

MANAGING FEARS

Taming the Back-to-School Transition

Following are some situations that may present challenges or cause fear for children when it's time to go back to school. Suggestions are given for how you can help.

Fears or challenges	What you can do to help
Change – such as going to a different school, whether it be in a different town or moving from elementary to middle or middle to high school	Let your child know that for everything they're feeling, there is someone else feeling the same way. Remind them of new things they tried and got through in the past, or share stories from your own back-to-school experiences.
Previous bad experiences – such as bullying or other personal or academic struggles	Problem-solve with your child to come up with ways to manage difficult situations. Role-play and rehearse. Get professional help if needed.
Schedule changes – such as increased responsibilities, juggling additional activities or moving to multiple classes	Help your child to develop a new school-year routine or schedule, and start moving to the new routine a few weeks before school starts.
Unknowns – such as not knowing the teacher, where their classroom is or whether they will fit in	Help fill in the blanks. Visit the school at least once before classes begin. Talk about what is worrying them as often as they need to. Problem-solve together and work on strategies for how to deal with concerns they can't solve in advance.
Social difficulties – a history of not fitting in, being shut out or picked on or not having many friends	Encourage your child to get involved in school clubs or activities. It's easier for kids to make friends if they have something in common. Plus, involvement can help them gain confidence and enjoy school more.
Getting lost – including fear of being late for classes or not being able to find classes	Attend open houses or school orientations with your child so they can practice finding their way around before school starts. Locate bathrooms, the cafeteria and bus stop.
Making the grade – such as fear of having more difficult homework or harder classes. Even students who have done well in the past may be worried that they won't be able to keep up the same level of performance.	Set realistic expectations for your child. Help them recognize their unique talents and establish realistic goals for the school year. Also, help your child find things they are good at outside of school. This may take off some of the pressure.

Managing separation anxiety

It's natural for young children to feel some anxiety when their parents leave them. Some children can struggle more than others. They may cling, cry and refuse to let a parent leave. Or they may complain of feeling sick so they can stay home. This can be very stressful for both the child and parent. Separation anxiety usually becomes less of a problem as children get older. Here are some tips for easing separation anxiety.

- › Practice being apart from each other well before the start of school. Have your child stay with a relative or caregiver for brief periods at first, and gradually for longer periods.
- › Get them involved in play groups or other activities and gradually remove yourself from being present at these activities.
- › Avoid repeated exposure to violence in the media or video games. It can increase their fear of something bad happening to you or them and lead to separation anxiety.
- › Take them to the school and/or bus stop a few times before the big day and walk them through what will happen when that day arrives. Make sure they have a chance to meet the teacher and find their way around.
- › Story books about going to school can help young children visualize how the day may unfold. They may want to read them over and over.
- › You may be able to arrange a play date in advance with one or two children from your child's class so that they'll see a familiar face on the first day.
- › Some children find comfort in bringing a special object from home with them for the first few days of school.
- › Keep your attitude positive and encouraging. Reassuring them that "everything will be fine" isn't as helpful as acknowledging that it can be scary, but that you are confident they will get through it.
- › Develop a good-bye ritual. After the ritual, leave quickly, without fuss or delay.
- › Don't give in and let them stay home. Avoiding school can reinforce their fears, because they won't have a chance to get past them. If necessary, it's better to go with them to school for a little while and then gradually taper the time that you are there.

Back-to-school fears and separation anxiety usually fade in the first few days or weeks of school. For some children it continues. They may show this fear in other ways, such as poor sleep, complaining of stomachaches, or acting out. If issues continue into the second month of school, it may signal a problem. Call your EAP to request a telephone consultation with a trained professional.

References

- American Psychological Association (APA). (2019). Dealing with back-to-school blues? Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/school-rush>
- Burch, J. M. (2018). Back to school anxiety. Retrieved from <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/back-to-school-anxiety-2018082314617>
- Johns Hopkins Medicine. (n.d.) 5 Tips to ease back-to-school anxiety. Retrieved from <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/5-tips-to-ease-backtoschool-anxiety>

SAFETY FIRST

Taming the Back-to-School Transition

Keeping your child safe is one of a parent's top priorities. You can't be with your child all the time, but you can take steps to help them stay safe. Here are some key reminders.

General safety tips

- › Make sure your child and the school has your home, work, and cell numbers, and know how to reach you or someone else in an emergency.
- › Teach even your youngest child their address and how to use 9-1-1 in an emergency.
- › Caution your child to avoid abandoned buildings, construction sites, alleys, and shortcuts as they walk to and from school.
- › Warn your child not to talk to people they do not know and not to approach or get into cars with anyone they do not know – *no matter what*. Explain that such “strangers” are likely to be nice, friendly, normal-looking people, so that your child will not be easily fooled.
- › Don't have your child's name visible on the outside of their clothing or backpack.
- › If you are not at home when your child gets home from school, have them call you.
- › Teach your child, when they are home alone, to tell callers that you aren't able to come to the phone right now, not that you aren't home. Remind them to keep the doors locked.
- › If your child is threatened over money or belongings, tell them to hand it over. They should then tell someone right away – you, school staff or other authorities.
- › If your child feels threatened or is being followed, they should know to go to a public place such as a fire station, store, or other facility where there are people who can help.

School bus safety: Rules to teach your child

- › Make sure to learn and remember the bus number.
- › Know where the bus will stop for pick up and drop off. Be at the bus stop at least five minutes before the bus is scheduled to arrive.
- › When the bus approaches, stand at least three giant steps (six feet) away from the edge of the road, and line up away from the street.
- › Wait until the bus stops, the door opens and the driver says that it's okay before getting on.
- › When crossing the street in front of the bus, walk on the sidewalk or side of the road to a point at least five giant steps (ten feet) ahead of the bus before you cross. Be sure the bus driver can see you, and you can see the driver.
- › When getting off the bus, be careful that loose clothing, drawstrings or book bags with straps do not get caught in the handrail or door.
- › Never walk behind the bus.
- › Walk at least three giant steps away from the side of the bus any time you are walking next to it.
- › If you drop something near or under the bus, tell the bus driver. Never try to pick it up. The driver may not see you and begin to drive away.
- › Always stay in your seat while the bus is moving. Keep the aisles clear so others can pass by safely. Don't stick your hands out the window. Don't shout, play loudly, or throw things on the bus – it can distract the driver.
- › If you're worried about bullying or other actions, sit close to the driver. Tell an adult later.

Walking to school: Rules to teach your child

- › Draw a map, with your child's help, of their route to and from school. Together, mark safe places they can go if they are being followed or need help.
- › These should include schools, churches, libraries, day care centers, police and fire stations, and the homes of people you know.
- › Walk this route in both directions with your child and point out the safe places you have identified.
- › Try to arrange for your child to walk with one or more "buddies." This is safer than walking alone.
- › Find out if your child's school has a "safe arrival program;" that is, they will call you if your child does not arrive by a specified time. You can do something similar for the return trip by having your child call you by a set time when they should have arrived home.
- › Help them understand why it isn't safe to wear headphones or use an electronic device while walking, biking or anywhere that they might be exposed to risk.
- › Walk on sidewalks or shoulders, not in the street. If there are no sidewalks and you have to walk on the shoulder, walk as far off the road as possible, facing traffic.
- › Cross at a crosswalk or corner, not mid-block, and especially not between parked cars. Always obey "Walk/Don't Walk" signals, be aware of traffic lights and stay within painted crosswalks.
- › Look left, then right, then left again before crossing the street, and keep looking all around until you reach the other side.
- › Try to make eye contact with drivers before crossing in front of them so you're sure they see you.
- › Watch out for cars that are turning or backing up, especially around driveways and garages.

Reference:

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). (n.d.)
School bus safety. Retrieved from <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-bus-safety>



HOME ALONE CHECKLIST

Taming the Back-to-School Transition

Staying home alone is a big step for your child and for you. While guidelines recommend age 12 or older, each child will be different. These questions, along with what you know about your child, can guide you. Page two has tips to make this experience more successful for you and your child.

Is your child ready?

- Does your child understand and follow rules consistently?
- Is your child self-sufficient and able to structure their time?
- Is your child able to solve problems and figure things out without specific instructions?
- Is your child calm, steady, not easily spooked in stressful or unexpected situations?
- Can you rely on your child to be responsible and make good choices?
- Can you count on your child to be honest?
- Does your child feel comfortable, not fearful about being alone?

Readiness skills

Work on any of these that your child doesn't know or is uncomfortable with, before leaving them alone.

- Does your child know their address?
- Does your child know how to tell time?
- Does your child know who to call if you are unavailable?
- Does your child understand when to call 911?
- Does your child know how to be safe outside the home (stranger danger, etc.)?
- Does your child know how to get home safely and open and relock the door?
- Does your child know basic first aid and where to find supplies?
- Does your child know how to use household appliances and furnace/AC?
- Does your child know all aspects of kitchen safety – stove, food handling, microwave?
- Is your child able to do what is expected without supervision? (chores, homework)
- Does your child know what to do in the event of weather emergencies or a power outage?
- Can your child manage the care of pets or siblings if necessary?
- Can your child stick to the rules even when pushed by friends to break them?

Tips for parents

Once you have determined that your child is ready to stay home alone, the following suggestions from the Department of Health and Human Services may help you to prepare your child and to feel more comfortable about leaving him or her home alone.

- › **Have a trial period.** Leave the child home alone for a short time while staying close to home. This is a good way to see how he or she will manage.
- › **Role play.** Act out possible situations to help your child learn what to do, such as how to manage visitors who come to the door or how to answer phone calls in a way that doesn't reveal that a parent isn't at home.
- › **Establish rules.** Make sure your child knows what is (and isn't) allowed when you're not home, such as cooking or having friends over. Set clear limits on video gaming, internet use, TV, computers, and other electronic devices. For guidance on how to set parental controls on cable television and internet content, contact your service providers.
- › **Work with your child** to put together a list of chores or other tasks to keep them busy while you're gone.
- › **Discuss emergencies.** What do you consider an emergency? What does your child consider an emergency? Have a code word that the parent and child can use in the event of any emergency.
- › **Call your child** while you're away to see how it's going, or have a trusted neighbor or friend check in.
- › **Talk about it.** Encourage your child to share his or her feelings with you about staying home alone. Have this conversation before leaving and then, when you return. Talk with your child about his or her experiences and feelings while you were away. This is particularly important when your child is first beginning to stay home alone, but a quick check-in is always helpful after being away.

- › **Don't overdo it.** Even a mature, responsible child shouldn't be home alone too much. Consider other options, such as programs offered by schools, community centers, youth organizations, or faith-based organizations, to help keep your child connected and involved.

Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2018). Leaving your child home alone. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/homealone.pdf>

Better safe than sorry

- › **Post the rules somewhere visible.** Include: boundaries (house, yard, neighborhood, and community), cooking rules, door/phone answering, friends who are/aren't allowed over, permitted activities, homework/chore expectations, etc.
- › **Remove or lock up dangerous items,** such as guns, prescription medications, alcohol and fireworks.
- › **Get a better idea of neighborhood safety.** Look up crime stats on your city or police web site. Check the National Sex Offender public website: www.nsopr.gov.
- › **Have backup.** Make arrangements with someone nearby who will be available to step in and help.
- › **Consider babysitter training** (often offered through the American Red Cross) or home alone class, if offered in your area.

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TRANSITION TIMELINE

Taming the Back-to-School Transition

Life doesn't stop so that you can do all the things you need to do to be ready for the return to school. Use this timeline to help you stay on track.

One - two weeks before the start of school

- › Gradually restart school routines – bed/wake times, screen-time rules, family meals.
- › Complete shopping for supplies and a few items of clothing with your child.
- › Get a calendar in a format you will use and that everyone has access to.
- › Decide how/where to manage school paperwork.
- › Watch for mail from the school. Get any important dates on your calendar right away.
- › Work with your family to set up a homework zone and a staging area.
- › Make and freeze a few dinners to take the pressure off during the first week back to school.
- › Arrange get-togethers to help your child reconnect with school friends.
- › Attend any school open house/orientation opportunities with your child. If this is not offered, make arrangements to tour the school and meet the teacher.
- › Talk with your child about any worries. Problem-solve together to come up with strategies.
- › Review transportation safety. Check out the bus stop or do a dry run of the walking route.
- › Review rules and role-play situations if your child will be home alone after school.

Other items: _____

The night before the first day

- › Go over strategies you came up with for trouble spots, but end conversation with something positive.
- › Ask them to name three things they are excited about for tomorrow.
- › Talk about what they want to wear and what they would like for lunch.
- › Check backpack to confirm they have all supplies, bus number, and all contact information.

Other items: _____

The big day!

Share a sense of excitement and enthusiasm with your child. Remind them that everyone gets a nervous feeling when they start something new. Tell them you are confident that they will manage.