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The information and techniques offered in this excerpt should not be used as a replacement for guidance, consultation, assessment or treatment by a qualified mental health professional.

### ***Back- to-school anxiety***

The prospect of returning to school after a long hiatus is both exciting and anxiety provoking for children. “Back-to-school anxiety” is a universal and ubiquitous experience that can range in severity from “butterflies in the tummy” to panic. Separation fears may resurface for some children. Most children overcome this form of anxiety with reassurance, repetition and familiarity.

#### **Parents can help in the following ways:**

- Normalize the experience. Let the child know that he is not alone and that other children and adults have similar experiences.
- Provide reasonable reassurance and nurturing.
- Explain *anticipatory anxiety*—“*You worry about it more before it happens and less once it actually happens.*”
- Use the *Feeling Thermometer* as an index of intensity and change in emotions.
- Remove uncertainty—describe the specifics of what the child might expect at school.
- Explain that anxiety will decrease with time and familiarity; each day will be easier.
- Take the opportunity to visit the school, classroom or teacher in advance if possible.
- Dispel myths and misconceptions about the school, teacher or peers; provide facts.
- Get the child into a predictable routine of bedtimes and mealtimes that are consistent with the school routine the week before school starts.
- Allow the child to take an appropriate “transitional object” such as a small and unobtrusive soft toy to school for comfort, familiarity and security.
- Use role-play to prepare the child for school-related activities such as riding the school bus, entering the school, finding the locker, greeting teachers and peers.
- Set a positive example; role model the behavior the child is expected to learn.

#### **Teachers can help in the following ways:**

- Provide parents with strategies for preparing the child for school and the classroom.
- Provide a warm and inviting classroom environment.
- Have an organized and predictable routine.

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- Allow the child to arrive early to have time to adapt and separate from the parent.
- Plan for easy, interesting “warm-up” activities to start the day.
- Prepare the child in advance for what to expect; remove surprises and unknowns.
- Use the *Feeling Thermometer* as an index of intensity and change in emotions.
- Alternate between energetic and quiet activities, to reduce over- or under-stimulation.
- Define clear areas of the classroom for different types of activities.
- Make classroom arrangements simple for smooth transitions.
- Ease transitions by giving advance notice, explaining the purpose and process of the transition, and describing what is involved in the next activity.
- Provide easily accessible incentives, rewards and other positives in the classroom.
- Provide a modified schedule if necessary.
- Encourage inclusive group activities.
- Eliminate pressure-inducing demands and expectations from the classroom.
- Foster acceptance and tolerance; prevent teasing.
- Set a positive example; role model the behavior the child is expected to learn.

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