

My Sixth Grader Is Anxious About School. What Can I Do?

By John Piacentini, PhD

Question: My daughter is in sixth grade and is really anxious about middle school. I'm used to her being worried about tests and other academic stuff. But what's new this year is how freaked out she is about getting to the right class at the right time. There are so many kids in the hallways!

She's also really anxious about keeping up with homework assignments from so many different teachers. School just seems so much more complicated and upsetting than it did last year. What can I do to help her calm down?

It's very common for kids to have some degree of anxiety about moving to a new school or transitioning from elementary to middle school or middle to high school. This is especially true for kids who have anxiety issues. Starting middle school can trigger fears of getting lost, being late to class, difficulty managing more complicated schedules and being socially isolated.

The most important thing for you to do is to stay calm and project a sense of confidence in your child's ability to succeed. This doesn't mean to ignore your child's fears. Listen to her concerns and then normalize them as much as you can. You can do this by saying things like:

- "Most kids worry about adjusting to a new school and keeping up with homework."
- "It's OK to feel this way. It may take a little time for you to figure this all out, but I'm confident that you'll do fine."
- "You're right that every year classes get a little harder, but it all evens out because you're a year older."
- "When I was your age, my friends and I were all a little nervous about adjusting to middle school because we didn't know what to expect. But it turned out to be great. I'm sure it will turn out fine for you too."

Projecting an attitude of confidence can be difficult if you're anxious yourself or very worried about your child's ability to cope. If you fit into either of these categories, do

your best to avoid directly or indirectly communicating your own anxiety to your child—which could reduce her confidence even further.

The way you model brave behavior and positive coping strategies is an extremely powerful tool for enhancing your child's resilience and confidence. There are several other important ways you can help your child:

Remind her of past successes. Try to be as specific as possible when you do this. Help your child see how the strategies she used successfully *then* could help her *now*: “Remember your first day of soccer practice last year? You talked to the coach, and he paired you up with Ashley so she could show you the ropes. Once you learned your way around, things were fine.”

Practice deep breathing. Slow, rhythmic breathing that starts deep in your belly is a great way to calm down. Even just a few breaths like this can be very helpful. This exercise is something the two of you can do together at home. It's also something subtle your daughter can do at school or in other social situations to help her manage her anxiety.

Focus on logistics. Go with your child after school to locate her locker, classrooms, bathrooms and other important locations. Draw a map of the school to help her visualize moving between classes. These strategies may help ease her fears of getting lost or being late. (They'll also be very helpful to reuse in late summer before she begins seventh grade.)

The transition from one to multiple teachers is a very common concern. This can be challenging for anxious children or those with organization issues. In these cases, proactive planning can be helpful. This could include:

- Having your child keep a copy of her class schedule in a place that's easy to access
- Using different colored binders for each class and designating a special place for doing homework assignments
- Creating a homework schedule and tracking log to help ensure that your daughter can keep track of her assignments and finish them on time

Establish and maintain a regular routine for your child. This includes setting a specific time for homework as well as a time for going to bed and waking up. It's important for your child to get a full night's sleep. Make clear that rather than staying up late to try to complete an assignment, your child could ask you to write a note to the teacher asking for more time.

Reward your child's effort and successes. This is very, very important. Verbal praise, smiles and hugs can be great ways to show your child how proud you are of her efforts. It's also good to reward her with things like a favorite dinner or dessert, a fun family activity or extra time with you doing something you both like.

No matter how you choose to reward her, remember to acknowledge the hard work she's putting in to develop coping strategies. This can help motivate her to stick with these strategies or try new ones.

About the Author



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