

## **Back to School Stress**

By Dr David Lewis

September can be a miserable month for children and parents.

As the new school year begins, your child will either be starting school; moving to a new school or going up a form. All these changes are stressful and can lead to a bad dose of the back to school stress. The three main causes are:

1] Separation Anxiety: Especially for a child just starting school. Don't worry if there are tears on parting or be surprised if you too have moist eyes. Studies suggest 85% of children cry when school starts and 25% remain tearful when a new term begins even at the age of eleven.

Such anxiety can also express itself as anger. You may notice a greater readiness to squabble or a return to the temper tantrums of the terrible twos. Do not worry about mood swings during the first few weeks of term. Stay calm and refuse to rise to the bait. By turning a blind eye to minor misbehaviour you can hasten your child's emotional adjustment. If starting school for the first time, be sure he, or she, understands the purpose of lessons. Some children, baffled and confused by the disagreeable new ritual, conclude it's a punishment for being naughty!

This only adds to the new school blues by making them feel either guilty or the victims of injustice. Never tease or scold a tearful child. Apart from causing needless distress, such a response merely deepens their depression. On parting at the school gate, make your goodbye brief and not overly affectionate. Give him a quick cuddle then, having made sure he's safely inside the school gates, walk briskly away without glancing back.

When taking an anxious child to school for the first time, describe what you will be doing during the day. Many children are reluctant to go to school from concern over what will happen at home in their absence. Never distract your child from thinking about school by describing all the interesting things you'll be doing together after class. Diverting attention from lessons makes them seem like a disagreeable intrusion rather than an essential and rewarding, part of your child's life. With older children, encourage a discussion of what he, or she, will be doing in school. Chatting about lessons and out of class activities makes unfamiliar challenges less intimidating.

Develop a routine at home that includes set periods for reading, drawing and playing. Following a family schedule makes it easier for children starting school to do things at specified times in form. It also establishes the discipline of studying at set times, especially vital when homework and exam revision starts.

2] Intellectual Demands: These are especially noticeable when changing from primary to middle school. Suddenly your child finds a play-learning atmosphere has given way to demanding and structured formal lessons. Equally stressful can be the move from middle to secondary education, as children confront the prospect of continuous assessment and examinations. Help by appreciating that even clever, hard working, children can have difficulty in making the adjustment.

Be prepared, at first, for lower marks and poorer grades. If this should happen never accuse your child of being lazy or not trying hard enough. Offer support and reassurance together with any practical help you can offer in sorting out misunderstandings and resolving confusions. Encourage thinking aloud while solving problems as this enhances reasoning while making it easier for you pinpoint misunderstandings and errors. But be sure to keep the atmosphere relaxed and friendly during such sessions.

When criticising your child's schoolwork, always comment favourably on all the positive aspects before pointing out any weaknesses or errors.

3] Social Pressures: Although some youngsters have no little difficulty settling into a new school or different class, others need a great deal of support while settling down. Mixing with unfamiliar children and often having to make new friends can be a major cause of anxiety and stress for children who are less confidence or outgoing than others.

Help by encouraging your child to play and co-operating with others from an early age. Keep open house for his, or her, school friends and encourage visits to their homes. Be alert for signs of bullying and take immediate steps to put matters right by visiting the school and communicating your concerns to his or her form teacher. If you child's initial score on the stress test below with low but, after a few days or weeks, increases significantly take this as a warning sign that something may be wrong. Use my advice on Positive Listening ( article available from [www.askddavid.co.uk/ Family Matters](http://www.askddavid.co.uk/FamilyMatters)) to encourage confidences to be shared. But be careful not to make matters worse for your child by acting too hastily or without getting your facts straight.

### Is Your Child Stressed by Starting School?

Score as follows for each of the six descriptions: Very True =3; True to Some Extent = 2; Not True At All = 1.

When term starts my child becomes:

- (1) Tearful
- (2) Angry
- (3) Sulky
- (4) Withdrawn
- (5) Moody
- (6) Apathetic

He, or she, suffers:

- (1) Nightmares
- (2) Tummy upsets
- (3) Disturbed sleep
- (4) Loss of appetite
- (5) Lack of energy
- (6) Headaches

Score: 12 - 15 Low stress.

16 - 26 Moderate stress.

27 - 36 High Stress

End