



Back-to-school anxiety: How to help your children navigate the unknowns

Starting a new school year is full of unknowns in a “normal” year. Will I like my teachers? Will my friends be in my class? Who will I sit with at lunch? What kind of clothes should I wear? What if I don’t understand my schoolwork?

Now, the COVID-19 pandemic is adding a host of new unknowns to the list. Will my classes be online or in-person? Will I have to wear a mask during class? Will I be able to maintain social distancing? Will I catch COVID-19?

While you won’t be able to answer all of the questions, it’s important to recognize that your child is likely to experience heightened back-to-school stress and anxiety. And if navigating unknown situations has been anxiety-inducing for your child or teen in the past, you’ll want to be especially aware this year so you can provide the help he/she needs. Explore the tips below to help you and your children prepare for a school year full of unknowns.

- **Be transparent.** As the situation evolves and decisions are made in your community, the school experience is likely to change, with options ranging from virtual classes to full-time in-person attendance – or a hybrid approach.

Prepare your child to expect change. For younger children, this can mean describing the different scenarios and what each means. Talking about the “why” is equally important as explaining the “what.” Helping your child understand the importance of working together to prevent the virus from spreading until a vaccine is available empowers them to feel like part of the solution.

Transparency with teenagers is critical. Share information as you receive it and talk about what they’re hearing from friends or via social media. Help them separate facts from rumors, and make plans for how they’ll adapt to different scenarios.

- **Acknowledge feelings and frustrations.** Let your child know it’s okay to be worried or anxious about what will be different about returning to school. Encourage them to express what they’re thinking and how they’re feeling.

Make time to talk, listen, and ask questions. Some kids prefer focused attention, such as before bed or at mealtimes. Others, especially teens, may be more likely to open up in a more casual setting, such as during a car ride or while hanging out at home.

Reassure them they are loved and supported, but don’t just provide blanket assurances that “everything will be okay.” Listen and help children recognize what’s causing their concerns. Then, help them think of ways they can react and cope.

- **Manage your worries.** Kids take cues from the adults in their lives about how they should react and how much they should worry. Let them see how you’re adapting to unknowns and how you’re feeling. Model resilience in how you react to stressors and talk about how you solve problems. Remind your kids that they’re resilient, too. And most importantly, let them know that you’ll handle the situation as it changes – together.

Get help when you need it. If your child’s anxiety persists, contact your company’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if you have access to that benefit or consult with your child’s primary care physician, who may refer you to a behavioral health specialist. Another option is to call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration’s Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990, a free, 24/7, 365 day-a-year, national hotline that provides immediate crisis counseling. It is toll-free, multilingual, and confidential.