

SOOTHING SCHOOL ANXIETY

School is off to a great start. Your child appears happy. All looks good for a positive year ahead.

This scenario does not prepare you for the panicky, teary-eyed, clingy child who may stand before you some morning and plead for a reprieve from school. School anxieties are relatively common and can be effectively handled.

CAUSES

The causes of school anxiety are often indirect. The anxiety may stem less from any direct dealing with school than with other feelings in the child. The child may not have a phobia of school but of the feelings they may have experienced at school.

The child may wish to avoid school in an attempt to stay near home where the child feels safe and secure.

A specific factor can trigger anxiety such as an important loss or significant life change. Children may also experience anxiety when returning from an illness, beginning a new school year, attending a new school, or having a new teacher or classmate.

Some children have a fear of not measuring up or of making mistakes. Other children express concern over abandoning their parents by coming to school. Back to school anxieties are common as children grieve the end of summer's activities.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Children who experience school phobias are often average to excellent students. They usually associate their feelings of anxiety to physical complaints such as:

- headaches
- stomachaches
- poor appetite
- nausea
- diarrhea
- weakness/fainting

These symptoms appear most frequently at breakfast and disappear once the time to begin school passes.

A daily refusal to attend school may indicate school anxiety. Children who are "school reluctant" refuse to go to school on a less consistent basis.

The ages of five to seven are peak years for school phobia to occur. Other years prone to school phobia are the years of transitions to junior high and high school. School phobia occurs equally between boys and girls.

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ANXIETY

Parents who suspect their child is suffering from school anxiety should act immediately. The longer a child is allowed to stay home, the greater the fear to return to school. The following suggestions may help improve the situation.

- Take the child for a checkup to rule out illness. Alert the child's teacher, principal and school counselor. Make sure no specific causes of anxiety are present.
- Have a different parent drive the child to school.
- Suggest that going to school is the child's job, similar to the responsibility of the parent's job.
- Give the child frequent exposure to school, reassuring the child that nothing bad will happen.
- Make sure the anxiety is not caused by any traumatic event experienced by the child.
- Provide positive modeling. Invite a student to your home in the morning to share a walk or bus ride to school.
- Discuss your plans for the day. Your child will discover you have a full day filled with responsibilities too.
- Understand the temporary regressions back to security items at home, such as blankets, stuffed animals, etc. Once the child feels more secure, the items will again be push-ed aside.
- Putting the child on the bus is usually a better transition than dropping the child off at school. The involvement with other kids is often a distraction from anxiety. For some, a more gradual desensitization is needed.
- Speak positively about school and the child's teacher. Relate how another transition for the child turned out okay. Encourage the child to be patient. Relationships and security take time to develop.
- Plan for some activity you will do with the child in the evening.
- Look over your child's work when you arrive home and offer praise for the accomplishments of the day. Asking specific questions about classes will yield more conversation than, "How was your day?"
- Make plans to be involved at school in PTA, lunches with your child or volunteering. Your child will discover that you are welcomed and are supportive of his/her learning.
- • Make home a boring place to be for the school refuse. Allow no television, playmates, toys or other entertainment during school hours.

Determine if your child has other fears or phobias. If your child is overly anxious, it may be advisable to consult with a child psychologist, anxiety clinic or child psychiatrist. The earlier school anxiety is identified and treated, the quicker the problem can be resolved.