



September Counsellor's Corner

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September's Topic: Back To School Anxiety

September can be a time of great excitement and change; new experiences, friends, teachers and learning opportunities can be something that children and adults alike thrive on. Many children; however, struggle with a great deal of stress and worry when faced with new situations. A common response when the stress response elevates is to go into "fight or flight" mode: refusal to go to school, teariness or moodiness at home, increased fighting with siblings and more. The following are some suggestions in dealing with your child when struggling with anxious feelings.

- Refrain from building new situations up into a "Disneyland" kind of experience (e.g. "You must be SO excited about kindergarten! It's going to be amazing!). If your child is anxious, they are unlikely to shift that feeling just because those around them are trying to convince them it will be great.
- Recognize your own worries and anxiety. Children look to us for how to navigate the world. Instead of saying, "Daddy is going to miss you so much when you start kindergarten!" consider saying, "Daddy is excited to go to work tomorrow and I'm looking forward to 2:30 and hearing all about your day."
- Let your child's teacher know (out of earshot) that your child is struggling. Often, a predictable activity when entering the classroom can help transition time (e.g. a colouring sheet on the desk).
- Refrain from allowing screen time in the morning (and limit it at night). Screen time affects the sensitive nervous system, creating overstimulation and hyper-arousal, resulting in the brain being in a state of chronic stress. Activities like swinging, listening to calm music, working on a puzzle, etc. are great before-school activities that can ground your child and prepare him/her to face anxiety-provoking situations.
- Consider that anxiety and "boredom" don't exist at the same time. A "boring", predictable routine can alleviate worry. Routine provides safety and comfort for children. Morning routines that are practiced in

role-play can settle anxious feelings. Predictable snacks/lunches/clothes, etc. create a safe feeling. If your child's stressful time is at drop-off, create a routine on paper that your child can contribute to in a calm exchange. (e.g. build a "script" and practice it at home). Make sure you stick to the script and don't alter it in times of worry. An example script could be:

- Arrive 8:25
 - Play at park for 5 minutes
 - Timer on phone goes off at 8:30
 - Side door for goodbyes
 - Three hugs, one kiss
 - Mom/dad, "I love you have a good day" and walks away without looking back (or peeking in the window; it sends the message that you don't believe he/she will be okay.)
 - Child goes to class.
 - Mom/dad come back at 2:30.
- Little pictures "pics" can help on the script, for readers and non-readers alike.
 - Children in stressful states will try to alter the script by getting you to stay: "One more hug!" It is important to not adjust the script so the child can get used to the routine and trust the script. Recognize there is not comfort in "one more hug"; rather, delaying the inevitable and keeping the child suspended in an anxious moment. Typically, I recommend that parents don't stay until their child settles as this also keeps the child in that anxious state of when the bandaid will be ripped off. In most cases, children are able to adjust quickly. If you require extra assistance or if your child has always transitioned easily but suddenly shows resistance to attending school, do not hesitate to reach out to the school counsellor and/or teacher for help.

Extra resources:

<https://www.anxietybc.com>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/mental-wealth/201711/is-your-child-overstimulated-too-much-screen-time>

<http://anxietyfreechild.com/how-to-manage-screen-time-for-your-anxious-child/>