

Words From Mr. Hutch - School Counselor

Topic - School Anxiety



The summer is drawing to a close and the winds of change are upon us. To some - excitement, enthusiasm, new motivation, to others, butterflies in the stomach, feeling of being overwhelmed, confusion and uncertainty. Yes, it's time to go back to school!

I've been in the school business as a student or employee for 42 years of my life and I still have a variety of emotions and thoughts at the start of every school year. As a kid, I hated the start of the new school year. I was the anxious child that wanted to hide under the bed when the school bus was driving down the street. My mom will tell you that I was typically a pretty easy going kid, but when school was starting I was a bundle of nerves - couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, upset stomach, yes, the master of thinking of ways to avoid going back to that prison, I'm sorry, I mean school.

As the school counselor at Bright Elementary, I have seen my share of anxious kids. When I talk with them it reminds me of my own challenges that I had at their age. To many people, the start of school may get a little more adrenaline flowing, but the child with school anxiety goes well beyond a little adrenaline. I like to tease parents about how they prepared their anxious student for school, especially the kindergartners. They lie to them by say things like - "school's going to be so much fun", "you're going to have so many friends", "I heard you have the nicest teacher in the building". The kids faithfully try to believe their parents and they go to school thinking everything is great. In the first week each day opens their eyes to the possibility that mom and dad could have been lying. They begin saying to themselves - "school really isn't as fun as mom said it was going to be", "I don't have any friends at this place", and, "my teacher is mean, she always makes us work". Usually by Labor Day weekend the kids have removed the rose-colored glasses that their parents placed on them, and they have their own image of what school is. The Tuesday after Labor Day weekend tends to be one of the worst days of the year for the child with school anxiety.

What to do? As with any subject related to raising kids, you can find a million and one books on advice about how to help your child with school anxiety. Many are helpful and many aren't worth the paper they are printed on. Let me give a few tips that may be helpful from my past experience.

1. Plan ahead by visiting and talking to the child about the school before the first book days. If you wait even until the early days of registration, the student may see crowds of people and confusion due to people walking through the building, looking at class list, buying schoolbooks. Try to get the child to the school before any crowds are gathering. Maybe one day when just a secretary or custodian is in the building and they allow you to visit the hallways and classrooms. This allows the child time to digest, at their pace, this new information. They will be able to figure out some of the physical logistics of the building prior to be thrown in to the mix of new students, teachers, and classrooms. The anxious child's condition grows worse when they feel like they have too much to manage at one time.
2. Encourage them with positives about the school and this new experience. Yes, they will figure out that some of it is not completely true. But, telling your child negative things about school, teachers, subjects, etc... only plants the seed for them to develop a negative attitude before they even start. Your words carry a great deal of weight. Weigh them wisely.
3. Don't make deals with you child about going to school. "Don't worry Bobby, if you don't like this school after two weeks I'll keep you home to homeschool you." Guess what you're going to be doing in two weeks - yes, homeschooling. Rather, "Bobby, we are going to school because it is the best way for you to learn all the things you need to be successful". PERIOD! The faster Bobby understands that school is just another part of life, the faster he will accept what his role is as a student. Don't blame him for trying to get out of it. That's natural. But since you are the parent you need to reinforce that school is the right thing for him to do.
If your child is anything like me, he will claim he is sick, has a headache, going to throw-up, etc... He may actually have these symptoms, an anxious mind and body can be a very sick mind and body. However, as the parent you must do your best to look beyond the common symptoms of anxiety and push for your child to get to school. If the anxious child is permitted to stay home even one time when they in fact are not truly sick, it can be guaranteed that they will continue to try this again and again. If you are not sure if your child is truly sick, bring them to school and let the school nurse check them out. They are medically trained to make such judgements.
4. Get back to the basics - in this crazy, busy lifestyle that many of us find ourselves trapped in we forget that our kids do not always handle the business as well as we might. Make sure your child has a regular bedtime every night - preferably before 9:00 PM and no later than 9:30 PM. Set up an after school

routine that is comfortable and predictable to the child. Kids need time to wind down from their school day. If they are coming home and immediately being told to jump in the car to run around until 10:00 PM, you are looking for trouble. Over-stimulation does not help the anxious child. Slow down and try to keep life as simple as possible. This often causes us to reevaluate our family priorities and determine what is really important to our family.

5. Stay the course - don't give up even when you don't know if your child or you can continue to push through this difficult time. If you need help with the process call me (the counselor), or your child's teacher. As a team, you can develop more specific interventions to help everyone move forward. Typically, I will see the anxiety through the first month of school. The worst days seem to be the first day back to school, the Tuesday after Labor Day, and Mondays. Once the child gets through this difficult time they tend to understand what school is about and how well they can handle it.

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6. How long will this go on? School anxiety tends to be most common with K, 1st, & 2nd grades, occasionally, I'll see a 3rd grader that continues to struggle. If the anxious condition continues through 3rd grade and into 4th grade it may be worth the time discussing the matter with the child's doctor. When the condition goes this long it is not unusual that other phobias and anxieties have begun to be manifested. Medical intervention along with counseling therapy may be necessary to help the child work through these difficult times.

All in all, most students adapt to their new school year in a matter of weeks. Once they learn the new routines and schedules they are able to become more comfortable and get back to the task of learning. All of us seem to do better if we are able to minimize the distractions from our daily work. Working to keep your life as well as your child's life as simple and predictable as possible is a great place to start. Kids find comfort in predictability. Leave the surprises for Christmas and birthday parties. Make the start of your new school year a great one!