

Navigating back-to-school anxiety: expert tips for students and parents to ease the transition

WBFO-FM 88.7 | By [Dallas Taylor](#)

Published September 18, 2024 at 3:37 PM EDT



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The school year is now well underway for students and parents. While the Back-to-School season can bring about excitement, it also presents some challenges.

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“It is very typical for students (and adults) of all ages to feel worried or anxious about returning to school,” said Dr. Amanda Nickerson, Professor and Director of the Dr. Jean M. Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention at the University at Buffalo. “Students may worry about things like finding their classrooms or lockers and/or about social situations. ‘Am I going to have friends? Will my teachers be nice?’ or academic or organizational concerns.”

For some kids, that anxiety can present itself in many ways such as school refusal, or

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“Students may be coming home and maybe being more disruptive or non-compliant or whiny or tired, or maybe more irritable,” said Dr. Stephanie Frederick, Assistant Professor Associate Director of the Dr. Jean M. Alberti Center. “Anxiety can also be seen in many parents, educators, and teachers, and kids for sure pick up on that.”

The transition from summer to school is just one root of that anxiety.

“Any change in routine, big or small, can be disruptive or stressful,” said Dr. Nickerson. “Most students also want to do their best in their roles, socially and academically, so there is some understandable stress that comes from questioning what may be expected and if they can be successful.”

According to Dr. Frederick, another root cause is the concern over school safety which has heightened anxiety for children, families, and teachers.

“We’re seeing a lot more stories about school violence,” said Dr. Frederick. “Even negative stories that maybe are coming from schools or others. We’re just as likely to be exposed to this information because of the news and because of social media.”

So, what can students and adults do to help alleviate some of the back-to-school anxiety?

Reach out to others for support

Students can reach out to an adult for support that they think would be helpful.

“So whether it’s a parent, an aunt, uncle, a neighbor, or reach out to a friend,” said Dr. Frederick. “It can be really helpful particularly for middle or high school students if they have a buddy – a safety person that they can plan ahead with and walk into school with for those first couple of days.”

Develop routines early

Much like you’d prepare for a test ahead of time, students can prepare ahead of time for the new routine of going back to school.

“Getting into a good sleeping and eating routine and preparing for the transition can

That may include things like getting clothes and school supplies ready the night before, eating breakfast, and planning for lunch. Students can also set their alarm clocks earlier to become accustomed and get used to more structure, whereas the summer may have lacked some regular structure.

“For younger kids, having parents drive them to school before school starts,” said Dr. Frederick. “Playing on the playground, walking around the building, just getting used to things.”

Self-talk

Students can remind themselves that it is normal to be nervous and remember that they have coped with new situations before.

Talking with others can also be helpful.

“Talking to adults about what to expect and talk about those things,” said Dr. Frederick. “What are some things you are looking forward to and what you’re excited about? Are you feeling anxious and what are you feeling anxious about? Just talking about those things with others.”

Model Appropriate Coping Strategies

Dr. Frederick says that the number one thing for adults to do to help their kids is look inward and look at their behavior and their reactions and what that looks like for kids.

“So making sure that we don’t let our kids know that we’re feeling stressed about back to school,” said Dr. Frederick. “They’re like sponges, so just making sure that we are able to recognize the emotions that we’re feeling.”

Set the Tone

“Educators also set the tone for kids,” said Dr. Nickerson. “Teachers and other adults at school that are positive, welcoming, and clear about establishing and teaching expectations can help ease anxiety and contribute to a productive, inclusive, and hopefully fun experience for students.”

Give it Time

The first couple of weeks may produce exhaustion and irritability in students.

“Let the routine kind of run itself,” said Dr. Frederick. “Allow your child to get used to the structured routine of school. If the feeling of anxiety still persists into October, I would certainly reach out to either a school or mental health practitioner just to make sure there’s nothing else going on.”

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