Back to Backpacks: Navigating the Back-to-School Transition

As summer draws to a close, parents, caregivers, and children often feel a variety of emotions about back-to-school season approaching. It’s important to acknowledge the challenges that may arise during this period and take proactive steps to support the mental well-being of the entire family.

Back-to-school challenges

Shifting from a laid-back summer schedule to a school routine can be difficult. Adjusting sleep patterns and daily schedules can lead to stress and disrupt the family’s balance. However, there are other challenges that often go unnoticed.

Separation anxiety. Going from spending most days together to being apart for several hours each weekday can trigger separation anxiety. Parents may have concerns about their child’s welfare at school, while children may feel apprehensive about being away from their family for an extended period. This anxiety is not limited to young children; teens and those headed to college may also experience these feelings.

Social dynamics and friendships. Reconnecting with peers and adapting to classroom dynamics can be hard for children and teens. Social anxiety, fear of rejection, and the struggle to fit into established circles can contribute to a sense of isolation or loneliness. Parents may also experience worry and stress regarding their child’s interactions.

Bullying. One significant concern that persists in school settings is bullying. Verbal, physical, or cyberbullying can cause increased anxiety, low self-esteem, and reluctance to attend school. Parents may also feel stress and frustration as they try to help children through these difficult situations.

Academic pressures. The pressure to meet new academic expectations and adapt to the demands of the educational system can be overwhelming. Parents may feel anxious about their children’s grades or achievements, while children may experience performance-related stress.

School safety. The safety of the school environment is of importance for both parents and children. Safety concerns, such as school shootings, violence, or accidents can significantly heighten anxiety levels.

Financial strain. Financial strain can impact parents’ ability to provide resources for their child’s education. Expenses related to school supplies, extracurricular activities and educational resources may create additional stress.
**Strategies for supporting your child**

It's important to maintain open and supportive communication. Encourage your child to express their feelings and concerns, allowing them to feel heard and understood. Here are some strategies that you can use to help ease transitions and reduce stress and anxiety.

**Establish routines.** It helps to gradually transition routines a few weeks before school starts. Create a predictable daily schedule to provide a sense of stability and security for both you and your children. Consistent bedtimes, meal schedules, and designated homework or study time can help alleviate anxiety and create a structured environment that fosters well-being. For children with learning needs, use visual schedules or calendars to help your child better understand their daily routines.

**Support independence.** Encourage your child's independence and teach age-appropriate skills that will help them become more self-sufficient. This may include tasks like organizing their school materials, managing their time, and taking responsibility for their homework. Children with learning challenges could find these tasks more difficult and may require additional support for longer periods of time.

**Promote resilience.** Help your children develop resilience by teaching them coping strategies and problem-solving skills. Encourage them to view challenges as opportunities for growth and learning. Discuss potential difficult situations and develop plans for how to approach or disengage. Role-play how specific scenarios may look.

**Foster friendships.** Provide opportunities for your children to engage in social activities before and during the school year. Encourage participation in extracurricular activities, clubs, or sports teams where they can meet new peers with similar interests. Teach your children empathy, kindness, and inclusivity to foster positive relationships.

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**Time restraints.** Juggling work, household responsibilities, and caregiving can leave parents with limited time and resources. This can make it challenging to participate in school-related activities, attend parent-teacher meetings, or provide additional support. Furthermore, finding time for self-care as an adult can easily take a back seat to all these responsibilities.

**Increased responsibility.** Single parents may bear the weight of managing all aspects of their child's life, including daily routines, emotional support, and academic support. These added responsibilities can lead to feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion.
**Strategies for supporting yourself**

Taking care of yourself allows you to be a better parent and partner, so it's important to find balance between your needs and those of your child.

**Establish routines and priorities.** Routines are beneficial for both children and adults. Create a structured routine that balances your work, household, and parenting responsibilities. If possible, seek flexibility in your work schedule to attend important school events or meetings. Prioritize tasks and set realistic goals, ensuring you set aside time for self-care and quality interactions with your child.

**Share responsibilities.** Express your needs and concerns to your partner, co-parent, or other caregivers. Be open to having conversations about balancing responsibilities and finding solutions that work for everyone involved. Determine how you can divide responsibilities related to your child's education and overall well-being, as well as household responsibilities. Delegate tasks and responsibilities based on each individual's strengths and availability. Collaboratively determine who will handle school communications, attend meetings, or assist with homework, ensuring both parents feel involved and invested.

**Develop a co-parenting plan.** For those who are single or co-parenting, create a written co-parenting plan that outlines agreed-upon strategies for handling school-related matters and other responsibilities related to the care of your child. This plan may cover homework routines, communication with teachers, attendance at school events, doctor appointments, extra-curricular activities, discipline, and decision-making processes. Regularly revisit and update the plan as needed.

**Stay flexible.** Recognize that not everything will go according to plan and unexpected challenges may arise. Remain flexible and adaptable, adjusting your routine as necessary while keeping your goals in mind.

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**Take action against bullying.** Encourage open dialogue about bullying, including what it is, how to recognize it, and the importance of reporting incidents. Teach your child assertiveness skills and strategies to respond to bullying, such as walking away, defusing responses, seeking help from trusted adults, and utilizing school resources like anti-bullying programs or counselors.

**Get involved with safety efforts.** As parents and caregivers, know that your worries are valid. If needed, set up opportunities for you to discuss your concerns with school staff or support groups. Stay informed about school safety policies and procedures. Encourage open communication between other parents, children, and school staff regarding any safety concerns. Advocate and become involved in your district’s planning committees.

**Help with organization.** Assist your children in developing effective organizational skills, such as using planners or digital calendars to track assignments and due dates. Teach time management techniques, including prioritization and breaking tasks into manageable steps. Remember to focus on the process and the learning potential versus the outcome.

**Encourage down time.** Ensure your child maintains a healthy balance between academics and extracurricular activities. Help them understand the importance of self-care, stress management, and relaxation practices. Emphasize the importance of hobbies, physical exercise, and quality sleep to support mental and emotional well-being.
Prioritize self-care. Remember, taking care of yourself is essential for maintaining your emotional well-being. Make time for self-care activities that help you relax and recharge. Engage in hobbies that bring you joy, seek social support, and consider therapy or counseling to process emotions and build resilience.

Don’t forget to be kind to yourself and seek assistance when needed. Managing stress, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness can be difficult without a strong support network. Spring Health, your mental wellness benefit offers fast access to therapy, coaching, and other helpful resources. Visit benefits.springhealth.com to activate your benefits and access care, or speak to a Care Navigator for more information on how we can support you.

Your care with Spring Health is private and confidential.