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BACK TO SCHOOL - NEW TO SCHOOL - OUT OF SCHOOL

For most children, the end of summer vacation brings a return to friends and the school schedule. For most children, the end of the school year brings a return to summer friends and the summer schedule. For the new kindergartner, it is the beginning of a whole new world. And, for parents, it can be stress over their stress.

Starting school is representative of the major transitions issues children face; for many it is the most major transition in childhood. For some children, this transition to school or from school will go smoothly as most of their previous transitions have gone. They usually have found new things exciting and engaged eagerly in the adventure; adapted to changes in their routines; and enjoyed the excitement and stimulation. Their separation anxiety was probably short and easily resolved. Their parents also tend to temperamentally well matched with them, and/or were authoritatively responsive to them.

For some children, the school transition may go roughly but successfully. Typically, they have had some difficulty doing transitions from infancy. Caution is their approach to new and different things. They can and do adapt if given the support and time they need.

And, unfortunately, for some children the transition goes very poorly. Some rush in, are overwhelmed by the stimulation, react intensely and inappropriately. Others hold back, are also overwhelmed by the stimulation, retreat into themselves and are lost. Often there has been previous transition difficulties as preschoolers, or, for older children, a history of poor returns to school.

As parents, what can be done? Fortunately, a lot!!

First, acknowledge the stress. Some parents avoid planning help for their child because it is too distressing for them to consider that their child may have anxiety. Parents invalidate their children when they ignore their children's stress. This may come from not knowing what they can do, so they just hope for the best. Acknowledge your own anxiety, and do whatever it takes to deal with it. Children are extremely sensitive and attuned to their parents' anxiety. If your anxiety is excessive, the message you give is that they are not going to be okay! Express and model excitement with confidence that school will be great! And, that your child will be fine.

Second, identify and accept your child's temperament. Instead of focusing on why your child has that temperament and trying to change it, focus on how he/she expresses that temperament. Since your child's behavior is predictable, plan how to prevent, mitigate, and guide that behavior in a positive manner. For example, if your child usually takes a long time to adapt to a new situation, plan on giving your child many exposures to the situation- begin the adaptation process earlier. This means visiting the Kindergarten room, the school, the playground, and the teacher (if available) often before the beginning of school.

Third, inform the teacher about your child's temperament, especially his/her high or low sensitivity to stimulation (school is very exciting and stimulating!), whether he/she tends to jump into things or holds back, how long he/she takes to adapt to new circumstances, and how he/she expresses any



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anxiety or excitement (by acting out, getting hyper, withdrawing, and so forth). When your child behaves as predicted, the teacher will not be surprised, but instead feels prepared to deal with his/her needs.

Last, support your child- love and nurture your children before, during, and after transitions. This is not just about a specific issue- starting or returning to school. It is about parenting. Research about resilient children who bounce back well from stress identifies four areas that parents strongly influence. Resilient children: 1) have good relationships with emotionally supportive parents; 2) have personally, and also seen their parents and siblings face previous social challenges successfully; 3) have less overall stress in the family; 4) have been supported and been successful in other areas such as sports or music.

You and your child can survive the start of school- and can flourish as well. Have a great school year!

Biography

Ronald Mah, therapist and educator, combines concepts, principles, and philosophy with practical techniques and guidelines for effective and productive results. He uses humor and stories from his many experiences to illustrate important points in a stimulating and highly motivating and engaging style.

A Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, his experiences include: Asian-American community mental health, Severely Emotionally Disturbed mental health & school partnership programs, vocational programs for at risk youth, welfare to work programs, clinical consulting & cross and multi-cultural training for Head Start, other early childhood education programs, social services organizations, & mental health agencies, supervising a high school mental health clinic, training and supervising therapists, private practice in Castro Valley, author of the Asian Pacific Islander Parent Education Support curriculum.

Professional Education experiences include: 16 years in ECE, including owning and running a child development center for 11 years, Kindergarten, elementary, & secondary teaching credentials and experience, ethnic studies curriculum writer, community college instructor, Masters of Psychology instructor, and former member Board of Directors of the California Kindergarten Association and of the California Association of Marriage & Family Therapists.