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Ease Kids' Back to School Fears with These Tips from Experts

August 13, 2007, TAMPA, FL - The first day of school may mean new clothes and fresh school supplies but it also can be a source of stress and anxiety for kids - and their parents.

It can be tough for young children to go from sleeping late and playing all day to getting up early and having homework to do. Add in the stressors of a new school or new grade and children may experience a considerable amount of apprehension and fear at this time of year.

“Structure and routine are a source of calm and reassurance to a child,” said April Lott, a licensed clinical social worker and the Director of Community Treatment Programs at Directions for Mental Health in Largo. “When things change, it’s not unusual for kids to experience some anxiety.”

The biggest mistake parents make, Lott said, is to minimize a child’s feelings. Instead, talk with them about your own experiences and tell them it is okay to be scared. Give them permission to feel their feelings and let them know you are here to help.

“Parents should talk to their child openly and try to be good listeners,” Lott said. “Acknowledge the child’s fears, tell them how you felt when you first started school and how you were able to get through it.”

Parents should remember to take into account whether other changes in the family’s routine may exacerbate the stress of going back to school. Things like divorce, a move or a death in the family can make it even harder for a child to cope with first-day jitters.

Also, don’t underestimate the stress your older children may be feeling. While parents usually know to prepare a child for the first day of kindergarten, they often overlook the transition of middle school to high school.

The key is to pay attention to your child and respond accordingly, Lott said. Some children may need a week of preparation to get used to a change of routine. Others may only need two or three days.

“I always tell parents that they are the expert on their child,” Lott said. “Every child is different.”

The following tips can help make your child’s transition back to school more manageable:

- ∞ If your child is starting a new school, conduct a trial run before classes start. See how long it takes to get there during morning traffic or check out your child's bus stop. Show your child where his classrooms are. Meet the teachers and have a look around the cafeteria or playground.

- ∞ Participate in any back-to-school events at your child's school, such as an open house or meet-the-teacher night. If a child does not want to go, that may be a sign of anxiety. Make it fun by going to a restaurant for dinner afterward or teaming up with another parent and child.

- ∞ Start easing your child back into a school-time routine. Wake them up a few minutes earlier each day and send them to bed a little earlier. Plan your morning routine. Consider creating a checklist to help them get organized. Determine how long they will need for each item, such as eating, getting dressed, brushing teeth, making their bed, etc.

- ∞ Select clothing, including shoes and socks, and have them laid out the night before. Hair accessories, backpacks zipped and ready, lunches made or at least decisions about what will be in the lunch, and determining weather-appropriate attire helps to minimize morning madness.

- ∞ Allow your child to have a say in the process, wherever possible. For example, let them pick out their first day outfit, breakfast cereal or snacks for lunch.

Whatever your plan for easing your child back into school, try to make it fun and don't put too much pressure on your child – or yourself. If at all possible, avoid leaving everything until the night before school starts. Waiting until the last minute can produce anxiety in both children and adults.

Still, if you don't have everything by the first day, don't panic. You can always pick up any forgotten items in the weeks to come.

“Kids will take their cues from the parents,” Lott said. “You don't want to add to their feelings of being out of control.”

April Lott is a licensed clinical social worker and the Director of Community Treatment Programs at Directions for Mental Health. Established in 1982, Directions is a non-profit organization committed to helping heal the hurt in the lives of thousands of Pinellas County residents suffering from mental health illness. Nationally accredited and serving more than

80,000 people per year, Directions is dedicated to developing innovative programs that change lives, while reducing crime, homelessness, drug abuse and child abuse. For more information, visit Directions for Mental Health at www.directionsmh.org or call (727) 524-4464.

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