

## School anxiety?

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(HealthNewsDigest.com) - Did you know that anxiety issues are the most common mental health disorders in children? There are an estimated 18 million children and teens who suffer from anxiety. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that 25 percent of teenagers have issues of anxiety, and the statistics don't take into account the young people who are undiagnosed or don't reach out for help. (credit [sheknows.com](http://sheknows.com)) Because the start of a new school year can trigger or worsen anxiety in stressed-out children and teens, **NYC Licensed Neuropsychologist and School Psychologist Dr. Sanam Hafeez offers the following tips for parents to help ease**

**back-to-school anxiety for their kids.**

### **Start Early**

Over the summer, most families take their cues from the sun and stay up later. While it may be tempting to keep the late-night fun going up until the end, starting your school routine a few weeks early can help ease the transition back to school. Starting two to three weeks before the advent of school, begin going to bed and getting up close to when you need to for school, and try to eat on a more regular schedule as well. This advice isn't just for little kids -- teens and adults need quality sleep for proper functioning as well, and getting your schedule straight now will help ensure that you all start the school year off more prepared and don't feel as much anxiety over the advent of that first day.

### **Give your child a preview**

Talk to your child about what they're going to be doing in the upcoming school year. If your child is starting school for the first time, see if there's a kindergarten orientation or a way to meet their teacher before school begins. Whether they're starting a new elementary school or going back to the same one, go explore it with your child. Review where their class will be, visit the cafeteria, the library or the art room. Take them to the playground (with a friend who'll be going to their school, if possible) to help them get adjusted and feel comfortable at the school. Give your child a "preview" of the new faces and places they'll be seeing. This can help to "right size" the school in your child's mind and take the fear and mystery out of it.

### **Shopping together for school supplies**

Shopping together for school supplies, and using the shopping trip as a time to talk about what to expect at school, can be a healthy way to keep a child talking. Parents should also try to connect

their child with future classmates. "If a child knows someone who is going to be in the same classroom, that can greatly reduce their apprehension and fear of the unknown," says Dr. Hafeez.

### **Facilitate friendships.**

Help prepare kids for school-year socializing by arranging a couple of playdates with classmates and reminding them that they'll be seeing their familiar school friends again soon.

### **Talk up the positives**

Field trips, old friends, new classes, sporting events, after-school activities. There's plenty to get fired up about! Remind your child and the enthusiasm will be contagious.

### **Sick of School-Literally**

Nervousness over heading back to class can make kids feel sick. They may complain of stomachaches, headaches, nausea and dizziness, especially on Sunday evenings after feeling well all weekend. If you observe potential symptoms of stress as the start of school approaches, Dr. Hafeez suggests having a candid conversation with your child. "Don't just accept 'fine' if you ask your child, 'How are you?' or, 'How was your day?' Ask questions that can't be answered 'yes or no,' like, 'How do you feel about going back to school?' Then, let them talk, and don't try to fix what they say."

### **When anxiety about school "masks" something else**

Kids of any age who don't want to go to school, or avoid it, may be doing so because of a specific issue beyond general anxiety, worry or depression, notes Dr. Hafeez. "Children who are bullied or teased often become anxious about going to school, and if the problem is not addressed, the anxiety will continue along with a host of other problems," she says. "Similarly, children who are avoiding school may be doing so because school is hard for them - school anxiety many times emerges just before a child is diagnosed with a learning difficulty."

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Dr. Sanam Hafeez is a New York City based Neuro-psychologist and School Psychologist. She is also the founder and director of **Comprehensive Consultation Psychological Services, P.C.** She is currently a teaching faculty member at Columbia University.

Dr. Hafeez graduated from Queens College, CUNY with a BA in psychology. She then went on to earn her Master of Science in Psychology at Hofstra University. Following that she stayed at Hofstra to receive her Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) She later completed her post-doctoral training in Neuropsychology and Developmental Pediatrics at Coney Island Hospital.