

# The Hidden Benefits of Your Child's Back-to-School Butterflies

Has your usually chatty child become quieter than normal? Does your typically confident kid need extra hugs?

The start of a school year brings a unique mixture of emotions for both parents and children. Whether your little one is taking their first steps into kindergarten, starting a whole new school (or high school), or just moving up to a new year level with friends, that flutter of anxiety in their stomach (and yours) is completely normal. These transitions are crucial moments for emotional growth.

Recent research in childhood development shows that periods of change—whether it's starting school, changing classes, or moving to a new suburb—are remarkable opportunities for your child to develop resilience and emotional intelligence. When they tell you they are worried, these concerns aren't necessarily something to “fix”. Rather, it's a sign of their developing emotional awareness.

Consider what's happening when your child says they're worried about school. They might be:

- *Processing complex social dynamics:* A new friend group, new classmates, new teacher,
- *Anticipating academic challenges:* “I don't know how to do what they're going to ask me to do”, or simply
- *Responding to a change in routine.*

Each of these concerns represents their brain working to prepare them for new experiences.

## Some practical steps can help:

### Slow things down.

Rather than running full steam ahead and filling up their calendar, start slow. Ease into things. Reduce after-school activities if your child needs it. Keep plans simple on the weekend. Leave margin so you can be available.

### Time your conversations.

The best time to talk isn't necessarily as soon as you see them. While some kids are excited to tell you everything the minute they see you, most prefer to have some time to relax and decompress. You probably don't like being interrogated when you arrive home. Nor do they. Give them time to process. Some children need quiet time; others might want physical activity to release the day's tensions.

### Ask deep questions.

When it's time to talk, rather than saying, "How was school today?" ask them to tell you who they spent time talking with and how it felt. Invite them to tell you something they did that was challenging. Have them consider how they showed determination. Who did they help or show kindness to? Deep questions create connection.

### Listen to their specific concerns.

Are they worried about how big the school is (or how big some of the kids are)? Making friends? Understanding new rules? Each worry gives you insight into what support they might need.

### Ask practical questions.

Do they like their lunch? Are they feeling like the morning routine is working for them? What's their favourite afternoon tea?

When they do share concerns, *listen more than you solve*. Rather than rushing to fix every worry, help them identify what they're feeling and why. Say things like, "That sounds tricky", and "Wow, how do we solve that one?" This builds their capability and confidence.

Without being overzealous, watch for physical signs of anxiety: stomach aches, sleep changes, or increased clinginess might appear. These aren't just "attention-seeking" behaviours—they're often genuine expressions of emotional processing.

**Remember:** Your role isn't to eliminate their anxiety but to help them understand and work with it. (Think of Riley in *Inside Out 2*. When anxiety takes over, it's a problem. But it does play an important role.) When we support children through transitions while validating their feelings, we're helping them build emotional skills they'll use throughout their lives.

Every child moves through transitions differently. Some might be excited about new books, fresh pencils, and their new teacher, while others need more time to warm up to change. Neither approach is wrong—they're just different ways of processing the same big step.

Your child is learning to navigate complex feelings about school. The key is remembering that this anxiety isn't a problem to solve, but rather a normal part of growing up. By staying present with them through these feelings, you're teaching them that they can handle big emotions and new experiences - even when they feel overwhelming at first. Supporting a child through these transitions can be emotionally taxing for parents too, but this investment in understanding and patience pays off in building your child's emotional toolkit and their resilience.



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