

Managing Fears

Following are some situations that may present challenges or cause fear for children when it's time to go back to school. Suggestions are given for how you may be able to help.

Fears or challenges	What you can do to help
Change. Moving up a grade brings changes, but a new school can be an especially big adjustment, whether that's due to a move to a new area or just a shift from elementary to middle or middle to high school.	Let your child know that for everything they're feeling, there is someone else feeling the same way. Nerves are normal when facing something new. You might share stories of your own experiences. Remind them of new things they've tried and managed in the past and that being new doesn't last long.
Unknowns , such as who their teacher will be, where their classroom is or whether they will fit in. Even something that may seem insignificant to you may be a worry for them.	Help fill in the blanks. Visit the school at least once before classes begin. Talk about what is worrying them as often as they need to. You can acknowledge their fears but also be sure to share your confidence that they will manage. You may want to problem-solve together and work on strategies for concerns that they can't solve in advance. Also create some balance by talking about what might be positive and fun in this new year.
Getting lost/finding their way. They may worry about being late for classes or not being able to find classes at all.	Attend open houses or school orientations with your child so they can practice finding their way around before school starts. Locate bathrooms, the cafeteria and bus stop. Have them practice opening their locker a few times.
Social difficulties – a history of not fitting in, being shut out or not having many friends. Perhaps they were picked on or bullied.	Encourage your child to get involved in school clubs or activities. It's easier for kids to make friends if they have something in common. Involvement can also help them gain confidence and enjoy school more. If bullying has been an issue, Problem-solve with your child to come up with ways to manage difficult situations. Role-play and rehearse. Seek professional help if needed.
Making the grade. A new year can bring a fear of more difficult homework or harder classes. Even students who have done well in the past may worry that they won't be able to keep up the same level of performance.	Set realistic expectations together for the year. Help them recognize their unique talents and establish achievable goals. Also, help your child find things they are good at outside of school. This may relieve some of the pressure.

Separation anxiety

It's natural for young children to feel some anxiety when their parents leave them. Some children can struggle more than others. They may cling, cry and refuse to let a parent leave. Or they may complain of feeling sick so they can stay home. This can be very stressful for both the child and parent. Separation anxiety usually becomes less of a problem as children get older. Here are some tips for easing separation anxiety.

- Practice being apart from each other well before the start of school. Have your child stay with a relative or caregiver for brief periods at first, and gradually for longer periods.
- Get them involved in play groups or other activities and gradually remove yourself from being present at these activities.
- Avoid repeated exposure to violence in the media or video games. It can increase their fear of something bad happening to you or them and lead to separation anxiety.
- Take them to the school and/or bus stop a few times before the big day and walk them through what will happen when that day arrives. Make sure they have a chance to meet the teacher and find their way around.
- Story books about going to school can help young children visualize how the day may unfold. They may want to read them over and over.
- You may be able to arrange a play date in advance with one or two children from your child's class so that they'll see a familiar face on the first day.
- Alert the teacher(s) and support staff. Let them know what you have been doing at home to reassure your child. Try to arrange a hand-off to someone who can give your child one-on-one support as you leave.
- Some children find comfort in bringing a special object from home with them for the first few days of school.
- Keep your attitude positive and encouraging. Reassuring them that "everything will be fine" isn't as helpful as acknowledging that it can be scary, but that you are confident they will get through it.
- Develop a good-bye ritual. After the ritual, leave quickly, without fuss or delay.

Don't give in and let them stay home.

Avoiding school can reinforce their fears because they won't have a chance to get past them. If necessary, it's better to go into the school with them for a little while, and then gradually taper the time that you're there.

Back-to-school fears and separation anxiety usually fade in the first few days or weeks of school. For some children it continues. They may show this fear in other ways, such as poor sleep, complaining of stomachaches, or acting out. If issues continue into the second month of school, it may signal a problem. Call your EAP to request a telephone consultation with a trained professional.

References

American Psychological Association (APA). (2023, July 17). *Back-to-school can be a stressful time. How to help your kids transition.* <https://www.apa.org/topics/children/school-anxiety>
Miller, C. & Busman R. (2023). *Back to school anxiety.* Child Mind Institute. <https://childmind.org/article/back-school-anxiety/>
Orchinik, L.J. (2023, March). *Separation anxiety.* Nemours Kids Health. <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/sep-anxiety.html>

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Home Alone Checklist

Staying home alone is a big step for your child and for you. While guidelines recommend age 12 or older, each child will be different. These questions, along with what you know about your child, can guide you. Page 2 has tips to make this experience more successful for you and your child.

Is your child ready?

- ☐ Does your child understand and follow rules consistently?
- ☐ Is your child self-sufficient and able to structure their time?
- ☐ Is your child able to solve problems and figure things out without specific instructions?
- ☐ Is your child calm, steady, not easily spooked in stressful or unexpected situations?
- ☐ Can you rely on your child to be responsible and make good choices?
- ☐ Can you count on your child to be honest?
- ☐ Does your child feel comfortable, not fearful, about being alone?

Readiness skills

Work on any of these that your child doesn't know or is uncomfortable with, before leaving them alone.

- ☐ Does your child know their address?
- ☐ Does your child know how to tell time?
- ☐ Does your child know who to call if you are unavailable?
- ☐ Does your child understand when to call 911?
- ☐ Does your child know how to be safe outside the home (stranger danger, etc.)?
- ☐ Does your child know how to get home safely and open and relock the door?
- ☐ Does your child know basic first aid and where to find supplies?
- ☐ Does your child know how to use household appliances and furnace/AC?
- ☐ Does your child know all aspects of kitchen safety – stove, food handling, microwave?
- ☐ Is your child able to do what is expected without supervision, such as chores and homework?
- ☐ Does your child know what to do in the event of weather emergencies or a power outage?
- ☐ Can your child manage the care of pets or siblings if necessary?
- ☐ Can your child stick to the rules even when pushed by friends to break them?

Tips for parents

Once you have determined that your child is ready to stay home alone, the following suggestions from the Department of Health and Human Services may help you to prepare your child and help you to feel more comfortable about leaving them home alone.

- **Have a trial period.** Leave the child home alone for a short time while staying close to home. This is a good way to see how he or she will manage.
- **Role play.** Act out possible situations to help your child learn what to do, such as how to manage visitors who come to the door or how to answer phone calls in a way that doesn't reveal that a parent isn't at home.
- **Establish rules.** Make sure your child knows what is (and isn't) allowed when you're not home, such as cooking or having friends over. Set clear limits on video gaming, internet use, TV, computers, and other electronic devices. For guidance on how to set parental controls on cable television and internet content, contact your service providers.
- **Work with your child** to put together a list of chores or other tasks to keep them busy while you're gone.
- **Discuss emergencies.** What do you consider an emergency? What does your child consider an emergency? Have a code word that the parent and child can use in the event of any emergency.
- **Call your child** while you're away to see how it's going, or have a trusted neighbor or friend check in.
- **Talk about it.** Encourage your child to share his or her feelings with you about staying home alone. Have this conversation before leaving and then, when you return. Talk with your child about his or her experiences and feelings while you were away. This is particularly important when your child is first beginning to stay home alone, but a quick check-in is always helpful after being away.

- **Don't overdo it.** Even a mature, responsible child shouldn't be home alone too much. Consider other options, such as programs offered by schools, community centers, youth organizations, or faith-based organizations, to help keep your child connected and involved.

Reference

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2023, December). *Leaving your child home alone*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/homealone.pdf>

Better safe than sorry

- **Post the rules somewhere visible.** Include: boundaries (house, yard, neighborhood, and community), cooking rules, door/phone answering, friends who are/aren't allowed over, permitted activities, homework/chore expectations, etc.
- **Remove or lock up dangerous items,** such as guns, prescription medications, alcohol and fireworks.
- **Get a better idea of neighborhood safety.** You can look up crime stats on your city or police web site. Check the National Sex Offender Public website: nsopw.gov
- **Have backup.** Make arrangements with someone nearby who will be available to step in and help.
- **Consider babysitter training** (often offered through the American Red Cross) or a home alone class, if offered in your area.

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Resources for Neurodiverse Students

The following resources may be helpful in smoothing the back-to-school transition for you and for your child, as well as offering strategies for the year ahead.

Transition tips

Preparing Your Neurodiverse Child for a Successful Back-to-School Transition

grantagift.com/news/preparing-your-neurodiverse-child-for-a-successful-back-to-school-transition

Parents: Reducing Back-to-School Anxiety

parents.com/reducing-back-to-school-stress-for-parents-of-neurodiverse-kids-7668855

Learning tips

Neurodiversity at School: A 10-Part Guide for Parents

additudemag.com/neurodivergence-at-school-parents-teachers/

ADHD Parenting: School & Learning

additudemag.com/category/parenting-adhd-kids/school-learning/

Supporting Neurodiverse Students

childmind.org/article/how-schools-can-support-neurodiverse-students

Understood

understood.org/en

Support resources

Center for Parent Information & Resources

parentcenterhub.org/cpir-resource-library/

504 Education Plans

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/504-plans.html>

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/iep.html>

IEP Laws by State

adayinourshoes.com/idea-individuals-with-disabilities-education-act/#iep-laws-for-all-50-states

Parent Training and Information Centers

Every state has a center created to help families of children who have a disability (birth to age 26). These centers offer information, training, and workshops on special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and how you can support your child who learns and thinks differently.

Find your center:

parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center

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Transition Timeline

Life doesn't stop so that you can do all the things you need to do to be ready for the return to school. Use this timeline to help you stay on track.

1-2 weeks before the start of school

- Gradually restart school routines – bed/wake times, screentime rules, family meals.
- Complete shopping for supplies and a few items of clothing with your child.
- Establish a family calendar in a format you will use and that everyone has access to.
- Decide how/where to manage school paperwork.
- Work with your family to set up a homework zone and a staging area.
- Watch for communications from the school. Get important dates on your calendar right away.
- Make and freeze a few dinners to take the pressure off during the first week back to school.
- Arrange get-togethers to help your child reconnect with school friends.
- Attend school open house/orientation events with your child. If this is not offered, make arrangements to tour the school and meet the teacher.
- Talk with your child about any worries. Problem-solve together to come up with strategies.
- Check out the bus stop or do a dry run of the walking route. Review transportation safety. The [National Safety Council – Back-to-School Safety Checklist](#) has tips to review for walkers, bus and bike riders, young drivers, and more.
- Review rules and role-play situations if your child will be home alone after school.

The night before the first day

- Go over strategies you talked about for trouble spots as needed but focus on and end the conversation with positives. (Do this earlier, not right before bed.)
- Ask them to name three things that they are excited about for tomorrow.
- Talk about what they want to wear and what they would like for lunch.
- Check backpack to confirm they have all forms, supplies, bus number, and contact information.

The big day!

Share a sense of excitement and enthusiasm with your child. Remind them that everyone gets a nervous feeling when they start something new. Give them a hug, and tell them you are excited for them and confident that they will manage.

More ideas?

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