Beyond Butterflies

As summer winds to a close, a fourth grader develops frequent stomachaches, seems irritable and restless, and regularly refuses play dates. A second grader starts putting up a fight every morning about going to school. A toddler, newly installed in day care, is waking up at odd hours after two years of sleeping soundly through the night, needing what seems like excessive calming to settle back into sleep.

"Transitioning to the new school year is one of the most anxiety-producing moments kids experience," says psychologist Tamar Chansky, author of *Freeing Your Child from Anxiety*.

For preschoolers, the combination of going into the classroom and being away from a parent or a regular caregiver for the first time is a lot to get used to.

Returning students often have concerns about whether they'll be able to handle the more advanced assignments or still be pals with kids they haven't seen for a while. Kids moving from one school to the next may feel exceedingly nervous about how they'll navigate a new cafeteria or how their locker will work. "The anxiety comes around things they don't have experience with," she explains.

Here, Chansky and other experts offer advice about how to alleviate some of the pressure—for back-to-school and beyond.

Dial Down the Demands:

Kids today have heavier workloads, an ever-growing number of extracurriculars, less free time, and more of a sense that what they do now matters for their future, Chansky explains. Help them prioritize by having them pick one or two activities to avoid over-scheduling. And make sure they have some unstructured time every week, preferably away from a screen.

Give Them Previews and Practice:

If anticipating school seems to be the cause of your child's anxiety, take him to see the classroom or arrange to meet the teacher before the year begins, Chansky suggests. Rehearsing the steps of riding the school bus or finding his locker will make those activities less of a scary unknown.

Make Sure They're Rested:

"When you're not sleeping, your body is flooded with stress hormones," explains child psychologist Lele Diamond, whose Bay Area practice, Symbio, focuses on whole-family mental health. Which means that when exhausted kids face a negative experience, it's doubly hard for them to cope because they're already so stressed. So create a sensible age-based sleep schedule and make sure they stick to it.

Check Yourself:

"Kids of people who struggle with anxiety are more prone to follow suit," says Dr. Sanno Zack, who directs the outpatient clinic at Stanford's Early Life Stress and Pediatric Anxiety Program. So it's important that anxious parents be self-aware. If a kid is already worrying about certain things, and the parent is talking about being worried about those same things, then "it's like the kid is hearing it in stereo," Chansky explains.

Be a Supermodel:

Parents can help model brave behavior and a willingness to make mistakes. “Sharing that they too get nervous and demonstrating what they do to calm themselves and cope—this helps inhibited kids to practice overcoming their own apprehensions,” says Zack.

Guide Them Toward Good Distractions:

Social media, electronics, incessant and instant information—these are alluring distractions. But they carry a certain level of pressure to keep up and can keep kids from connecting to what’s most important, says Diamond. Activities like exercise, being in nature, working with your hands, and spending quality time with people you love, by contrast, modulate anxiety by releasing calming feel-good chemicals in the body.

Help Them Confront the Anxiety Monster:

Parents can be great coaches when they understand the strategies for helping kids beat anxiety, says Zack. The main thing is to gradually help them face whatever they want to avoid: “Learning to confront the anxiety monster is what takes away its power,” she explains.

When to Worry About Your Worrier

The difference between having ordinary worries—the ones that are temporary and easily forgotten—and having more extreme, inexplicable, intractable anxiety is a tendency to worry about lot of different things and often all at the same time, Zack explains. These are the kids who, as Chansky puts it, "leave no worry stone unturned."

occurs in both boys and girls equally at younger ages, though in adolescence it's about two times more likely in girls," says Zack. "Whereas a child with a phobia is fearful of something specific, like dogs or needles, kids suffering from GAD are often afraid they might not be perfect or that things—bad things—are going to happen in life that they can't control,"

GAD sufferers are often very high functioning at school while falling apart at home

And mostly they come into the world that way. Sometimes anxiety is triggered by a stressful life event—a death, a divorce, a move—or a developmental phase. But more often it's innate. These are the kids that invent far-fetched scenarios to worry about in situations that most people would find completely non-threatening. Reassurance from their parents or other authority figures doesn't help. "Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

Zack says. Their perfectionist tendencies mean GAD sufferers are often very high-functioning at school while falling apart at home (not sleeping, having emotional outbursts, picking fights, questioning parents excessively), so there may be a big difference between what parents are seeing and what the teachers observe.

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Silver Lining Playbook

If you suspect your child has generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), the best first step is to consult a child psychologist, pediatric anxiety specialist, or cognitive behavior therapist. He'll evaluate the child by asking questions about what you're noticing and by engaging the child in activities to get a full picture of her feeling and coping strategies, says Zack. If the therapist does diagnose GAD, he will outline a plan for how to treat it, including specific exercises that help kids reframe their anxious feelings and work through their fears.

"The good news," says Zack, "is that GAD is very treatable," even for kids who've been through trauma, and in many cases, relatively quickly. "The vast majority of children who engage in treatment improve with cognitive behavioral therapy or other approaches in as few as 12 to 20 weekly sessions," she says. Best of all, the treatment typically has a lasting positive effect, leaving kids feeling more empowered and self-confident and setting them up with lifelong skills for managing life's stressors.

The Early Life Stress and Pediatric Anxiety Program at Stanford Children's Health conducts ongoing research about helping kids manage anxiety and stress. Read about their latest research and find resources at: med.stanford.edu/elspap