

Talking to Kids About Back-to-School Worries

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Tips for a more productive conversation

Writer: [Rae Jacobson](#)

Going back to school can bring up big worries for kids, but talking about concerns — and feeling supported — can help. Here are some tips to make your back-to-school conversations more productive and less stressful for everyone.

Be realistic about challenges

Kids who've struggled in the past, especially those with learning, mental health, or social issues, often feel more anxious than excited about heading back to school. As a parent it's tempting to focus on the positive: "It's a brand new year!"

But glossing over your child's challenges can leave them feeling unheard and be a missed opportunity to talk about what's really worrying them: *What if I fail again? What if I can't do it? What if I have to talk in front of the class?*

Instead, acknowledge your child's struggles and be direct — and strategic. Think about what's traditionally been difficult for your child: Social struggles? Test anxiety? Trouble following rules in class? Past troubles can provide a roadmap for future support. Give your child the chance to talk through any concerns, *What if I'm terrible at math just like last year? What if they ask me to talk in front of the class again?* And work together to brainstorm solutions.

- "I remember how hard math was last year. But we know a lot more about what you need to do well now. When you're ready, let's make a plan!"
- "Let's talk to Mr. Dean and let him know you don't like being called up to the blackboard."

Giving kids the opportunity to talk about what's worrying them can help you understand their struggles and help them advocate for their needs.

Take worries seriously

Remember, issues that might seem silly to you can be very serious to your child. Worrying they won't have any classes with friends, seeing a former crush in the hall, finding out they have another class with a teacher who "Hates me!" — all of these can be sources of real stress.

Instead of brushing worries away, take care to validate kids' feelings and give them opportunities to talk about what's troubling them. Asking open-ended, non-judgmental questions can help kids open up, and make it easier to share worries.

- “I can't believe you're starting 5th grade this year. How do you feel?”
- “Are you excited to be back in school?”

Talk about the good stuff

Anxiety can be consuming for kids, blocking out good memories and casting a dark cloud over the upcoming year. But big, empty statements of encouragement (“I bet you'll love it!”) can fall flat. Instead, try asking them about concrete things they've enjoyed in the past. Helping your child remember some of the good parts of school — activities or classes they like, favorite teachers, friends they've missed over the summer — can help fight negative thoughts and temper stress. Try encouraging kids to compare notes on topics like these:

What did they miss about school during summer vacation? Seeing friends?
Getting the good cookies at lunch? Play rehearsals?

What are they looking forward to? Starting a new subject? Getting a break from time with parents (I mean let's face it, grownups can be tiring)? Joining a team?
Decorating their locker? Whatever it is, make sure to make it part of your back-to-school conversations.

Remember, the idea isn't to put on a song and dance about how amazing school will be. The goal is to help them focus more on facts about what they've enjoyed, and less on what-ifs about what could go wrong.

Don't push

Sometimes kids just don't want to talk. We all want our kids to feel supported and do well, but sometimes stepping back is the right thing to do. The goal should be to let your child know you're aware that this can be a stressful time, and you're there if they want to talk.

The urge to check in, even when your child isn't responding, might be more about your own anxieties than your child's needs. Try to manage your own expectations, and if your child isn't ready to talk or doesn't seem engaged with the conversation, that's okay. You'll have plenty of opportunities for conversations as the year goes on. For now, just knowing you're there, and that you love and support them, can be enough.

This article was last reviewed or updated on August 16, 2022.

