

The year of separation anxiety: How back to school is harder than ever in 2020

Even kids who once went to school happily may find themselves clinging to parents this fall.



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By Lisa Tolin

As soon as school let out for summer, my 5-year-old son began intense negotiations about starting kindergarten in the fall.

In addition to standard [questions about a new school](#) (are the teachers nice?), he wants to know about the changes. Will coronavirus be gone? (No.) Does he have to wear a mask? (Yes.) Can I be there every day? (No.) His response was firm: “Then I’m never going to school.”

[Back-to-school](#) jitters are to be expected even in normal times, which 2020 is surely not. After months at home, children leaving the nest may fuel intense separation anxiety. Add to that new rules about masks and social distancing, not to mention fear of the virus itself, and you can expect an army of kids [clinging to their parents](#) when that first bell rings.

[Separation anxiety](#) is most intense for toddlers, but older children, tweens and even teenagers leaving for college may have a tougher time than usual this year, says Dr. Tovah Klein, director of the Barnard Center for Toddler Development and author of [“How Toddlers Thrive.”](#)

“All of our lives have, in some form or another, been turned upside down, and our children are no exception to that,” says [Dr. Rebecca Schrag Hershberg](#), psychologist and author of “The

Tantrum Survival Guide.” “Many children will have some difficulty adjusting to going back to school in the fall; parents need to expect this, and to accept that it will be an unfolding process.”

If your children are heading to a classroom, here are nine strategies to help a child with separation anxiety at school.

[1. Do a trial run](#)

Visiting school before it begins can be a comfort, even i

if you’re just walking around the perimeter and talking about what to expect, says Jennifer Miller, a family and educational consultant and founder of [Confident Parents, Confident Kids](#).

For younger children, practice separating and coming home. Returning after even a walk around the block establishes trust that a parent always comes back, Klein says.

[2. Talk about it ... but not too much](#)

Talk about what’s new this year. Will teachers be wearing masks? Will there be extra hand-washing or a new lunch routine? And talk about what will be the same — maybe some familiar play equipment or materials.

Klein warns not to talk about school too far in advance with little kids, who don't understand time. “The younger they are, the slower you should go to reintroduce school,” she says.

[3. Pay attention to their feelings](#)

Listen if the child wants to talk, "without trying to talk the child out of their feelings," says [Dr. Laura Markham](#), author of "Peaceful Parents, Happy Kids." Let children know that even if they are nervous, they can face their fears with your support.

“In general, when children are anxious, the parents' job is to communicate to the child that it is normal to feel some anxiety AND they know the child can handle whatever is making them anxious, AND they are there to support the child,” Markham says.

“In other words, ‘You can handle this. I will help. You can feel the fear and do it anyway.’ That's what strengthens the child's confidence and diminishes the anxiety.”

Watch for changes in mood or behavior that might show anxiety children can't explain yet.

[4. Give your child a memento](#)

Miller suggests allowing your child to have a scarf or handkerchief of yours, or buying a small teddy or blanket “that you’ve put your love into” to place in their backpack. For older children, a piece of your jewelry, a trinket or photo can do the same trick.

“On those tough days when they miss you, one soft cuddly item from you or a picture or symbol will help ease their worries or sadness,” she says.

[5. Take it slow](#)

Parents and teachers should expect children to need extra support this year. Klein advises parents to allow baby steps — maybe a shorter time at school, or planning for a parent to stay, if allowed.

“Older children and middle- and high schoolers will likely be relieved to see their friends, and yet will have so many adjustments, plus the worries brought on by COVID-19,” Klein says. “Whatever the child's age, keep an eye out for challenges as they adjust to school.”

[6. Create a routine](#)

Staggered school schedules could mean an even longer adjustment period, as children may have a harder time adjusting to an irregular routine. Even if your child is in school two days a week, try to establish a home routine on off days.

“Parents can help them by making a calendar,” Klein says. “Help the child establish routines around when they go to school and when they stay home. ... This structure, which does not have to be rigid, helps frame the day. That is reassuring to the child.”

Miller suggests allowing a child to write or draw their own plan, so they feel they own it.

[7. Lighten up](#)

A healthy dose of laughter may be just what your child needs to keep things from getting too heavy.

“The most effective way to help children with fear is actually by helping them laugh. So parents can reduce children's school anxiety by roughhousing with them in the morning before school,” Markham says.

8. Be honest

You might not have all the answers. You may not know what school will look like, or if it will shut down suddenly again. It's OK to admit that.

"Parents can still be reassuring. They can let children know that it is a different year and we are not sure of how school will look there this year. Honesty is appreciated by children," Klein says.

Let them know that teachers and other people are making sure school can be safe for everyone, and no matter what, you'll be there to help.

9. Say goodbye and mean it

Before you leave, let your child know who will be picking them up and when you will see them again. If the child cries, give a good hug and kiss, tell them when you'll see them, and leave them with the teacher.

“Don't linger. The lingering suggests that you might not trust the situation and may make them more upset,” Miller says.

Separation can be emotional for parents, too, especially if a child routinely cries. Miller suggests taking deep breaths, going for a walk and buying yourself a cup of coffee. (Go ahead and spring for the latte.)

At the end of the day, whether your child cried or not, praise their bravery and remind them that you'll always return.

And take heart: crying and clinging is a sign that your child is attached to you, which is "critical for your child's healthy development and future academic success," Miller says. "Allowing them to practice trusting in someone else's care because you've approved it for your child is yet another step in their growth and development."