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Beat the back to school blues

Glaiza Godinez | August 21, 2016



Going back to school can be an exciting but nerve-wracking experience for students. Some might be thrilled to see schoolmates, while others might be anxious over another school term. Dr Samra Tahir, clinical psychologist at the American Centre of Psychiatry and Neurology in Abu Dhabi, says there are different reasons for back-to-school anxiety: "A new environment, a new teacher and greater learning expectations.

"Some of their friends may have left, while the arrival of new students could be intimidating. Moreover, the stress of shifting from holiday mode back into the school routine, which consists of exams, regular evaluations or bullying, if there is history, will also lead to stress for a student," explains Dr Tahir.

Benjamin Atkins, deputy head of secondary at Sunmarke School in Dubai, says that in the expat-populated UAE, where students come and go, the first day at school can be a lonely time: "Each year there are many new faces in the class and one of the big worries is 'will I make friends?' This is echoed by returning students who often see friends relocate back to their home country over the summer."

Think positive

During this transition time, strong parental support and a push in the right direction are needed. Atkins advises parents to create a positive mental attitude for kids. He says: "Talk about the new friends they will make and new teachers they will have. Remind them of their old friends and try to arrange times in the weeks before school when they can re-connect." A pep talk can help too: "Tell them funny stories and anecdotes of the good times you had in school. Reassure them you are there to support them and there will be many teachers and peers they can turn to if they have a problem. At the end of the day, they're not the only ones going back to school and everyone is there to help. If in doubt: ask."

Stick to your routine

Dr Tahir says establishing a routine from the start can get the family organised: "If a family is well into a routine, it's not a big hassle for the parents to follow a regimen. Children thrive on routines and appreciate it with

more respect." The same goes for little ones who are attending school for the first time. Graham Beale, principal of The Arcadia Preparatory School in Dubai, explains children face "separation anxiety and the fear of the unknown, as they have to spend time in a new environment with strangers". Beale says kids need to feel settled and safe at school. Chatting about their expectations and what they look forward to will help.

Atkins adds some ways to get children ready: "Consistent bed times, meal times and study times. Your children will be more relaxed in knowing what will happen when. It also helps to set boundaries and rules, especially for older students who may have important exams they need to study for. You also need to remember that the school days are long in Dubai and even longer for students who use buses. Make sure you give your children the time they need to relax, play and let off steam when they're at home."

Plan ahead

The weeks leading up to the big day should be about planning and preparation. Dr Tahir says parents need to keep their children busy with a mix of physical and academic stimulation activities before the new academic year. For first-timers, familiarisation with the new environment and schedule is key. Beale says: "Attend parent information evenings the school may run or other events to become familiar with the school environment and staff. Schools are generally happy to show new children and parents around school and introduce them to key people such as the nurse, school counsellor and the principal. Where possible, visit the school with your child before they start and find out where key areas are such as the canteen, sports hall and bathrooms." For Atkins, an important thing to remember is not leaving anything to the last minute whether it's buying uniforms, stationary, starting routines or even talking about school and getting them excited."

SLEEP FOR SCHOOL KIDS

As the new school year approaches, The London Sleep Centre Dubai advises parents to get children back into sound sleep schedule:

- Talk to kids about the importance of sleep. From a young age they should understand physical growth occurs when we sleep.
- Ease children into a good night's sleep with relaxing environments that are cool, quiet, comfortable and free of electronic devices.
- A 'wind-down' routine one hour before bed works wonders and can consist of anything from a bedtime story, or relaxing bath to gulping a glass of warm milk.



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