



Back To School Worries

By Michael D. Zito, PhD

The beginning of school can be filled with excitement about new opportunities, friends, new clothes and school accessories. But for some, it is filled with worries that go beyond the normal disappointment that summer vacation has ended. School worries that become intense can develop into school phobia. School phobia starts with the child's negative predictions and expectations about their school experience that manifest differently depending on the age. Anxious children tend to overestimate the negative possibilities so reality checking their concerns can be helpful. At times their worries can be due to a real problem, such as being bullied that should be checked out.

For young children, the school phobia often centers around the fear of separating from a caregiver and/or the fear that something bad will happen to their caregiver when they are in school. It is important to try to draw out the specific concerns your child has. Gentle open-ended questions such as, "help me understand what exactly you are worried about or tell me what you think will happen when you go to school" are suggested. Reminding them of a recent positive school experience can also be helpful. For example, with a younger child you may say, "After school on Friday, you told me how much fun you had and now on Monday morning you are telling me you are afraid to go to school. Help me understand what you think will be different today than it was Friday."

At the middle and high school levels, the phobia most likely has to do with negative prediction about social issues and peer acceptance vs. rejection. Teens often fear ridicule, rejection, and/or embarrassment. They may be a bit more defensive when drawing out the story because typically they fear being judged by a parent or a parent judging their friends. Non-judgmental questioning can be helpful here. For example, "help me understand how you know Jane is really mad at you, what exactly did she say." Helping the teen look for evidence of their perceptions can be helpful because anxious children often overestimate the negative possibilities. Even if the teen is reluctant to share their thoughts, just asking the question can create a new awareness even if they don't answer it.

If your child expresses some school anxieties, consider the following:

- Give a clear and strong expectation that your child needs to go to school even if they are worried.

- Realize the best solution to school worries is to be in school to reality check their fears.
- If your child is anxious, for the first few days of school distract them with breakfast out at their favorite eatery and maybe invite a friend.
- When intervening, remain calm which will help reduce the child's anxiety.
- If the anxieties are strong, arrange to get the child into the school building and to perhaps visit the school nurse, counselor, or another support staff member.
- Responding to school anxieties quickly is very important.
- School anxieties often reappear on Sunday nights into Monday morning and after long school breaks so make a plan to deal with it.

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