



by Karen Stephens

# Back-to-School Transition: Helping Kids Make the Adjustment

The yearly back-to-school ritual is invigorating. The newness of it all! It's like a fresh start.

While the start of school brims with potential, for children it also brings a bag chock-full of mixed emotions. Children's feelings are even more complex if entering a new school and/or early childhood program.

Whatever kids experience, parents can help them manage and adjust. But it takes empathy, patience, energy, and good old-fashioned consistent communication.

Below I've listed feelings kids are up against at school start-up. You know your kids best, so anticipate which emotions they're likely experience. That reflection will help you choose ways to guide and support them through their adjustment.

## **School children may feel:**

- *Delighted:* to be with peers; to see former teachers; to have a fresh schedule.
- *Excited:* to have a new classroom; to break in new supplies; to have new clothes.
- *Optimistic:* that life will be more interesting; that a year of new adventures awaits.
- *Relieved:* to have their own school life to focus on again.
- *Protected:* from parental fights; from neighborhood violence not tolerated at school.
- *Anxious:* about the new teacher's expectations; about new rules; about finding the way around; about being popular.
- *Lonely:* for you, siblings, neighbors, and relaxing summer days together.
- *Curious:* about new classes; about trying out for sports; about who's new and who's moved.
- *Driven:* to perform; to succeed; to be perfect; to fit in; to conform.
- *Pressured:* to get it right; to make the grade; to excel; to learn quickly.
- *Worried:* about not making the grade; about making dumb mistakes; about inadequacy.
- *Wary:* of looking stupid; of failing; of losing face; of letting you down.
- *Over-eager:* to please; to blend in; to be accepted at too high a price.
- *Embarrassed:* about body changes, such as weight or acne of pre-adolescents.
- *Skeptical:* of double standards applied to students versus teachers; of the reliability of old friendships.
- *Disloyal:* for liking new teachers as much as last year's; for having less time for old friends as new friendships blossom.
- *Scared:* of being bullied; of being the class "nerd"; of messing up in front of everyone.

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- *Insecure*: about gang temptations and all it entails, such as talk about drugs, sex, and risky dares.
- *Vulnerable*: to teachers or coaches who may pick on them; to peers who tease mercilessly.
- *Terrified*: of the threat of random violence, such as shootings or bomb threats.

Obviously, the social nature of school can tax kids' emotional stamina. That stress undermines their ability to focus on learning. But we don't need to abandon children to wallow in an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Kids can gradually learn to cope with stress, even stresses you wish children never had to face.

Parents are "front line" advocates who help kids learn how to cope with life's fixed realities — like school start-up. The best and simplest way to do that begins with good communication. It must be consistent, honest, and unending. You don't even have to give advice. Simply listening to kids is very supportive. Sometimes kids just need the chance to state their feelings out loud. It helps reduce the power the feelings have over them, and it can move kids past stumbling blocks onto problem solving.

I bet you're shaking your head and groaning: "I try to listen all the time, but my kid just won't open up." I know what you mean. At one time or another all of us have asked, "What did you do at school today?" The response is a disinterested, ho-hum "Nuthin'." Or worse, the defensive pre-teen responds with, "What, are you checkin' up on me?"

If you've felt defeated in your communication attempts, don't lose heart. Kids will communicate. They just don't respond well to straightforward questions. So why not try tact?

At the school day's end, hold off with questions. Let your children know how glad you are to see them: "Oh, it's good to see you! I've missed you all day long." Nonverbal communication helps, too; a quick hug and kiss — not the smothering kind.

If you do ask questions, phrase them so they *can't* be answered with just a yes or no. "Did you have a good time at school today?" doesn't get much communication mileage. Open-ended questions invite children to elaborate on thoughts and feelings. Questions such as, "What frustrated you today?" "What was the most boring thing today?" "Who did you play with/hang around with today?" "What surprised or confused you today?"

The goal of communication is for both parent and child to connect and feel understood. This does **not** mean you have to agree with everything and anything your child says. However, parents who hear children out before jumping to conclusions or accusations are more likely to keep communication going.

When children talk, listen for specific feelings. Consider comments thoughtfully and then respond with empathy and compassion. Avoid the knee-jerk temptation to lecture and alienate the minute you hear something you don't like.

Imagine your school-age child complains about having to stop playing a game outside to go back to schoolwork just as her team was winning. Do these responses sound reasonable? **Express empathy**: "It's hard to stop something you're really enjoying to go inside for schoolwork." **Respond to a feeling**: "Oh, how maddening to feel so close to winning and then have it slip away!" **Share a childhood memory**: "I remember being sad about less time to play games when I went back to school. School can be hard work." **Respond with humor**: "Wouldn't it be fun to be the boss of the world and get to do whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted?"

Those responses encourage dialogue. But *not one* of the comments said outdoor play should be longer, nor do they say schoolwork isn't important. The responses simply recognize that we all struggle with adjusting to schedules and routines — especially when we don't get to make them. It's a fact of life. We learn to deal with it, but we don't have to be overjoyed about it.

Being able to identify, verbalize, and cope with a wide array of feelings will help children through all facets of life. More than anywhere else, those communication skills are learned in the home. Parents really are teachers!

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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