

# BACK TO SCHOOL ANXIETY IN LITTLE KIDS



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New year, new teachers, new classroom, new peers- it's no wonder that plenty of little kids (and parents) feel nervous as the first day of school approaches. Back to school anxiety is understandable and common, but that doesn't make it any less challenging.

Little kids may not be able to tell you that they feel worried about starting or going back to school. Instead, they might ask for lots of reassurance, complain of tummy or head aches, get upset when asked about school or have a tantrum when you drop them off.

The good news is that this is not unusual and typically resolves within a few weeks of starting school. There are lots of things you can do to support your child to manage and overcome their anxiety about school. There's also plenty of support available if you need it.

# THINGS THAT HELP

01

## ACKNOWLEDGE THE EMOTION

Feeling worried or anxious is a normal feeling that we all get sometimes. We don't want kids to feel embarrassed or guilty for feeling scared. We want to acknowledge how they feel and communicate that we can learn to handle it together. You could say something like "I can see that you're feeling scared about going to school. Everybody feels scared sometimes. let's work out how we can manage it together."

02

## CREATE SOME PREDICTABILITY

Explain what happens in a school day in conversation or by reading stories before school starts (e.g. on youtube you can find "[the school book](#)" by Todd Parr and "[Going to School](#)" by Usborne first experiences). Talk about what happens at drop off (e.g. "we say hello, hang up your bag, have a quick cuddle and goodbye, then I leave and you play") and pick up (e.g. "I'll come back to get you at 3pm and I can't wait to hear about your day!").

03

## PRAISE AND REWARD POSITIVE STEPS

Acknowledge all the things your child does well and talk about it when they've done a great job transitioning to school. Lots of kids respond well to small rewards. For example, a great motivator could be a sticker chart for days and where they've successfully stayed at school and the promise of a favourite outing or treat for 5 stickers.

04

## TEACH SOME SOOTHING SKILLS

Things that can help little kids are taking [slow deep breaths](#), [squeezing muscles then relaxing them](#), Thinking about things they like about school and asking for help. Choose one and practice it together at home. You could also read or watch a story like [the invisible string](#) and make string bracelets or draw a heart on their hand so they remember you're always connected when they are at school.

05

## PRACTICE

Little kids learn through play, plus it's fun! Role playing things that they are nervous about can help them gain confidence and a sense of control. You could use figurines or dress-ups to role play things like getting ready, going to school, asking for help from teachers and asking other kids to play. You could also go and have a look at the school and play on the playground during the holidays to help them gain confidence.

# THINGS THAT DON'T HELP

01

## SHOWING YOUR KIDS THAT YOU ARE WORRIED

Lots of parents feel worried when their kids are starting school. This is completely natural. Try to talk about these concerns with other adults and try not to express your own concerns or worries to or around your child. Even little kids pick up on how other people are feeling and they use this information to understand what is happening and how they should feel. You can help them by modelling focusing on things that will be great about school and how they can manage their worries.

02

## DRAWN OUT GOODBYES

This is very tricky when you have an upset child but try to make your goodbyes at school as predictable and normal as you can- regardless of their reaction. You can let the teacher know you think they will be upset beforehand. When you arrive, go through your goodbye routine with a hug and kiss, then hand them over to the teacher and leave. This sends a message to your child that you know they are safe at school and you are confident in their ability to cope. Ask the teacher to call if they are still upset in half an hour. You could also tell the teacher about the calming activities you have practised together at home. Most kids settle very quickly once their parent has left and the exciting activities begin.

## GETTING HELP

Regardless of how severe (or mild) your child's challenges transitioning to school are, You do not have to manage alone.

There are a range of services and resources you can use on the next page.

A few things that indicate that involving a professional (e.g. psychologist or paediatrician) might be important:

1. Your child's reaction to being left at school or general worries do not improve after a few weeks of school (or get worse).
2. Your child has additional needs which mean typical strategies are not helping them (such as autism).
3. Your child's anxiety interferes with their ability to participate at school or in activities they usually enjoy at home a few weeks after they've started school.



# RESOURCES

## HELP!

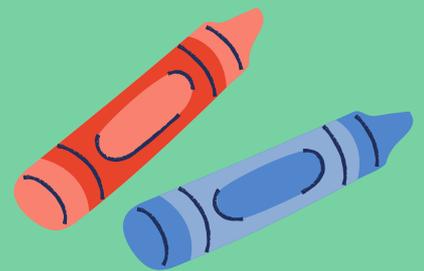
- If you're worried about your child's anxiety, talking to a GP or paediatrician is the best place to start. They can refer you to a child psychologist or psychiatrist if needed. Early childhood teachers also usually have lots of experience with children being anxious at the start of school and might be able to help.
- You can also call [the Ngala Parenting](#) line on 9368 9368 to get information and advice between 8am and 8pm, 7 days a week.

## STORIES

[The School book](#) by Todd Parr  
[Going to School](#) by Usborne first experiences  
[The Invisible string](#) by Patrice Karst  
[Ruby's Worry](#) by Tom Percival

## CALMING ACTIVITIES

[Belly buddy breathing](#)  
[Flower and Candle Breathing](#)  
[Muscle relaxation](#)



## HANDY APPS

- 'Go Noodle' app - once in the app you can select the junior version. It contains a range of relaxation activities as well as general mental and physical health activities for little kids.
- Sesame street 'Breathe' app- in the app your child navigates through a game where they learn to breathe deeply and problem solve when upset.

## MORE INFORMATION

[Coping with BACK-TO-SCHOOL anxiety](#) by Anxiety Canada (there are lots of great resources about childhood anxiety here)  
[Back to School anxiety](#) by the Child Mind Institute  
[Anxiety](#) by Beyond Blue families