shoes on, and he would race to the door and tie them on within seconds. It was life-changing.

Re-frame the doom and gloom

The positive aspects of the new school year might get lost in the weeds of your kids' worries, but redirecting their focus onto something that interests them about school can help. Is there a subject they enjoy and excel at? Friends or teachers they look forward to seeing? An extracurricular activity they look forward to? Focusing on the positive, fun aspects of going to school can help overpower any possible anxious thoughts.

Address the root cause

Ask your child questions about what it is that's making them stressed or anxious about school. Are they [having difficulty making friends](#)? [Are they being bullied](#)? Or struggling with school work? Determining the root cause of their school anxiety will help you decide on the best course of action for tackling the problem. Here are some tips for [helping your child cope with anxiety](#).

Remember, kids aren't always aware of their emotions, and may express their stress and anxiety in different ways. Learn about the signs that your child might be anxious about school, [here](#).