

Help ease your children's back-to-school jitters

By Sherry Robinson, Times Staff Writer
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For the majority of children in the Tampa Bay area, the new school year began this week. And for some, that meant new clothes, new friends and new schools. • But for some kids, the new school year brings worries about all of those new things. Charlotte Reznick, a child educational psychologist and former UCLA Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology, says there are tools to cure a child's "back-to-school-itis", as she calls it. • She suggests that children use their imaginations to help cure their concerns over hitting the books again. Of course, for more serious cases, parents should seek out professional help. But if the concerns are not causing disruptions in class or at home, there are ways for kids to win the battle against back-to-school jitters. • We asked Reznick a few questions about back-to-school worries.

Are there strategies for dropping your kids off at school if they are crying and don't want to let you go?

Practice, practice, practice. If one of her fears is being all alone, arrange with another mom to have the two kids meet up before school and walk in together. If it's a totally new school, find out some other moms in the neighborhood and arrange for play dates. If she's still crying at the moment of separation, try the imagination activity (see box).

Does one gender seem to have more of a problem with back-to-school-itis?

The problems I've seen in my office have been more a function of a child's personality (anxious, shy, fearful) rather than by gender, though gender differences might show up in how children's worries are acted out. Boys are typically more aggressive (but not always) and girls tend to become withdrawn (but not always).

Since all kids are different, are there different strategies to use based on a child's age?

Younger kids often focus on fears of leaving mom/dad and the unknown changes that inevitably pop up. Let the little ones know you'll be there every step of the way and give as much information as they are interested in having. Knowing what to expect is often comforting. Older kids might dread the long hours of homework they know is coming, along with their loss of summer freedom. Ask them to visualize the possibility of working hard but also having lots of free time. Help the older ones plan a schedule so there's still time for fun every day.

If your child continues to complain after a couple of weeks, should you try other techniques or visit a doctor?

Whether you should worry or not if your child hasn't adjusted to the new school year within a few weeks often depends on the age of your child and whether he's been separated from you before for an extended time. Preschoolers and kindergarteners can take months to get used to being away from Mommy for the first time, and some schools make adjustments for this by having parents stay in the classroom and slowly over time reduce their visits. But if your child has already adjusted to going to school and all of a sudden can't handle it after a couple of weeks, this can be cause for concern. . . . Consult your pediatrician or a local trusted counselor.

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CALMING CHILDREN

Charlotte Reznick is author of a new book, *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety Into Joy and Success* (Perigee, 2009, \$14.95). She offers these tools for calming kids who have worries about school at her Web site, www.ImageryForKids.com.

- Teach your child to balloon breathe. With her hands around her navel, have her breathe slowly and deeply into her lower belly so it presses into her hands like an inflating balloon. This has calming effects and facilitates a state of focused concentration.
- Visit a special place. This is a safe private place in your child's imagination where she can work out problems or take a mini-vacation from stress and worry.
- Draw the fear. Putting an image on paper makes her fear of separation less frightening than keeping it inside, and makes her fear less likely to grow. Once she has a picture, she can talk to it, find out why it's trying to scare her, bargain with it and so on.
- Talk to the symptom. When a child suffers from a worry headache or stomachache, these questions can help eliminate the pain. Have her do deep balloon breathing, then ask: What color is it? What shape is it? How heavy is it? After more breaths, ask her again. Continue to breathe and question in rounds. Her pain will likely change or disappear.
- Picture the future. Artwork is also useful when you're working with clear end-goals, like getting a good night's sleep or reducing a fear. Have your child draw two drawings — how things are now and how she'd like them to be. Hang them in her bedroom as a reminder of her desired goal and the first step to getting there.
- Encourage drama. For kids whose nature tends toward drama, acting out their worries is a wonderful way to release them. Let them play it out — with puppets, their bodies, anything their imagination suggests. It's amazing what creative solutions come up when given free reign.

