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BACK TO SCHOOL



Ease those first-day blues

By Andrea Anastasiou, Feature Writer
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How do you prepare your child for the return to school after the long holidays in a transient place like the UAE, where expatriate families come and go?

The new academic year brings the opportunity for a fresh start and exciting activities, but it can also be a stressful time for parents and students. Some children will start the year at a new school, having relocated with their families over the summer. Many pupils will be returning to class knowing that several of their closest friends will not be joining them, as families have left the country. This can be especially true in a transient place like the UAE, where expatriate families come and go.

Annie Fox, an educator, online adviser and author, says, "Transitions can be hard for people of all ages. We get into a routine and we feel comfortable and competent. When we start a new chapter, we're likely to feel a little anxious about what's ahead. It's the same with the transition from summer to school. Lots of worries and questions can fill the minds of parents and kids: Will I like my teacher? Will I get teased? Will my child make friends? Will my child be able to keep up with the work? Talking about

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fears and worries is a good way to quiet an over-active imagination."

Making friends

So what can you do to help your child settle in to the new term? One of the things children worry about is making new friends, particularly if they're changing schools or their best friends have left. "Finding and maintaining friendships tops the list of worries among kids today, particularly when moving from one academic level to the next," says Joe Bruzzese, author of A Parents' Guide to the Middle School Years. "The transition to high school hits a high point with regard to anxiety as kids worry about roaming around a place full of people they have never met."

There are ways parents can help their children make new friends. "Children who haven't had good success at making friends may well feel nervous about giving it another try. Parents can help with younger children by setting up play dates with friendly children. A little success and confidence in making friends on a one-to-one basis in a home environment can go a long way to building friendship skills at school," says Fox.

If your children are anxious about the new term, Dr. John Mayer, a clinical psychologist and author, believes you should avoid trying to alleviate their stress and try instead to help them cope with it. This will present them with an opportunity for personal growth and equip them with coping mechanisms.

"We do too much thinking as parents about how to eliminate this or that in our child's life, rather than letting them face some stress and learn how to develop coping mechanisms in the face of it. This is a healthy development as they will not avoid stress all their life. It's inevitable, so help them deal with it," he says.

Mayer recommends keeping your home stress free as much as possible during these times, as children don't need added anxiety, and to be compassionate about your child's fears as opposed to dismissing them. He also says you should share with them how you experienced the same feelings when you



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were their age. You can suggest coping strategies such as being organised for the start of school, reviewing habits that worked well the year before, improving on skills that were weak last year, and by making sure they take breaks, have fun and get plenty of physical activity.

'Communicate confidence'


Fox recommends that parents try to make sure their child doesn't pick up on any of their own separation anxiety. "If you've got any worries swirling around in your head, deal with your own stuff in healthy ways so that you only communicate confidence in your child's ability to manage in a new situation without you. Saying things like, 'you will do great,' and 'every day when you come home you can tell me all the cool things that happened in school,' will help alleviate anxiety," she says.

For children who are going to school for the very first time this September, it can be very daunting. However, providing parents encourage their child, it can also be viewed as an adventure. "Assuming parents have instilled a positive attitude about going to school and getting an education, it's very likely that a young child going to school for the first time will see it as a) an adventure they've been eagerly awaiting and b) a sign that they are growing up," says Fox.

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