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Back to Cool

Fighting Off That Queasy 'I Don't Want to Go' Feeling

* Behavior: Youngsters often don't like to talk about school woes, but alert parents can detect signs of trouble. Talking regularly to teachers also helps.
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Home Edition Life & Style Part E Page 2 View Desk
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One day, Suzy won't move from your side, the next, she won't be seen with you. One year, you worry Jack won't fit in, then you worry when he does--with the wrong crowd. And just when you think things are going swimmingly and it's safe to breathe, the teacher or, worse, the principal calls with news to the contrary.

Ah, school days. Harder than ever on the old emotions. The first weeks of school are the toughest, says Michael Hass, assistant professor of education and coordinator of counseling and school psychology for Chapman University in Orange. "Kids are not only going from the unstructured days of summer back to the highly structured days of school, but they are also stepping up a grade level."

"We see a lot more stomachaches in the beginning of the year," says Kay Ostensen, a psychologist and counselor for the Laguna Beach School District, who encourages parents to do what they can--short of letting kids stay home--to ease the transition. "School phobia always gets worse when kids stay home," she says.

What can parents do to soften the psychological blows? Develop a good relationship with the teacher, understand the stages of your child's development and get your kids to talk, say the experts. Start the year off right by getting to know the teacher.

"Don't wait until the teacher calls you with a problem," says Mary Pat Kelly, a Laguna Beach clinical psychologist and former schoolteacher. "I'm not saying you have to be room mom, but a hello in September, a call in October and a monthly check-in will make the teacher more likely to tell you about a small concern before it becomes big."

For openers, ask the teacher what the academic and behavioral goals

for the year are, so you can raise the bar at home. Share specific goals you have in mind for your child. Tell the teacher if you're working with Jane at home on, say, following through with projects. Knowing this, the teacher may not only be less likely to brand your child as difficult when she doesn't finish an assignment, but will also be more likely to work with Jane, knowing the effort will be backed up at home.

Let your child's teacher know when there's a problem at home. Moving, divorce, a new sibling, financial struggles, a parent losing a job, death or illness usually show up one way or another at school, says behavioral pediatrician Debbie Rubin of Woodland Hills. Young children generally get more needy, and older ones become more withdrawn. Alerting teachers can help them better understand and accommodate a drop in performance or a change in behavior.

Understanding what kids are up against developmentally may also help parents help their children. Pressures change with each developmental age. From preschool to second grade, the biggest issue is separation. Separating is not just the child's issue, but the mother's too, says Rubin. From third through sixth grade, children begin to compare themselves to their peers and become concerned with how they're doing academically, athletically or socially. Kids in middle school also begin to form groups and may struggle to fit in.

By junior high or middle school, peers mean everything. "A child's self-evaluation has so much to do with what peers say, and peers can be very hurtful," says Ostensen. This is also the time kids are likely to run into early experiences with sex and drugs. "What they learned in the DARE [anti-drug] program in fifth and sixth grade has to be lived out in junior high, where the issues don't appear so black and white," says Ostensen. Later, teens struggle with a whole new battlefield of issues, many of which they must sort out themselves. Pressure to succeed academically increases while youths struggle with the dual goals of becoming an individual and belonging.

Through all these stages, getting your children to talk is key to helping them move through their problems. This is tricky because, in general, younger children who are more open are less verbal. Then, as kids develop the language to express their feelings, by age 10 or 11, they also begin to keep more to themselves. By the time they're teens, ask them what's wrong and they're apt to say, "Nothing."

When asked about their day, even very young kids often won't tell you. But don't be alarmed, says Rubin. "It's really a boost for them to have a world that's all theirs that they want to be quiet about. Find out about your child's day from the teacher instead."

Also remember that children tend to share information in pieces, says Ostensen. A piece one day, another the next. You have to keep your antennae up and build the puzzle.

As kids get older, tune in for what Hass calls throw-out lines like, "My reading teacher is really stupid" or "That class is really boring." "Boring," he says, is a great stand-in word for lots of feelings like anger, frustration and anxiety. "It means the child's feeling detached and wants to remove himself for any number of reasons."

Also realize that when you pursue one of your child's loaded lines, you might get her to talk for a minute, but that's all you'll get, says Hass. "Parents usually want to talk about the problem for five minutes. That's way too long and they wind up chasing the kid all over the house, prying and annoying the kid. Resist and come back to the subject later when it's less charged."

When kids do open up, be careful not to heap on advice, says Hass. "As parents, we want to offer suggestions, but we also want our kids to take responsibility and work things through on their own."

"It's easy for us to see why they got themselves into the mess they're in," he says, "but when we try to point that out, they take it as blame or criticism." Better to act curious and be neutral: "So what are you going to do about that (insert adjective) music teacher?"

Hass remembers approaching his son once after being called by his teacher about some not-so-model behavior. "I simply told him, 'I don't care how you do it, but I don't want to hear from Mrs. Jones again.' And I didn't."

"If there's something unpleasant they must talk to you about," says Ostensen, "say a bad citizenship grade, tell them they don't have to discuss it that moment, but that you want to talk about it before the weekend."

"Sometimes you have to hold your breath and accept the quiet times," she says. "If you know your child is going through a hard time at school, it's time for a note in the lunch box to show you care."

And when you've come to the point at which you think your kids aren't listening anymore, don't lose hope. "Parents often feel their words are being lost and overwhelmed by the influences of peers and television," says Ostensen. "While it's true that children are sexualized at a very young age and exposed to a tremendous amount of violence, it's still

heartening to learn that studies continue to show the No. 1 influence in children's lives is their parents."

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Here are more ways that experts say parents can soften the psychological and emotional blows school can inflict on kids:

* Don't get defensive when you've found out Johnny's been bad, says Kelly. Instead, gather information and give the teacher the benefit of the doubt. When kids are in trouble, they almost always present the situation as if it weren't their fault. Parents like to believe that, to everyone's detriment.

* Encourage kids to describe their social interactions at school and analyze them, says Kelly. Ask what do their peers think is important. Power? Appearance? Popularity? Integrity? Kindness? What do you agree with? Who's like you? This helps children develop insight and social judgment.

* In cases of joint-custody divorce, work to unify goals. "Divorced parents may disagree on a lot, but they generally both want what's best for their kids," Kelly says. Before school starts, parents should discuss what they think their child needs to work on and what each parent will do about it."

* If you and your child don't like the teacher, make the best of it. If the dislike is extreme, request a change. Otherwise, use the experience to teach your child that all through life you run up against different people.

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