

Navigating Stress & Anxiety as Kids Return to School

How to understand, support and empower your child — and yourself

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As kids re-enter the classroom this fall, it's natural for them to experience a mix of excitement and apprehension. For some, however, these emotions can escalate into anxiety that affects their well-being and academic performance. Understanding the signs and symptoms and knowing when to seek help are crucial for parents, but so is knowing how to regulate your own emotional responses during a time of year that's chaotic for caregivers, too.

“All transitions can be stressful,” said Traci Bartley, licensed clinical social worker and Behavioral Health Director for Aetna Better Health® of Oklahoma. “The body can't tell the difference between good stress and bad stress, and everybody feels the impact of the seasonal shift of this transition in different ways.”

The good news? The start of the school year is the perfect time to incorporate whole-family habits to support everyone's mental health. Bartley offers six key strategies for parents to help kids manage school-related worries, beginning with regulating our own stress first.

1. Model good mental health practices.

Children mirror their parents' behaviors, including how they manage stress or anxiety.

When parents regulate their emotions well, kids follow suit. This process can begin with a heightened awareness of where you, as the parent, feel stress in your body.

“Your body will let you know,” said Bartley. “If you know your shoulders get tense [when you're stressed], pay attention and then tap into self-care and coping strategies.”

Know what triggers your stress responses (like running late to the school pick-up line) and remove or alleviate what you can. Then, consider what forms of self-care are most beneficial for you.

“That could be going to therapy, going to the gym, regulating your breathing,” suggests Bartley. “Show your kids how you take care of yourself. Social-emotional learning is one of the best things parents can contribute to a child's life.”

2. Schedule regular family meetings.

Set aside time weekly to discuss family logistics and conduct a mental health check-in.

“Oftentimes people wait to have conversations until they're in a crisis or there's an argument,” said Bartley. “Family meetings keep everyone on the same page, plus you can work on mental health skills.”

After you've addressed chores, work and activities, have everyone rate their mood, name what they're thankful for or give a compliment to another family member. Family meetings can also address conflicts.

3. Encourage dialogue and practice active listening.

Help kids develop a vocabulary around feelings. Schedule a family night to watch one of the *Inside Out* movies, then discuss which emotion you identified with most and why.

“Using things in popular culture to stimulate conversation — like books or movies — is a nice jumping off point for family connection and conversation,” said Bartley.

While extended time in the car can feel like a drag, kids often open up during these intervals when you're not looking directly at each other. Approach kids with curiosity, rather than judgement, when trying to gauge the status of their mental health and focus on open-ended questions.

“When behavior changes, it can be really scary,” said Bartley. “But don't go into worst-case-scenario mode. When you're afraid, you look for ways to control a situation, and that can invite a power struggle as the child is also trying to maintain control. Be brave in those moments and focus on being curious and learning more.”

Avoid minimizing or dismissing kids' feelings, even when they don't seem like a big deal as an adult. There may be something more beneath the surface.

With teens in particular, respect their boundaries and spend intentional time with them without asking an overload of questions.

“You might say: ‘I sense that you don't want to talk right now and I respect that. I would love to hear about your day when you want to share,’” said Bartley. “That leaves the door open.”

4. Practice healthy coping skills.

Share the coping strategies that work for you and encourage kids to try them. Make time to have fun together as a family — perhaps playing a sport or visiting a local museum or park.

“Positive activities relieve stress,” said Bartley. “Kids don't always need to talk things out.”

Talk with kids about safe adults with whom they can share worries. You, as the parent, can also check in with these individuals if you're concerned about your child's mental health to see if they're noticing signs of anxiety.

“Since the pandemic, families have become pretty isolated,” said Bartley. “The U.S. Surgeon General has declared loneliness as a public health crisis. Loneliness has an impact on health, especially for children. Sometimes kids are more willing to share with a teacher or another safe person. The more trusted people in a kid's life, the better.”

5. Recognize the signs of anxiety.

Anxiety manifests differently depending on a child's age. Younger children may exhibit regression in developmental milestones like eating and sleeping, especially when their routine changes.

For older kids, even when they're excited to see their school friends, they can still experience stress. Signs of anxiety could include irritability, major behavior changes or avoidance of activities or people they once enjoyed.

While stress is normal for kids during the back-to-school transition, any regressive behaviors or major behavior changes that last longer than a month could indicate anxiety.

6. Seek help.

If you notice persistent signs of anxiety in your child, Bartley recommends a visit to your family physician to discuss concerns. Ask if they employ a behavioral health clinician.

"We're seeing more behavioral health clinicians being integrated into those settings," said Bartley. "You can go to your child's pediatrician and get the advice of a mental health professional who will also work with your child's school and provide holistic, comprehensive care."

When seeking a therapist, find out which providers are covered by your insurance and what benefits your plan provides. Many employers offer employee assistance programs that include free counseling.

Parents can call or text 988, Oklahoma's Mental Health Lifeline, in a crisis situation or with questions or concerns about a child's mental health, or their own. Operators are locally licensed and certified health crisis specialists who answer calls, connect with and dispatch local services and mobile crisis teams as needed.

In the midst of ensuring your child's immunizations are up to date, scheduling their well-checks and meeting their mental health needs, parents should consider what preventative services you're due for as well.

"Those regular check-ups are a form of self-care," said Bartley. "Kids often come first, but those regular checks with your PCP are crucial for your own health and your family's health as well."