

Sidestep the Scariness of School

by: June Allan Corrigan

New beginnings are exciting but often nerve-wracking so don't be surprised if your child seems a little jittery during the first few weeks of school. You might expect it, especially if it's their first foray into the academic world but sometimes you'll find returning students are just as apprehensive. Not to worry, there are simple steps you can take to assure that both first timers and veterans alike slide smoothly into class.

Get back to basics

While you wonder if your child will succeed in the coming year, he may have more elementary things on his mind. "It's really the same set of basic fears that all of us encounter when we go someplace new or make a transition," says Mary Ann Rafoth, Ph.D, chair of the department and educational and school psychology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, in Indiana, Pennsylvania. Things like worrying about what door to go in or where the bathroom is, progressing to wondering who they will eat lunch with or whether they'll like their new teacher. By addressing these simple issues, you can go a long way towards relieving your child's uneasiness.

The BIG Building

Navigating a new and unfamiliar place can prove daunting to anyone. Don't let a sprawling campus prompt your child into thinking he'll get lost. A tour may have been provided on orientation day but if your child is still feeling a little shaky about specific routes, maybe you could meet up with him before or after school and let him show *you* around. Have him point out the bathrooms and the water fountains. And don't forget fun areas, like the playground or gym, the library and any special art, music or science rooms. This role reversal should boost his confidence and make him feel secure in his knowledge of the layout.

The Bathroom

Kindergartners and first-graders, in particular, are apt to be a little nervous about bathroom protocol. Its location may be firmly established in their minds but maybe it's some other little detail that's hanging them up. Does yours know how to operate the lock on the stall or pull paper towels out of the dispenser? Is he taking advantage of regularly scheduled visits? Has he learned his classroom's silent hand signal when nature simply can't wait? Ask your child these questions and prompt him in turn to ask his teacher for help should there be any gray areas. And to make the whole process easier, Calgary mom and former 1st grade teacher Christine Sazie advises dressing your child in easy off elastic-waist pants - no belts please! She also recommends sending an extra set of clothes to school in the event of a potty mishap or vomiting.

The Cafeteria

Many children, no matter what grade level, approach the lunch room with some apprehension. They worry over how to navigate the lunch line, where to sit, and what if they don't like the food? To give a true novice more practice in a cafeteria-style setting, plan a family outing to a similar type restaurant. Show her how it works: taking a tray, silverware and selecting foods while making one's way down the line. When it comes to the food choices themselves, check the menu ahead of time. Most schools send home a print-out of a month's meals in advance and now it's often found online. If nothing sounds appetizing, you can always fall back on a home-packed lunch. Be sure to include her favorites in easy-to-open containers. As for the matter of seating, most schools in the interest of keeping order cause grade levels to sit together. Find out if she's following directions to sit with her class. In those first few weeks that can bestow a sense of belonging. Some seat shuffling may occur later as friendships are established but it's unlikely she'll be left standing with a tray and nowhere to sit.

The Locker Room

It could be a cubby or simply a hook or maybe even a full-blown locker but the proverbial 'place to hang one's hat' definitely makes a child feel part of the club.....er, school. In the case of older kids wrestling with a combination locker for the very first time, definitely have them practice working the sequence of numbers until they can open and close the latch without any problem, advises Dr. Rafoth. "It's pretty stressful for a kid to hear the class bell ring and still be fumbling with his lock!" As for younger kids, make sure they recognize their assigned storage space. The savvy teacher will have gotten busy with the label-maker and you should as well. "It really helps if parents label their children's outerwear - especially backpacks - because invariably two kids have the same one," says Sazie.

The Big Yellow Bus

Travel time can be the most stressful of all school experiences, especially to the uninitiated. Have an older sibling or responsible neighborhood kid keep an eye on the new bus rider in your family and escort him to class until he knows the way himself. As for the return trip, make sure he seeks out assigned yard duty personnel if he has any doubts about which bus to board. If he's not wearing a name tag already make sure he gets one with his bus route clearly marked to avoid mix-ups. Even so it's good idea to create a plan of action in the event he does get lost, Dr. Rafoth cautions. "Teach him his room number and teacher's name, the name of his bus stop, and have him practice how to ask a grown-up for directions."

The New Teacher

There's a new role model stepping into your child's life and as with everything, there's fear of the unknown. When presented with the classroom rules, some children worry they'll trip up and get into trouble. Remind your student that many of her new teacher's rules - no interrupting, no back talk, no hitting, no yelling - are the same ones she already follows at home. Also point out that most teachers chose their profession because they genuinely like kids! Consider taking a photo of your child with her new teacher. Post it on the fridge at home to foster a sense of familiarity.

Side into a discussion about school during down time with your child. Get a feel for anything that's troubling him. You'll find it's easy to put his mind at rest about often innocuous things with a just little preparation and encouragement.