

Health Tips for Parents

SEPTEMBER 2012 | VOLUME 86

How can I help my child with school-related anxiety?

While some anxiety is normal, as many as 20 percent of children ages 6-17 experience anxiety that is serious enough or persists long enough to cause problems at home, at school or with friends.



The end of summer vacation and return of to school causes many children to experience anxiety, an unpleasant sense of apprehension that can be accompanied by stomachaches, headaches and restlessness. For most children, the discomfort dissipates within a couple of weeks as they become re-accustomed to the demands of school.



Symptoms of serious anxiety vary from child to child, but may include fearful or negative attitudes about school, an inability to complete homework or schoolwork, feigning illness to avoid going to school, and unusual amounts of tearfulness, sleeplessness, irritability or anger. “Most, if not all, kids are going to experience some level of anxiety or uncertainty about

returning to school because it’s something new,” says John Piacentini, Ph.D., director of the Child, OCD, Anxiety and Tic Disorders Program at the Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital at UCLA. “While many will be able to get through it just fine, there is a proportion of kids who are going to have more difficulty.”

Children with school-related anxiety often improve when parents take the time to talk to them about their feelings, encourage helpful routines that reduce stress and ensure they have a healthy balance of physical activity and sleep.

If a child’s symptoms persist or worsen to the point that the anxiety interferes with social or school activities, a consultation with a mental health professional may be advised, Dr. Piacentini says.

Tips to help reduce school-related anxiety

- Make sure your child eats well, has regular physical activity and gets enough sleep.
- Avoid caffeine.
- Help your child develop good coping strategies by touring the new school or meeting his or her teacher before school starts.
- Allow time to unwind before bedtime by limiting stimulating activities.



How to help

“It’s important for parents to talk to their kids about going back to school and to keep the dialogue going for the first couple of weeks,” Dr. Piacentini says. “Many parents try to make their children feel better by reassuring them their fears are misplaced. It’s actually better for parents to acknowledge their children’s fears and to let them know that other children feel the same way.”

This information is provided courtesy of the pediatricians at Mattel Children’s Hospital UCLA. UCLA Health System pediatricians are conveniently located in your neighborhood. In addition to our Children’s Health Center in Westwood, we have offices in Brentwood, Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica and West Los Angeles. All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional.