

It's quite typical for children—even adolescents—to feel some butterflies at the beginning of a new school year. We expect these feelings to dissipate as the school year progresses and the child adjusts to a new environment, new people and new expectations. When a child continues to have difficulty, however, it is important to assess what the reasons are. Similarly, it is important for parents to help facilitate their child's adjustment to minimize anxiety before it gets out of hand.

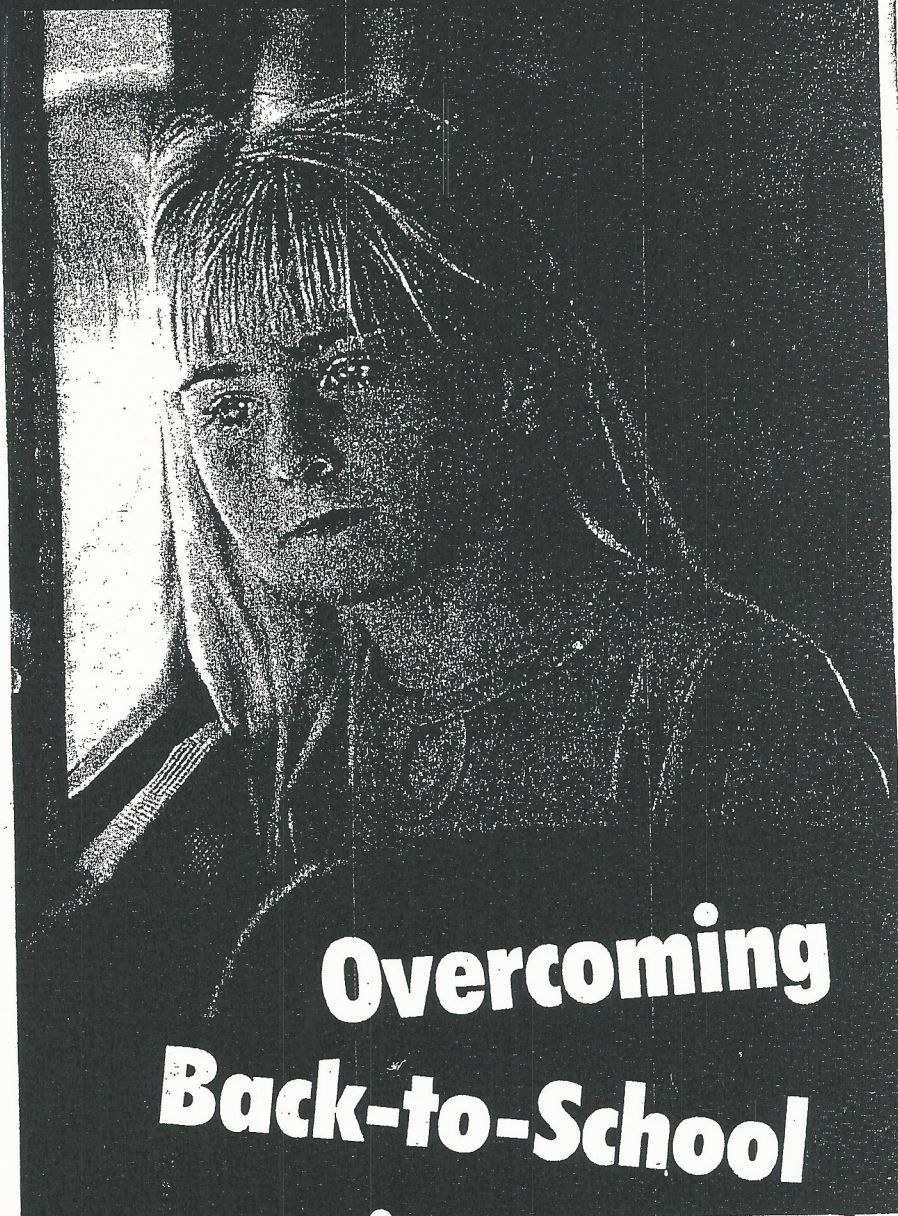
Anxiety about school can take various forms.

Separation anxiety occurs when the child fears leaving his parents or primary caregiver, even for just the school day. We see this type of anxiety most commonly in very young children who often are not accustomed to being apart from their parents for long periods of time. They also may not have much experience with adjusting to new environments. It is helpful for parents to be very positive about their child's school experience, talking it up and sharing their excitement about it. If you show apprehension, so will your child; children model emotions and viewpoints after their parents. Take your child to the school and walk around to familiarize him with the new setting, from the classroom to the lunchroom to the area where he will be dropped off or picked up after school. Discuss the general schedule with your child so he will know what to expect. Tell him when he'll leave to go to school, how he'll get home and how the school day will go. Familiarity with the new routine and expectations will help greatly to facilitate comfort.

School avoidance can start small (wanting to miss one class) but can lead to missing days and weeks. Therefore, it is crucial to attend to school avoidance when it first occurs. The most important things to do are to determine the problem, create a solution and keep your child in school. Keeping a child out of school will actually exacerbate his anxiety about going.

Kids may want to miss school for various reasons, so it is important to *identify* the true issue, rather than *assume* it. Common reasons for school avoidance include problems with peer relations, social or performance anxiety, feeling intimidated by a teacher and feeling overwhelmed by academic expectations.

Problems with peer relations can occur for many reasons, and teasing and peer pressure can make school an uncomfortable place to be. Parents should know who their child's friends are and be aware of any potential social strains. Parents can help children troubleshoot about how to handle various situa-



Overcoming Back-to-School Jitters

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tions, how to use the support of their friends, and how and when to involve school personnel.

In a similar way, parents can help shy children feel more comfortable in school. They can suggest activities that will help their child make new friends, pair him in an activity with a current friend who is more outgoing and give him strategies for facilitating more comfortable interactions with other children.

Moving beyond shyness, social anxiety is a clinical diagnosis and occurs when a person is so uncomfortable in social situations that he withdraws and/or cannot function as expected. Social anxiety is not uncommon in adolescents and often manifests itself in performance situations, such as giving an oral presentation, passing out papers in the classroom or doing anything that involves drawing attention to oneself. Social anxiety goes beyond typical shyness or nervousness; it is a feeling of intense discomfort. As a result, the child often avoids social or performance situations at all costs. A person suffering from social anxiety is best helped by cognitive-behavioral therapy, which teaches him to recognize and change specific thinking patterns and behaviors. If the anxiety is significant enough, he may also need to be treated with medication that reduces anxiety so he may then be able to utilize learned strategies.

Difficulty with adults and authority figures such as teachers and coaches can occur if the child does not interact well with adults, if the adult is intimidating or unapproachable, or if the match between a particular child and adult is

Lifestyle

A child's lifestyle greatly affects his attitude toward school. Lifestyle includes physical needs, family life and parental support/provision of structure.

Physical needs such as sleep, nutrition and exercise are crucial components of an individual's well-being. Kids should have a consistent bedtime that allows them to get a proper amount of rest. They are not likely to regulate themselves in this way; it is up to parents to enforce rules about sleep and rest. Similarly, nutrition is a key component of health and functioning. Parents should assure that their children are eating appropriately. Eating too little or eating unhealthy foods can inhibit a child's ability to focus in school. Sitting down with the family for a calm breakfast is a wonderful way to start the day. Exercise and recreation are equally as important as sleep and nutrition and should be built in to every child's day.

simply not a good one. For example, if your child is having a problem relating to his teacher, it is helpful to first determine the reason for the poor interaction. If the personalities clash terribly (such as an extremely timid child with an overbearing teacher), consult with the principal about switching teachers. If your child simply doesn't like his teacher, however, he will benefit from learning how to work with someone he doesn't care for, a skill he will need later in life. It is not always helpful to avoid conflict but to learn how to deal with it appropriately and effectively. Parents can serve as good guides in teaching their children how to do so.

If a child is feeling overwhelmed by academic expectations, it is important to assess why. Is he performing up to his potential but being pressured by home or school to go above and beyond? Is he trying his best but facing the hurdles of undiagnosed learning disabilities, attentional problems or unmet learning needs? Is the coursework at a level beyond his ability? Any of these reasons could be enough to turn him off from his school experience. Fortunately, if we determine the reason why the child is overwhelmed, we can work toward creating a solution.

Parents should set up routines and structure for their children. The degree of parental involvement in this task should, however, vary according to the child's age and needs. Beyond the structure for the child's physical needs (mentioned above), he may benefit from a routine regarding when homework is done, when free time occurs and how much time is spent in certain activities (e.g., video games). Elementary and middle school children need assistance in organizing their time and planning. Kids in high school should be more independent, but may benefit from some "gentle guidance."

Family life and involvement can greatly add to a child's well-being and daily functioning. Eating meals together, being involved in recreational activities such as playing games or taking walks and regular positive interactions are excellent sources of energy and motivation for children's successful functioning. Parental interest and involvement in what transpires at school mean a lot to a child. Asking *specific* questions, such as, "What did you learn in math today?" may encourage a child to answer more than the typical, "Nothing." Dr. Jared Seltzer, a school psychologist for the Clark County School District in Las Vegas, Nev., suggests that parents become educated about the curriculum and know how to help their child at home. Form a rapport with the teacher and be accessible. He also suggests viewing the school's website and learning what special opportunities the school offers.

Having interested and inquiring parents is a wonderful asset. Parents can help prepare children for school and create a balance among their activities. They can help identify and praise their child's strengths and help him with his weaker areas. They can keep an eye on all areas of his functioning, such as the social, emotional, physical and academic. Parents see their child's uniqueness up close and are best attuned to their child's specific needs.

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