



Looking Forward

Taking our best step forward into the new school year

By Rachel Rosenholtz, LCSW

What is that deep feeling of relief that is beginning to wash over you? Oh yes, school is almost here and for some it has already arrived. The wonderful weeks between school and camp with your children have been just that. Wonderful. At this point, though, you are quite ready to wave goodbye as your children cruise down the road in the big yellow school bus.

You are looking forward, but maybe your child is not. As the first day of school approaches maybe you notice subtle differences in your child. An appetite or sleeping pattern change, perhaps nervousness or restlessness. As much as you may be looking forward to school, your child may not be feeling quite the same way.

How can you help your child?

Set the tone now

Start with getting your child on a structured schedule. During the summer bed times and daily routines can often be described as non-existent. Take advantage now during the short time we have left before school to ease your child back into a healthy routine. Wake up time should be earlier. Your child may be tired and cranky at first without his usual amount of sleep but he will be ready and able to go to sleep earlier at night. Make sure that you stick to a set bed time as much as possible. A well-rested child is a child who can cope better with stress and will be less prone to anxiety. Good nutrition is also an important factor that can make a big difference in how a child deals with stress.

Incorporate school little by little into your daily conversations. This will slowly help your child adjust to the concept of going back to school - something he has not thought about since the beginning of the summer. Involve your child in the preparations for the new school year. Allow him to help pick out his school supplies and clothing. If you send lunches from home, talk with him about what he would like to eat. Kids can't choose whether or not to go to school but this kind of participation can help make school more exciting and something to look forward to.

Spend quality time with your child and encourage her to share her feelings about going back to school. If she expresses anxiety, normalize her fears. Let her know that feeling nervous about going back to school is perfectly normal, but do not rush into providing reassurance that everything will be fine. That just shuts down the conversation. To really help your child you need to know exactly what is bothering

her. It is important for a child to feel like her parents are really listening to how she feels and that her feelings are valid. If she is having a difficult time expressing herself ask open ended questions such as, “What do think this year will be like?” or “What are you the most concerned about?” Listen carefully to what she says and be supportive. Then explore with your child how she can deal with whatever she is nervous about. If the fear is based on a “What if” help your child reframe her thoughts to see the situation in a more positive light. People tend to assume the worse, and kids are no exception to this. For example, if your child is nervous about who her new teacher will be, encourage her to be positive. Help her focus on the potential that her new teacher will be good instead of harping on the possibility that she will be bad. This will also increase the chances your child will see her teacher in a positive light instead of a negative one. Such attitudes go a long way in shaping the path of your child's journey into the new year.

The known is less scary than the unknown

Anxiety is rooted in the unknown. When things are vague our imagination can run wild and fears can abound. Talk with your child about what to expect in the upcoming year in a calm, positive way. The more a child knows what to expect the less anxious she will be. This is especially important for children who are transitioning from preschool to elementary school, elementary to middle school or middle school to high school. There is a bigger transition at these stages and more unknowns for your child. Talk about other times in your child's life when she was nervous about starting something new, yet adjusted just fine.

If your child struggled with school in the past, explore with him what he thinks would make a difference this year. If there are academic or social concerns discuss them with your child. Your child is aware that something is wrong and this way he will have a better understanding of what it is. Left on his own, despite being wholly unequipped for the task, he will be forced to identify and assess the troubles himself. In such a scenario he will very likely feel fearful and helpless to deal with the issues and give up on solving them. This can easily lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Talking directly with your child will prevent him from making the problems he has worse than they are. He also has the reassurance that his parents know about the problem and can help him fix it. For example, if your child struggled with math, reflect on the fact that you know this has been a struggle for him in the past. Share with him your plan of action to help him overcome the challenge. Let him know that you are there to support him in any way possible. When a child has the strength and reassurance of his parents behind him, he will feel more secure and confident, two important components for success in school.

Your attitude plays a powerful role as well

Sometimes parents are more anxious about the new school year than their kids are. Be aware of how you talk about school. Are you talking in a way that exudes positivity or concern? Kids often take cues from their parents about how they should feel. Visualize your child doing well in school. Even if she

struggled in the past. An optimistic start to the school year gives your child a greater chance of being successful. A new year means new opportunities and a fresh start. Help your child focus on the exciting aspects of school such as getting new supplies, new teachers and seeing old friends. Challenge your child identify three things she enjoyed about school in the past and write it down. Younger children can draw pictures instead. Keeping your child focused on the positive aspects of school will make your child feel less anxious.

School is a part of life and is something kids will always have to contend with. How you set the tone in the house about school can make all the difference in how a child approaches the new school year and how they will do in school overall. Alleviating fears, providing unconditional support and maintaining a positive attitude about school will go a long way in setting the foundation for a successful school year.

Wishing everyone a Kesiva v`Chasima Tova and Hatzlacha and Bracha in the upcoming year!

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