

GUEST POST

Guiding Our Children Through School Transitions: Elementary School

Dr. Sharon Sevier | Aug 11, 2014


My daughter recently sent me a picture of my granddaughter when she was two years old. Her comment under the picture was "Tears." I totally understood her, the baby she loved and protected, the one who was so innocent and full of wonder, was about to "graduate" from kindergarten. Where does the time go? I think every parent of a school-age child wishes that they could turn back time. It's hard to think of them leaving the nest and heading off to the school bus on that very first day. We see the kids full of smiles and excitement but behind them we see moms and dads fighting back tears. Sitting here writing this, I fast forward 12 years and see those roles exchanged, the kids fight back tears as they leave home for college while mom and dad are full of smiles and excitement knowing their kids are out of the house for a while. How perspectives change.

Parents and children deal with a number of school transitions throughout life. As parents, we want the best for our kids, and we want them to be happy, successful and fulfilled during their school life. Parents sometimes struggle with how and what to do to make this possibility more of a reality. Here are a few ideas that might keep everyone smiling.

Transitioning into Kindergarten

- Always, ALWAYS talk positively about going to school. Your child will zero in on your emotions and feelings like a homing pigeon headed back after a long flight. Be positive and excited for this new venture.
- Learn the ropes. When your local school has parent meetings about the transition into kindergarten, attend! These opportunities will allow you to meet important school personnel, like the principal, teachers, counselor, and nurse. You will also learn about any before-school activities that may be taking place, as well as important dates.
- Many elementary schools offer a "jump start" program for incoming kindergartners. My best advice would be to make this a priority for your child to attend. These programs allow friendships to begin forming, and they give children a foundation for how school works; the types of things they'll do each day, expected behavior, routines, etc. Find out the dates of these activities early so you can plan your vacation time around them.

Test Anxiety Tips for Children | Cope with Anxiety

 childmind.org/article/tips-for-beating-test-anxiety

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When athletes are called upon to perform in high-pressure situations many of them describe having peaked senses that they use to their advantage. They're able to quiet their minds, zone out the audience, and make the catch. Kids with test anxiety have the opposite reaction.

"Anxiety also has the potential to shut you down," explains neuropsychologist Ken Schuster. "When kids are having test anxiety they can't think clearly, they can't judge things the way they could if they weren't anxious. All of your other abilities get clouded up by anxiety."

Why some kids get test anxiety

There are a number of different reasons why some kids might be more susceptible to anxiety. Test anxiety often goes hand-in-hand with learning issues. Children who have ADHD or a learning disability are often already feeling anxious about school, and when it's time to take a test that sense can be heightened. "If I have ADHD and I am prone to inattention, if I start feeling anxious on top of that I'm going to have a lot more difficulty," notes Dr. Schuster.

Likewise, when a student has a limited amount of time to take a test and knows that he processes things slowly, he's probably going to start feeling anxious.

Kids worried that they won't do well, for whatever reason, are prone to more anxiety. Kids with an anxious temperament who worry about making mistakes or performing in general—from singing in music class to going up to bat at baseball—tend to feel more test anxiety. Kids who believe that they won't do as well in a particular subject—like girls influenced by the stereotype that boys are better at math—may also be more prone to test anxiety in that subject.

Feeling more confident

The common denominator is that if you *think* you aren't going to do well, you're going to feel more anxious going in. "What I have seen when I work with kids who have test anxiety is they tend to say, 'I'm so stupid,' " says psychologist Matt Cruger. "That can't be a helpful mindset to have when taking tests. In a more general way I'm really trying to rehabilitate kids' sense of themselves as competent learners."

Learning strategies to bolster your confidence going into the test is a good approach. Often that starts with changing how you study. Dr. Cruger says that 90% of the students he works with don't have an effective model of studying. "What they end up doing most often is rely on their memory of what they heard in class, or review their notes by reading them over," he says. He helps them try other more active methods that give them more mastery over the material.

Better study strategies

the last page and answer the last question first. "Somehow breaking up the routine seems to be helpful for getting things done," he says. "Other people have told me they do this, too."

– **Practice calming techniques:** Sometimes kids like to bring things like worry stones into tests that they can use almost like a stress ball. Practicing deep breathing and using mindfulness techniques can also be effective.

– **Accept when you don't know something.** Sometimes the best way to manage your anxiety is to accept that you don't know the answer to a question and move on. If you feel like the test was unfair and didn't give you a chance to show your knowledge, you can advocate with the teacher later.

– **Accommodations** Some kids who really struggle with test anxiety may also be eligible for accommodations during test time. For example, some kids might need to get up and take a break during a test if they are really starting to panic and need to calm themselves down. Sometimes kids get more time because they aren't working at an optimal speed because they're experiencing low grade panic throughout the test. Kids may even be eligible for a modified version of the test.

Finding success

Sometimes it can be hard to convince kids to start using new study or test-taking strategies. "You always need to sort of sell kids on the idea of trying something different," warns Dr. Cruger. This can be frustrating for parents and teachers, who only want to help, but Dr. Cruger points out that "Kids are being asked to learn lots and lots of stuff from very well intentioned adults all the time."

If they don't understand the rationale behind a new study method, they probably aren't going to adopt it, so parents and professionals working with kids should be explicit about how a new technique might be helpful.

But when kids start feeling like they've studied well and they know the material and they have strategies to fall back on if they need them, their attitudes going into a test will transform. And having the right attitude is important. "I think the best test-taking mindset is something along the lines of 'I'm a monster, I'm going to kill this test. There's no way I can be fooled or do badly,'" says Dr. Cruger.

- Questions or concerns. During the course of the school year, if you have questions or concerns, please contact the school. You want to have the right information, not rumors. Having the right information allows you to make better decisions. Be careful about listening to the stories or advice of other parents as the needs of their child may not be like the needs of your child. Ask your questions, and don't worry about asking questions. School personnel appreciate it when parents ask clarifying questions. It allows the school the opportunity to give correct information, and it helps to inform your decisions and/or calm your nerves. If something happens in life that may impact your child's school life, let the teacher or school counselor know. They can be prepared to help your child through whatever may be happening, and make school a safe and secure environment for him/her.
- Homework and reading with your child. Start early in setting up a specific time and place for your child to do homework. I'd suggest it be at the same time each day and in someplace where there is no TV or other technological distractions. Your presence should be very noticeable. Let your children know that you are there if they need you but, until they say there's a need, allow your children to do their work on their own. Here's what I've often told parents: "if you step in and do things for your child, the message you may be sending is this: 'honey, I love you but you are not capable.'" We want to empower our children to do things and attempt to do things on their own. If they make a mistake, it's ok. That mistake allows them to re-learn, and it teaches them that they don't have to be perfect. It's ok to make mistakes. One other suggestion on homework is building in a time for you to read to your child and for him/her to read to you as they learn. Even if there is no homework, make reading together an evening event. Choose fun books, and make this a quality time for learning and togetherness. Reading is a critical skill, so the more practice our children get, the better.

I hope these are helpful tips for you! Stay tuned for tips into the world of **middle school!**

*This piece is part of a series examining how parents can help children through school transitions. Check out some of the other posts about **starting middle school**, **transitioning to high school** and **sending kids off to college**.*

About the Author

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