**The Right Questions to Ask to Help Kids Take Charge of Back-to-School Fears**

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*"You're going to be fine. Don't worry! Of course you'll make friends. Of course you'll be able to do the work, you're a great student! Relax, it's going to be a great year!"*

What's wrong with this parent's response to their child's freak-out about starting back to school? On the surface, absolutely nothing. It's exactly what the child needs to think. But on the surface, these good ideas will stay and won't sink in to your child's mind -- for one reason. While well-intentioned mom is busy reassuring that everything will be fine, her son is in amygdala-overdrive, the anxiety like a force field blocking out logic and stirring up butterflies in the stomach and disaster in the mind's eye. With all those worst-case scenarios grabbing all of your child's attention, is it a surprise that a parent's reassuring words have little impact?

What's the alternative?

You don't want to see your child suffer. But there's another way. A better way. Instead of trying to talk your child out of their fears by rushing in with reassurances that aren't helping anyway, help your child come to these very good and reasonable conclusions you are offering, on their own steam, by flipping them around and asking the right questions. Questions bring out the smart child who is trapped inside the fear. When you ask a child a question about their worries (but, please, not the "Why are you afraid of that?!" question) such as: "What's worry telling you about that? What do you really think instead? What feels like the hardest part about this?" it switches their brain program into thinking and planning mode instead of fight or flight. Don't we want our kids to be in thinking and planning mode when they head back to school?

Children's imaginations go right for the tough spots, the "what-ifs." Listening to worry's version of the story of the new school year, they are filled with thoughts of apprehension, embarrassment, failure and rejection. But what if they didn't stop at that first fearful draft, and instead did an edit, a revision, by running the story past their inner-fact checker? From the logic desk, the story of their life would read very differently (and they would feel a lot better, too!) This is where you as the parent come in. Though you are tempted as a parent to rush in and reassure, resist!

Give your child the opportunity to test and challenge the fears himself. Then he gets to be the hero. He's the one who gets to prove worry wrong and in so doing, clear out the catastrophe clutter and see -- though the path to school has some unknowns -- it's all going to be OK, soon. When your child participates in the conversation rather than passively listening to your reassurances, he will feel mastery -- feel smart -- and confident in his ability to rise to the occasion.

Anxiety is about what is unknown or new, so children of any age are worried about things that are unfamiliar or that they haven't mastered yet. All anxiety starts with the same experience. The "yikes" button gets pushed and kids think, *Yikes! Can I really do that?*The answer of course is yes, but worry's automatic reaction is *no!* Use these strategies to help your child reset the yikes button and get to the truth. Better than any reassurance, when you teach your child that worry is something to test, not trust, you are teaching them skills that will serve them well all throughout their life.

**Narrow it down: What's worry really worrying you about?**
You might guess what your child is worrying about, but you might guess wrong. Instead, let your child know that everybody has worries, but you want to know what your child's particular concerns are. Give your child the opportunity to "tell on worry" by asking: "What's worry telling you about school?" "What's the part that you are having most worry thoughts about?" "What are you thinking is going to be hard at school?"

**Do the side-by-side comparison of facts vs. fears.**
Ask your child to counter each worry or "what if" with a "what else," as in, what else your child thinks is more likely to happen and why he believes that it will turn out this way. Put the two ideas side-by-side and ask your child, which answer seems more accurate or believable? Which would be the right answer in school? You can use the "million dollar question" to help bring home the point that worry is always wrong: "If you could win a million dollars by guessing right if your fear was going to come true or not, could you win the big bucks?" Putting it this way, kids are often able to see how exaggerated and unrealistic worry's claims are.

**Keep it real and be concrete: Problems have solutions.**
Sometimes fears are a sign of missing or inaccurate information. A child believes if she is late to school she'll go to "detention" or that the bus driver will forget her or won't know where to stop, or that she'll forget her locker combination and be stuck. Ask for details and then correct misinformation: she won't go to detention if she's late -- in fact, her school doesn't even have detention. Or, that the bus driver practices the route before school starts, or in the case of the locker -- have your child practice with the lock at home, and decide on a safe place to keep the combination in case she forgets.

**Put a time limit on the adjustment.**
Yes, the new school year is an adjustment; learning names and where the bathroom is, how to find the right bus, etc., and this can seem like a forever prospect until you ask your child how long he thinks it will actually take to get familiar or comfortable with these things. Suddenly forever turns into a week, or even just a couple of days. Even if it does takes a little longer, having the perspective that these adjustments are temporary will lower your child's start-up anxiety level and that is a game-changer.

Don't add your anxiety to the equation Remember, fear can be contagious. Try to keep your worries to yourself, don't show your child your fears or stir up additional concerns. Talk to your spouse or your friends to do your own side-by-side comparison of fears to facts and see if you can shrink the risk down to size.

Confidence can be contagious too -- sharing the job of collaborating with your child about worry by asking questions rather than giving answers will help your child build that confidence within herself. Now that's a great way to go back to school.

Happy new school year everybody! Remember, transitions are temporary, so take a deep breath, exhale and know you and your child will settle in just a little bit further down the road.

Want to learn more about teaching your child how to take charge of fear and worry? Check out my new book, [Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Revised and Updated Edition](http://www.amazon.com/Freeing-Anxiety-Revised-Updated-Edition/dp/0804139806/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1409234319&sr=8-1&keywords=tamar+chansky): Practical Strategies to Overcome Fears, Worries and Phobias and Be Prepared for Life! From Toddlers to Teens now available from Harmony Books.

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