

If back-to-school time has
your child feeling uncertain,
you can help him adjust.

Ease the Transition

BY CHRISTINE McLAUGHLIN

CHANGE MAY BE GOOD, BUT IT'S NOT

necessarily easy. Switching from the laid-back fun in the sun of summer to rules, homework, and routines can be a big jump for parents and children alike. With a little preparation and the right attitude, it doesn't have to be so hard.

It's normal for a child to have a little flutter of anxiety about going back to school, according to Eileen Kennedy-Moore, a clinical psychologist and coauthor of *Smart Parenting for Smart Kids: Nurturing Your Child's True Potential*. After

all, they're getting themselves ready for a lot of newness: a teacher, classmates, tasks, and challenges.

Students may have trouble sleeping at the start of the school year, but that's nothing to worry about, Kennedy-Moore says. More uncomfortable symptoms might include continued trouble sleeping, decreased appetite, or irritability. Severe cases can involve tears, tantrums, and even refusing to go to school.

Susanna DeRocco's older son, Ben, was one

of those severe cases. Every year from kindergarten through 2nd grade, he struggled with separating at back-to-school time. In the morning, tears would start flowing. He would often cling to his mom and refuse to go to school, including not boarding the bus. “As much as my heart was breaking for him, I had to put on a strong front and say ‘I know you can do it. I’m not worried about you at all. You’re going to have a great day,’” says DeRocco, of Towson, Md. “‘And I can’t wait to hear about it when you get home.’”

DeRocco used a lot of strategies with Ben, including role-playing school with stuffed animals, driving the bus route, riding on the practice bus provided by the school district, and visiting the playground and the classroom before the first day of school. They also practiced a farewell where DeRocco would say “See you later, alligator.” Ben would reply with “After a while, crocodile,” and know to break from his mom and get on the bus. The more he

practiced, the easier it got, and the anxiety he felt was soon behind him.

STAY POSITIVE

A parent’s attitude has a strong influence on how children view the beginning of school, says Kennedy-Moore. Children pick up on their parents’ feelings, react to them, and often magnify them. “You have to have faith that they’ll be able to get through [changes], even if it’s hard. It’s a powerful message to give kids,” she says. “We don’t want to dismiss their feelings, but we do want to normalize them and say ‘Everyone feels a little nervous going into the classroom, but I really think you’re going to be fine.’”

Kennedy-Moore has asked her own four children a question at back-to-school time: “Somewhere in your class is a child who is waiting to be your friend. How will you figure out who that is?” This sets a positive expectation about the school year, and it helps children

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notice and be ready to respond to friendly overtures.

Emphasize to your children that anxiety doesn't have to be a stop signal, she says. "It's really just our body getting us pumped so we're ready to handle a new or challenging situation."

CREATE ROUTINES

Establishing daily routines at home at the start of the school year (or even before) can also help children adjust. Doing this directly benefits their work in the classroom, where their day is full of routines, says Traci Matturro, a reading specialist at Luxmanor Elementary in Rockville, Md. "Routines need to be modeled to kids no matter what age. They need to be shown what to do, not told what to do," she says. "And parents need to let their kids know their expectations daily."

Matturro suggests creating a checklist or flowchart to help children get organized and stay on schedule. "It helps ease anxiety with rushing to get out the door, especially," she says.

Chris Gay, a mom of twins from Walnut Creek, Calif., did just that. Her two 2nd graders had to be out of the house by 8:10 every morning, but at 8 a.m. they still wouldn't have brushed their teeth. "I was so frustrated," she says. To ease the morning stress, she created a laminated checklist that hangs on the refrigerator and reads "Get dressed. Eat breakfast. Take vitamin. Brush teeth. Get backpack." Ashley and Ryan check off each item before they head out the door.

"It's been so great. They actually enjoy it," Gay says. "It helps them feel in charge and that [getting ready is] their responsibility."

For the afternoon, consider scheduling a routine for homework, snacks, and extracurricular activities. Matturro suggests having children help create the schedule as a way to get them to buy into it.

At night, when setting bedtimes, keep in mind that children between the ages of 5 and 12 need 10 to 11 hours of sleep. Setting an early bedtime at the beginning of the school year may not work as well for older children who can handle being up later. In this case, Kennedy-Moore suggests expecting them to be exhausted the first week when they come home from school and planning for low-key afternoons to give them a chance to decompress.

ESTABLISH FUN TRADITIONS

Because attitude matters, if you're excited for school to start, your children will follow your lead. Having an annual ritual can help ring in the new school year and can be a treasured tradition for years to come. For instance, every year the night before the first day of school, the DeRocco family sits around the backyard fire pit, roasts marshmallows, and talks about their "joys and concerns" for the upcoming year.

And then there's the red plate surprise. On the first day of school, one of the two DeRocco boys will get the cherished red plate and be able to choose what he wants (with approval) for breakfast. At dinner, the red plate appears at the other boy's place setting and he gets to pick the meal. "They get excited even when their brother has the red plate," DeRocco says.

Spending time just hanging out with your children before the start of the school year helps with transition. A parent's simple presence is comforting and soothing to children and gives them the opportunity to talk if they want to, says Kennedy-Moore.

Once school starts, of course parents want to hear all about it, but it's important to follow your child's lead. Some are chatty and want to discuss every detail. Others will feel overwhelmed with too many questions. They may need to relax first and talk later, or they may only tell you about bits and pieces of their day. Either way, it's fine, Kennedy-Moore says. "If your child seems calm and reasonably happy, you can assume the start of the school is going well," she says. "One of the most precious gifts we can give our children is our confidence that they will find their way." 📌