



BODY & MIND
CONSULTING

YOUR CHILD AND ANXIETY: SCHOOL STRESS STARTS EARLY



YOUR CHILD AND ANXIETY: SCHOOL STRESS STARTS EARLY

As the start of the school year approaches, have you seen your first grader go into meltdown mode at the mention of school, or watched your soon-to-be kindergartner regress back to baby talking and thumb sucking? Rest assured that you're not alone. Each fall, millions of parents deal with their children's beginning-of-the-year anxiety.

Stress is what you feel when you have to handle more than you are used to. When you are stressed, your body responds as though you are in danger. It makes hormones that speed up your heart, make you breathe faster, and give you a burst of energy. This is called the fight-or-flight stress response¹, which often parallels anxiety. These emotions many children experience before the start of school are a feeling many children do not have words to articulate.²

Stress and Distress³ and Performance Anxiety

Stress itself is not a bad thing, says child psychologist Brenda Bryant, PhD, professor of human development at University of California, Davis. "Being challenged makes you learn new things and keeps your brain functioning. In all the major theories of learning, there is stress. But if stress is really interfering with development, that is a problem. Sometimes with too much stress kids get immobilized."



Another professional agrees: "We don't need to apply pressure to get kids to perform," says Karen DeBord, PhD, a child development specialist for the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service. "Building on children's inner motivations is most important. Instead of paying kids a dollar for an 'A,' tell them how proud you are of them -- and say, 'aren't you proud of yourself?' If they perform only for our reward, that is not the greatest thing to teach them. That makes them like the people who come to work just for the money, and always complain about the job. Who could be more of a drag to be around?"

YOUR CHILD AND ANXIETY: SCHOOL STRESS STARTS EARLY

School Stress: How to manage

There are a few approaches to either prevent or manage “healthy” stress and try to keep it from becoming “distress.”

Calibrate your expectations - "Parents are too often very preoccupied with seeing their children succeed and intolerant of anything other than excellence," says Richard L. Hall, PhD, assistant headmaster of Atlanta's Lovett School. "We as schools and we as parents need to remind ourselves that sustained excellence is not natural. It is not how we, ourselves, operate." Hall also says it's just not fair for parents to demand higher standard for their kids than they themselves face.

Stability and Consistency⁴ - Give your kids a stable home environment. Negotiate home rules -- including consequences for rule breaking -- and stick to these rules. Monitor their eating habits; have consistent bedtimes. Routines are good and they help to alleviate stress. Regular bedtimes, get-up times, and bath times are important at any age. It also helps kids learn to develop routines themselves. Family meetings are also important. At the beginning of school, set a weekly time to regroup and to talk about what's going on and how it will work: who gets the shower first, what time to set the alarm clocks for. Give everybody a chance to talk.



Time - Probably the most important thing that parents can do to alleviate stress is to spend time with your children. "When you tuck

your kids into bed, or at bath time, whenever there is a one-on-one time, use open ended questions and to listen. Kids need some prompting or something concrete. Instead of saying, 'What did you do today?' ask about lunch, or what story they heard, which friend they played with, or specifics such as 'Tell me where you played. Were there balls and equipment? Did you play in groups?'

We also advise parents to make the first week of school a special event for your family. If both parents work outside the home, consider adjusting your work schedule for that first week (if at all possible) to make your child's transition smoother. Research shows that the first week of school is really tough for kids, no matter the age. Younger kids going through a lot of new and challenging experiences need to feel secure at the

YOUR CHILD AND ANXIETY: SCHOOL STRESS STARTS EARLY

beginning of the school year to help them adjust appropriately for the rest of the year. It would be a good idea for a parent or trusted caregiver to be home after school during the first week to talk with your child, but this may not always be possible. If not, set aside a time in the evenings to discuss how your child's day went and to listen to any concerns. Other ways to celebrate the first week include having family meals together, making your kids' favorite foods for dinner, packing special notes in their lunch, or going out together as a family for ice cream after dinner.

Communicate - Don't just talk to your kids. Communicate with them. When children misbehave -- and they will -- try to understand their behavior instead of merely punishing it. Listen, acknowledge and accept your child's needs and help them to learn that school is a long-term process. Normalizing growth and assisting them to understand that one success or failure is not going to determine their life is a part of personal growth. We parents can and must learn to accept this growth -- and the fact that it is going to be unpredictable. What we can do is show constant love, support, and be a presence in their lives. This gives them the most important message: that we are there for them, and that we love and support them.

Roller coaster of emotion

It's probably safe to say that there isn't anyone who doesn't think back on their school days without remembering times of anxiety. Going to school offers a wide range of emotions for parents as well as children. Whether it's dread or excitement, fear or euphoria, all of these feelings can be bottled up inside our kids. Remember that any one symptom of distress does not cement a child's fate or mean that their school year will be a failure. All kids, at some point in their academic career, will struggle, so try hard not to view their setbacks or anxiety as a permanent threat to their school career. Every year that your child goes through school will be filled with highs and lows, good moments and devastating ones. However, through encouragement, support and keeping your finger on the pulse of you child's emotions, you are laying the groundwork for their future success in school.

References:

1. Keil, R.M.K. (2004) Coping and stress: a conceptual analysis *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 45(6), 659-665
2. <http://www.empoweringparents.com/Reduce-Back-to-School-Anxiety-for-Young-Children.php#ixzz20HcrBECx>
3. Daniel J. DeNoon, Student Stress Starts Early. The Problem: Premature Pressure by Parents, Peers. <http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/features/school-stress-anxiety-children>
4. <http://www.empoweringparents.com/Reduce-Back-to-School-Anxiety-for-Young-Children.php#ixzz20HcrBECx>