



Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

Mental Health Quick Notes

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Back to School

Q. How do I support my children as they start a new school year? I have a child entering kindergarten and one going to middle school. Both of them seem to be a little more irritable lately and my kindergartener is having trouble going to sleep at night?

R. Nothing creates more anxiety in a parent than watching their children as they struggle to make a big transition. It's difficult to see them doubt and question themselves. It is equally hard to send them into an environment in which we are unsure of how they will be received. Parents know that they do not have total control over their children's school environment. They can make suggestions to the school about what type of classroom they would flourish in, but a mismatch between teacher and student can still occur. They can try to prepare their children by attending the school open houses and locating classmates in their new school, but children can still be scared about the unknown.

The question becomes how do parents prepare their children for this and other big transitions knowing that they have limited control and children must essentially do it on their own? How do we send them to school in a good frame of mind and ready to learn? How do we handle complaints about teachers and fellow students? How do we handle the initial transition to doing homework and getting up in time?

An overall goal that parents should have in preparing their children for the next school year is to create in them a sense of strength and resilience that gives them relative certainty that they can effectively face challenges that

come their way. "Easier said than done", you must be thinking. That is absolutely correct, this is the hard part of parenting, creating, self-reliance and not giving your children all the answers. Children who aren't empowered to think on their own can show less initiative in and out of the classroom and have less problem-solving skills. Let's get more specific.

What if your children begin to state that they do not want to go to school, or begin to not sleep well or become more argumentative than usual close to school starting. Concerns before the start of school are normal and are the result of anxieties about last year's experience, excessive expectations by parents or teachers or anxieties in separating from parents. But how do you figure out for sure what is wrong?

The attitude that parents have in asking the child a question is as important as the words that they choose. An attitude that conveys respect for the child's struggle and the belief that children have the resources to solve the problem is a major step in creating a self-reliant child. So something on the lines of "I know you have a big change coming up in starting a new school and big changes make almost anyone a little concerned. What has been on your mind about returning to school?" might pave the way to start a good conversation.

Once children have started talking about their concerns another hurdle presents itself. How do we help them figure out a way to move from feelings to problem-solving behaviors and how do we stay out of the business of solving all their problems? Statements like: "If I were you I would call all your friends and plan to meet before the first day" or "You'll be OK, millions of kids have started 6th grade and

none of died from it" denies the children's ability to problem solve. This can be a leap of faith which parents must make in turning struggles back to their children. A question that conveys trust in the children's abilities could be, "What do you think might make you feel braver about starting a new school year?". Does this mean that parents should never give their children information? Granted, parents have more information than children do on almost every subject but parents must also weigh the question in their head, "Is this information something that they can find themselves and is it more important for them to problem solve at this moment than to feel instantly relieved?"

A second area of concern exists when parents detect a problem once school has started. Children may come home complaining about a teacher or a fellow student. This is an area where parents have the tendency to either react too quickly ("Well, I'm calling that teacher because she has no right to treat you that way") or minimize the problem ("When I was a kid there where always kids like that on the playground. Can't you just ignore him?"). Both responses although they are not outrageous, do not show empathy for the child's problem or lay the ground work for critical thinking. Instead a parent may try, "So, Nathan hit you in the middle of back and ran away and then you cried by yourself. You must have felt lonely and maybe a little angry? What do you think you should do if that happens again?"

School challenges kids in areas of organization and negotiating the rules of their new environment. Recording assignments, transporting materials back and forth from school, getting to bed on time and up in the morning, and homework all test a child's organizational skills.

The old adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is very useful in organizational issues with

your child and school. Planning ahead can entail anything from a casual discussion with children about how they are going to organize themselves, to a contract of charting the completion of morning duties for the first couple of weeks, to the shopping for organizational supplies with the child devising the shopping list (parents are in charge of the budget).

But what if the organizational tool you have selected doesn't work? For instance, you have determined that the child will pick out her clothes the night before school to keep her on time and each morning she wants to change her mind and wear something different. As angry as this scenario may make you, you need to go back to the child and help them to problem solve the situation ("Jessica, it looks like you are having trouble sticking to the outfit you selected last night. Tell me how the system we have set up does not suit your needs. You also must understand that I have very little time to talk to you about clothes in the morning. Do you have any ideas how you could wear what you want and I can be on time?) Parents are often skeptical of letting their kids in on the decision making on these day-to-day challenges even when the badgering, yelling and pleading is not working. Although allowing your children to solve their own problems is not foolproof and takes more time than laying down the law, it gives them a lot of good practice in learning how to think critically which leads to more success in school and in the world.

Submitted by: Tracy M. Richards,

Much education today is monumentally ineffective. All too often we are giving young people cut flowers when we should be teaching them to grow their own plants— John W. Gardner

Back to School cont.

Q. Are there specific developmental concerns that should be kept in mind as children make a big transition in school?

R. There are three major transitions children must face in school as they progress from the elementary years through college: 1) kindergarten to grade school; 2) grade school to middle school; and 3) middle school to high school. These transitions have some factors that are unique to each phase and some that are common.

The common factors include parental involvement with each child, school, and change. The alignment of expectations of the child and parents with the developmental capabilities of the child should also be considered. These developmental capabilities not only include the child's intellectual capabilities, but also his or her emotional, psychological, social and family cultural capabilities and how these match or interact with the school, program, or grade level the child will be starting. The more a parent is involved in the transitions, the smoother the transitions will be. Parents can become involved by attending spring orientation events with their child at the new school so the child and parent can meet the teachers. They can stay involved by attending PTA meetings and parent/teacher conferences. As a child moves through adolescence into high school, the parent should encourage, but not expect, more independence in the transition. Being realistic about your child's developmental, intellectual, social, psychological, and emotional level is critical for the child's success at all levels of transition.

Kindergarteners will need to feel safe and part of the new school. The big concerns will be the child's ability to cooperate with the teacher, other children, and the child's readiness to learn. This is where family culture comes into play, such as having an established rou-

tine of reading to the children, training the children to deal with frustrations, teaching them to cooperate with others, and helping them learn to identify their personal belongings.

The transition to middle school also marks the beginning of adolescence. Schools will generally be bigger and students from many elementary schools may now be combined. Classes will be harder and students will be expected to be more self-motivated. There will also be more social pressures from peers, bullying from older students, conflicts with teachers, and increased disciplining.

Connecting with a new peer group - one the student feels comfortable with - is going to be complicated by the emerging changes the student is experiencing, and a new level of feelings for members of the opposite sex. The coping skills learned from the family culture will be critical at this time. If a student does not feel he or she fits in within approximately two months or so, they may need some type of mental health treatment to help in their transition. Treatment may help prevent some students from coping with this peer rejection by using drugs or alcohol and it may support them in selecting a new positive peer group.

Adolescents should be encouraged in their self-discovery during this time. Parents can contribute by periodically reviewing their child's strengths and weaknesses with them from the age of 10-11 onward. Together they can work on shortcomings, collaboration, and communication. Adolescents in this transition want to feel like part of a group. Encourage their skill training and social-emotional learning by helping them find a role and purpose with others with the same interests such as sports or band, saving the environment, working with the elderly, or by encouraging personal interests such as writing, painting, drawing, or computers.

The transition from middle school can be a difficult one for parents. For the child, it is time when peers and their view become ever more important. Continue the process of reviewing emerging strengths and weaknesses with your children but begin, if you have not already talking with them about the future. This does not mean

obsessing about grades needed to get in a good school or allowing the child to compare himself to sports figures or rock stars. Instead focus on authentic, real people you both know and the hard work they put into getting where they are. Also, it would be a good idea if parents talked to their children about the joys and downsides of their own careers.

Children should try different volunteer experiences, sports, music, and hobbies and will probably show an interest in certain areas. Changing their minds is OK!!

Children in this transition of late adolescence should continue to strengthen and develop coping strategies that began in the first transition to grade school. Encourage them to brainstorm over problems, think critically, and resolve conflicts. Parents are the teachers and role models for many of these skills.

Children learn responsibility during this period, so encourage them to have a part-time job or an after-school activity. This is as important as having responsibilities around the house. This may mean a teenager must limit their leisure activities and computer time, but it also means that parents should not overindulge their kids with opulent possessions, spectacular vacations, or programmed activities that create an unrealistic view of adulthood. Early stages in careers will burst this protected sphere.

Through all these transitions remember to normalize your children's anxieties with the change, but encourage them to discuss it on a regular basis from an early age. This will build trust, communication skills, and cooperation.

Submitted by: William Dietrich, MA

Resources

Faber, A., & Mazlish, E. (1980). *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Avon Books.

Elkind, D. (1985). *The Hurried Child*, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

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