



Say goodbye to school change anxiety

WRITTEN BY ISP EDITORIAL AND DR LAURENCE VAN HANSWIJK DE JONGE

It's completely natural and normal for your child to feel anxious about starting a new school, especially if the catalyst for the change is a house move or change in family circumstances. Even if your child is moving schools simply because they have graduated along with the rest of their year group, the thought of making new friends and performing well in a new environment can be daunting. With advice from Developmental Clinical Psychologist, Dr. Laurence van Hanswijk de Jonge, we look at ways to ease the transition.

Nerves are normal

- Let your child know that it's completely normal to feel nervous, and that often going into a situation with a few nerves can help us perform better than usual. Like feeling excited, feeling nervous can act as positive energy to help us do well!
- Try not to minimise their feelings. Listen to what they have to say and let them know about instances where you, or others in the family have felt the same about a new challenge but made a success of it in the end.
- "Ask simple questions" recommends Dr. van Hanswijk de Jonge, "like how are they feeling as they arrive at school on the first day. If your child is younger, then ask how their body feels to assess for butterflies in the tummy, a tightening chest, or lower breathing, which are all signs of anxiety. You can then label this for them and delve into it, asking "what are you thinking about that is making you nervous.""

- Once you know this, you can try and see how accurate that thought is and if it is reasonable you can help them by problem solving. This means that if these "worst case scenarios" do happen, they have the tools and feel empowered to help themselves.

- However, if this does not take the fear away then there may be another underlying fear that needs to be unpacked.

Change is inevitable

Change is an inevitable part of life, and not just for children. It's important to learn early on how to look at change positively, not shy away from it, and recognise that while things will be different, going into it with an open and positive mindset will make embracing your new reality much easier.

- Encourage your child not to focus on how it may go wrong, but instead visualise how the experience could go well for them. This becomes a lot easier once their fears have been unpacked and they have worked through problem solving these with you.
- Dr. van Hanswijk de Jonge says: "Let them list times they've overcome challenges in the past and ask them what that "evidence" shows them for the future."

Saying goodbye

It can be difficult to move on when you've been comfortable and happy in a school, maybe for several years. Deep friendships are an important source of confidence and joy, no matter what age we are. Saying goodbye to this, as well as to teachers and settings which are familiar can be incredibly upsetting.

- Take time to say goodbye properly and celebrate past successes before moving onto the next chapter.
- Gather contact details for your child's friends to help them stay connected to this period of their life.
- If they are moving schools at the same time as others from their year group, encourage them to talk to their peers going through the same thing to see that they are not alone.



Routine and stability

Keeping a routine and being around for your child will give them a sense of stability through the transition. In addition, you could take other practical measures to support the move:

- Contact the school to see if you can take a tour before the new term starts so your child can familiarise themselves with the surroundings.
- Find out if the school has any kind of “buddy” system for new joiners, someone who can have a chat with your child before term starts to talk to them informally about the day to day experience, and let them know that they have someone to look out for them when they arrive.
- Find out timings for the first day so that your child can arrive in good time. Having a good breakfast and time to get ready properly before this important day can make a big difference to first day nerves.
- Make sure your child has everything they need to take with them when they start. Small incidents like forgetting your textbooks or your sports kit in the first few days of school can make children feel they are standing out in a way they don’t want to.
- Dr. van Hanswijck de Jonge also recommends practicing “3 good things”, where you tell your child that you will ask them at the end of the day what 3 good things happened that day at school. This will keep your child focusing on positives, remember “we get more of what we focus on.”

Ups and downs

Making a success of a school change can take a while, and usually has some ups and downs:

- Make sure you keep checking in with your child on how things are going both socially and academically. Usually teaching staff will also be happy to catch up with parents on how their child is settling in

after a couple of weeks.

- Pay attention to any changes in regular behaviours as these can be indicators that something is not right.
- “Be mindful of spending one on one time with your child,” Dr. van Hanswijck de Jonge adds, “giving you the opportunity to check in, and giving them a space to open up. Driving to an activity is not one on one time! You need to put your devices away and sit face to face with each other.”

Periods of transition are challenging for all age groups, but with the support of family, a positive outlook, and some self-confidence, anything can be achieved!

Sources:

- <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/school-choosing-starting-moving/moving-schools>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/aug/19/top-10-tips-changing-schools-students-parents>
- <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/school-college-and-work/school-college/moving-schools/>

About the Contributor:

Laurence van Hanswijck de Jonge is a Developmental Clinical Psychologist with a background in Neuropsychology who provides developmental and psychological assessments for English speaking children between the ages of 3 and 18 at KidsAbility in the Cayman Islands. Her practice is rooted in Positive Psychology and her belief in the importance of letting our children flourish through building on their innate strengths. She is certified by the University of Pennsylvania, USA, to run the cutting edge resilience building programme for children.
<https://www.laurencevanhanswijck.com/>