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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Helping School Age Children Prepare for a New Teacher

Each school year is a new beginning that involves so many changes that it is inevitably a challenge for every child. There are, indeed, a number of ways parents can help preschoolers prepare for a new teacher. As always, we like to think about the meaning of a situation to a child — in this case, the challenge of starting a new class.

Every situation is mixed: Children (and others) long for perfection: parents who know and do exactly what they want, days that go just right, friends who know precisely how to play in the ways that they wish. Of course, this yearning extends to the classroom. A child longs for teachers who do not ask too much, are always understanding and never lose their cool; assignments that are neither boring nor intimidating; and classmates who are just right.

Beginning a new school year is an opportunity to help a child understand that the new classroom is good enough, if not everything that he wishes it would be. Sometimes, children's difficulty accepting "good enough" is part of their difficulty beginning a school year.

If parents find this to be the case for their child, we recommend that parents convey their understanding and acceptance of his dissatisfactions, such as how he or she misses the way things were done in his or her classroom last year or that the new teacher is stricter than his or her beloved previous teacher. But we also recommend that parents mostly emphasize that the glass is at least half full, too, and that their son or daughter has a role in just how full the glass will be. For example, parents can confidently emphasize that their child will be able to learn and enjoy the new routines, and that he or she will find many things that to like about the new teacher even if she is stricter than he or she might wish.

Every separation is new: Children, and adults, rely on familiarity and routines to feel grounded and secure. We are less lonely and more grounded when doing things that are familiar with familiar people in familiar places. Times of change and transition bring about feelings of loneliness and uneasiness, often felt as anxiety.

Separation anxiety is not something that is felt only in the first few years, nor is it something that is pathological. We feel this anxiety at various points of change or loss. During these times, it is important to be able to dig deep inside and find a self-reliance that can carry oneself through the transition.

Some children can find that extra self-reliance fairly readily, and others need assistance. Some children seem to need a little more help with these times of change than might some other children. We would expect that such children would respond with a greater need for assistance at other common times of separation that may occur during childhood, such as house moves, loss of grandparents, a good friend moving away or a parent gone for an extended period on a business trip.

Preparation is key: The most important way to provide extra help with the upcoming challenge is to assist children with preparation. Children, like adults, are more successful when they anticipate and plan for what lies ahead. For example, we may visualize a scene, organize a task, quickly imagine a possible interaction or gather in our emotions. This process is so familiar and automatic that we usually don't think twice about it.

The single most important way to prepare for a change is to talk. It is possible that a child will want to avoid thinking about his upcoming year. And although this is understandable — he or she will confront his nervousness about the upcoming year and the sadness about no longer having the prior class - avoidance will not serve a child well. Parents should find ways to bring up the next year, talk about what they do know, and help their son or daughter wonder about what he or she does not know. It may help to remind the child of ways that he or she has solved situation in the past that may have been worrying, such as how he or she made new friends last year.

On the other hand, parents have a different task with children who manage their anxiety with repetitiveness rather than avoidance. After hearing his or her concerns 3, 5 or 10 times, parents should tell their son or daughter that

it is not helpful to just worry. It is more helpful to think about what he or she will do about these worries. Even if this is difficult for the child to do with his or her parent, it is worth persevering. The key here is to turn passivity — either expressed through avoidance or through the helplessness of worries that loop — into an active, solution-focused orientation. Activity, and the confidence that it brings, is the best antidote to anxiety.

There are other kinds of preparation that might help. Visiting the school would be useful, especially if there is a change of schools. Meeting the teacher before class begins is often a great assistance. Planning a trip to get the supplies for beginning the year might help. It is always a good idea to involve the child as much as possible in this activity.

Because the relationship with his or her teacher will be so important in helping a child become grounded in the classroom, parents might ask their son or daughter what they would like the new teacher to know about him or her. Parents could tell the teacher about this on the first day (if possible) or, even better, encourage their child to tell their teacher.

There are many other ways to prepare for the coming school year. Parents should use their imagination and knowledge of what is important to their child.

Starting a new school year brings excitement and anxiety for a child. Every child will benefit from a blend of their parents' understanding, assistance and expectations. When parents keep that hand to a reticent child's back and remember that the development of emotional strength, what we call mental muscles, requires repetition and some heavy lifting, their child will be better for having met the challenge.