

BACK TO SCHOOL ANXIETY: SUPPORTING OUR KIDS THROUGH TRANSITIONAL TIMES



As we begin another new school year, many of us are experiencing a lot of feelings. The past year and a half have been different for every family and the beginning of this school year will present different joys, challenges, and worries for each individual and family. Some children will be returning to full-time in-person learning, just as they experienced last year, while others will be transitioning back into the classroom full-time after a year of virtual learning or homeschooling, there are also kids who will be continuing on with homeschooling or virtual options. No matter what your family's return to school looks like this year, this transitional time can bring out a variety of feelings for us and our children.

Overall we may feel like the transition into the school year brings with it a positive routine, friends, and new opportunities, but that doesn't mean that we don't also feel apprehension or worry at the same time. We can feel happy and excited, while also feeling a little nervous and sad. Our feelings are complex and so are the feelings that our kids experience this time of year. Many of the negative feelings that we experience during times of transitions can be categorized under the umbrella of "anxiety." At its core, anxiety can be defined as a feeling of worry, fear, stress, or uneasy apprehension. While these feelings are normal and very common for all people, there can become a time when these feelings can make it difficult to do the things that we need or want to do. As with all challenges that we encounter, we are better equipped to face them when we recognize issues and work to understand more about what is happening.

We will all feel some degree of anxiety as we make transitions in our lives. Today we will reflect on some of the ways we, as parents, may experience anxiety at this time of year as well as ways that our kiddos may express their anxiety.



*Iowa Family
Counseling*

409 B AVE
KALONA, IA 52257
641.777.2774

IOWAFAMILYCOUNSELING.COM

**SUPPORTING CHILDREN
AND FAMILIES WITH
GENUINE, EMPATHETIC,
AND COLLABORATIVE
MENTAL HEALTHCARE
ACROSS RURAL IOWA**

FOLLOW US:
[@IOWAFAMILYCOUNSELING](https://www.instagram.com/IOWAFAMILYCOUNSELING)

Recognizing Anxiety

Like all anxiety, back-to-school anxiety will be different for everyone. Though there are some common patterns related to school anxiety that can be identified, triggers, causes, and personal patterns will be unique as they are rooted in each individual's personality, experiences, and biology. Likewise, the degree to which anxiety symptoms are felt and the way they are expressed will be different for each person.

In order to understand the triggers, causes, and patterns of anxiety affecting the people that we are closest to, we must also be able to identify the ways in which anxiety may be expressed. The effects of anxiety can be expressed in many ways including in our minds or thinking processes, our physical well-being, and in our actions and behaviors.

Adults and children can express their worries or anxieties in similar ways, though children often lack the self-awareness and vocabulary to communicate their feelings to others. Sometimes the signs that someone is feeling anxiety can be very subtle and sometimes they can be very apparent.

The outward expression of anxiety does not always reflect the degree to which a person is being impacted by their fears and worries.

Therefore, it is important to pay attention to and be sensitive to the subtle changes in behavior as well as the major ones.



ANXIETY SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS



MIND

Excessive Worry
 Increased Perception of Threats
 Concern of What Others Think
 Inability to Focus
 Intrusive Thoughts/Racing Mind
 Negative Self-talk
 Lack of Optimism
 Negative Outlook
 Sense of Dread

BODY

Increased Heart Rate
 Sweating
 Nausea/Vomiting
 Stomachache
 Headache
 Muscle Tension/Muscle Pain
 Jaw Tension/Jaw Pain
 Dry Mouth
 Bowel Issues/Diarrhea
 Tiredness /Fatigue

ACTIONS

Frequent Waking or Restless Sleep
 Too Much or Too Little Sleep
 Complaining/Whining
 Crying or Yelling
 Freezing or Refusing to Move
 Avoiding Certain Tasks
 Burying Self in Other Tasks/Procrastination
 Pacing or Fidgeting
 Shaking of Hands or Body
 Substance Abuse



Common Patterns of Back to School Anxiety

Back to school anxiety is rooted in each person's prior experiences, identity, personality, and biology. As parents, we are able to pass some of our school experiences to our children. We all have had experiences with schooling, so it is natural for us to use those to inform the way in which we parent and the choices that we make for our children. Overall, our parental perspectives can help guard our children against negative experiences while fostering positive school experiences for our kids.

At the same time, our children are their own individuals. No matter how similar that they might be, they are not us. They have their own ideas, personalities, and experiences that will influence the way that they feel about school. Things may worry our children that we don't understand. Things that may be a big deal to our kiddos, may seem silly to us. We can have more empathy for our kids when we work to understand their feelings.

There are common patterns that back-to-school anxiety can take on. Once we recognize that our loved ones are experiencing anxiety, we can begin to explore the root cause or pattern of their discomfort. Common patterns for anxiety include separation anxiety, generalized anxiety, social anxiety, specific anxieties, and this year especially, we are seeing more health-related anxiety in children.

Separation Anxiety:

Separation anxiety is when a child is scared or nervous to be away from their primary caregiver. Separation anxiety is a healthy and natural part of child development that begins when children are between 6 and 9 months of age and will continue throughout their toddler years. Clinginess and tantrums are behaviors that are often associated with separation anxiety, but complaints of headaches and stomachaches are also very common.

Separation anxiety is often rooted in a fear that the caregiver will not return or that something bad will happen to the caregiver while they are away. Pre-school and school-aged children still experience separation anxiety, but the severity, consistency, and duration will decrease as they gain more experience and confidence that their caregiver will return.

Generalized Anxiety:

Those that experience generalized anxiety are often individuals that are classified as worriers. They seem to be nervous about many things, especially new when encountering new experiences. Common signs and symptoms of generalized anxiety include physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, and trouble sleeping, as well as behaviors such as repeatedly asking questions about upcoming events and avoiding/withdrawing from activities.

Anxiety about new or novel experiences is something that everyone feels, it is important to monitor the severity of the symptoms and seek help if anxiety gets in the way of what a person needs or wants to do.

Social Anxiety:

Individuals who experience social anxiety have nervousness or fear relating to interacting with others out of a fear that they will be judged or not know what to say or do. People with social anxiety are often considered to be shy and reserved. They may avoid interacting with new people or avoid social gatherings. Children with social anxiety may exhibit some behaviors similar to those who experience separation anxiety as they cling to familiar people as a way to avoid interacting with unfamiliar faces.

Though there is some link between social anxiety and introverted personalities, they are not the same thing. Introverts are people who enjoy their own company and are recharged by time spent away from others. Introverts can have social anxiety, but they can also just be people who prefer quiet and solitude. Anxiety is considered to be a feeling of worry, fear, stress or unease. Many introverts avoid the company of others because of personal preference rather than worry, stress or fear.

Specific Anxieties:

Specific anxieties are very individualistic and often related to very specific tasks or activities. For example, a student may fear forgetting gym shoes, being late for school, getting lost in the school building, or having their nose in class. Other common school anxieties are related to changing for gym class, losing homework, being late for class, missing the school bus.

Unlike generalized anxiety where a person feels anxious about many things at once, those who experience specific anxieties can easily target and identify the things that are causing them to worry.

Health-Related Anxiety

Anxiety that is related to health issues and schooling are not new. Children with severe allergies and health issues are familiar with the anxiety that comes with giving up control of their children's environment while they are at school. As it was last year, COVID-19 still continues to circulate and cause a level of health-related anxiety for many parents and children. Health-related anxiety, like all anxiety, is firmly linked to the personal experiences of each student and family.



Helpful Ways to Address and Manage Anxiety

When helping our children to manage their fears and anxieties, it is important for them to feel seen, heard, and understood. When we take time to notice their feelings and listen to children, we can also help them to build confidence, strength and resilience. As kids become better at talking about their feelings, fears, and anxieties they also become better at problem-solving and finding strategies that will help them to manage their anxiety.

When we listen to our children, we can begin to understand the root issue related to their anxiety and steer the discussion toward tools and strategies that may help them to manage or overcome their worries. The goal is to help kids to understand that anxiety, worry, and fear are all normal, but we all have to find ways to keep going so we can do the things that we need and want to do.

Whatever we do to help our kids understand and manage their anxiety, we need to make sure that we are also taking care of ourselves, regulating our own emotions, and being consistent with our approach.

Noticing and Praising Brave Behavior

Children thrive on positive attention. When we show them that we are proud of their effort, actions, and behaviors, they are more likely to repeat them in the future. Praise can go a long way:

- Wow! I know that you were nervous but you were so brave and you did it!
- I know that you weren't sure about it, but you thought about it, prepared, and made it through!

Material Rewards and Gifts

Though material rewards and gifts should not be used exclusively or excessively, they can provide the extra push needed to overcome a specific obstacle or anxiety. It is important that kids understand that it is okay to do hard things and the more practice they get at doing things that they find challenging the better they will get at it.

Material rewards are often small gifts, treats, stickers, or toys. It is important that material rewards do not become seen as a requirement to complete a challenging task, rather that they are earned through work and growth. For example, "You were so brave at school drop-off all week, going right to your teacher even though you were nervous! I am so proud of your bravery that I got you these stickers!"

Special Privileges or Activities

Kids show a lot of responsibility when they overcome challenges, fears, and worries to do the things that need to be done. It is important that they feel that their efforts are recognized. Spending time with your child, doing a fun activity not only provides a reward but is also an opportunity to connect. Special privileges could include staying up later one night or picking the movie for a movie night. You could also take them to a park or arrange a playdate with a friend. Whatever behavior that we choose to target, we need to make sure that we are consistent with expectations and that the rewards are clearly linked to the behavior that we want to continue.



New Beginnings

The beginning of the school year provides the opportunity for new beginnings, new routines, new friendships, and new experiences. It can be a time of wonderful transitions, but it can also be a time of anxiety. Anxiety is a perfectly normal part of life that we all have to learn to manage. Understanding the patterns and triggers for anxiety is a solid starting point for helping our kids develop skills to manage their worries and anxieties. When we understand our kids and their worries, fears, and anxieties, we can work to help them develop more solid coping skills and strategies so they can thrive.



References:

Rapee, R. M., Wignall, A., Spence, S. H., Cobham, V., & Lyneham, H. (2008). *Helping your anxious child: A step-by-step guide for parents*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.