

About this set of notes: Our Center is fortunate to be able to benefit from the energy and talents of UCLA students.\* Because of her interest in this topic, undergraduate Jocelyne Watts prepared the following to be shared as part of the Center's resources.

## **Back-to-School Anxiety**

### ***What is normal anxiety when entering a new school year?***

When vacations come to an end, it is not surprising to hear moans and groans from children as their television programs are interrupted by commercials promoting the beginning of year savings for school supplies and clothing. With the first day of school approaching, it is common for kids to feel some apprehension. The new school year means the end of extensive leisure time and the beginning of new challenges and responsibilities. A new teacher, classroom, and schedule, in addition to a harder curriculum and a higher expectation for academic performance are enough cause for anxiety. Moreover, these challenges are sometimes accompanied by additional obstacles, such as having to adjust to an entirely new school. It is safe to say that the majority of students see the approaching school year as both an academic and social challenge; some see it as quite stressful (Sirsch, 2003).

### ***When is anxiety excessive? How can you tell?***

There are some students who are paralyzed by the anxiety of returning to school, perceiving the event as an academic and social threat, in which the stressful situation is anticipated as harmful and fearful (Lazarus 1991). According to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, one child in every eight suffers from an anxiety disorder. With that being said, a teacher with a classroom of 25 can expect to have about 2 to 3 children with high anxiety levels.

Anxiety is considered excessive when it interferes with a child's well-being and ability to learn. High levels of anxiety are often apparent in a child's behavior, such as temper tantrums and refusals to attend school. Excessive anxiety can lead to school avoidance. It can also manifest as physical symptoms, such as trouble breathing, nausea, headaches, and stomach aches. A child who expresses such symptoms should see a physician, as well as having special attention from his or her teacher and probably a support staff member such as a school psychologist or counselor (Peach, 2011).

Separation anxiety is to be expected, particularly among those just starting kindergarten. Indeed, some children experience great emotional distress when asked to spend extended periods with anyone other than his or her parents or guardians

Identifying high anxious students involves taking note of students who display behavior, learning, and/or emotional problems; special attention should be paid to those who are frequently absent and disconnected from peers and school activities.

---

\*The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA is co-directed by Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor.

Feel free to reproduce and share this document.

Please cite source as the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

## ***What can be done to support students as they return to school?***

**Help them with anxiety reducing information and support.** Anxiety may manifest as uncertainty and a fear that the worst will happen. To mitigate this, it is important that teachers be aware of students' concerns and address them with supportive measures (Avant, Gazelle, & Faldowski, 2011). Children often need more information that conveys that what is expected for their level of schooling is within their grasp; parents need to be informed and mobilized about these matters as well.

Some of this can be done before the start of the term. For example, some uncertainty can be reduced by familiarizing students with what they will be encountering. School tours during the spring or summer help acquaint them with the layout, key places and persons on the campus, schedules, and so forth. Also during the summer, some schools encourage students to come to the campus by offering movies, concerts, summer classes, and sporting events.

**Plan.** Particularly important is that student and learning support staff plan for the arrival of new students, with special attention to those who will struggle with the transition. Teachers can plan ways to reduce student uncertainty by designing classroom routines and schedules that will be experienced as motivating and nonthreatening.

**At the Elementary School Level.** At all times, the key is: *be aware of students concerns and keep parents engaged.* Schools should make parents aware of the anxieties children are likely to experience. They should encourage parents to have open discussions with their children about their feelings on starting school so they are better able to address concerns. As many concerns stem from uncertainties, schools should inform parents of what is and is not expected of their child at a particular grade level and clarify ways to counter fears (Kendrick, online). Encouraging a dialogue between a child and the person they are closest to is an important step in supporting a child suffering from heightened levels of anxiety. Part of such a dialogue might include listing a child's fears on one side of a paper and writing "facts" on the other side (Peisner, 2011).

Schools also can help parents be aware of the signs of anxiety so that they can effectively intervene. Tamar Chansky stresses: "if your child is having difficulty sleeping, asking lots of 'what if' questions, crying, clinging, or whining more than usual, these may be signs of anxiety" (reported in Peisner, 2011).

Schools can encourage parents to normalize their child's fears (e.g., explaining to the child that it is natural to be worried and that even teachers feel nervous at the beginning). Moreover, parents can be encouraged to explain that they will feel more at ease as they become more accustomed to their new educational environment.

Teachers for young children know that building positive relationships can serve as a preventive measure for back-to-school anxiety. Researchers certainly support this. "Children with whom kindergarten teachers reported a positive relationship were rated in spring of grade 1 as better adjusted than was predicted on basis of identical ratings from the fall of kindergarten year" (Pianta et al. 1995). "Classrooms with supportive emotional climates ... buffer anxious solitary children from risk for social and emotional difficulties" (Spangler et al. 2011).

**At the Middle and High School Level.** Again, the key is to *be aware of students concerns and keep parents engaged and well-informed* about transition concerns. This includes providing parents with the knowledge necessary to reassure their children and to notice early signs of anxiety.

Researchers stress that “support for the transition from elementary school to middle school ... needs to begin late in elementary school (perhaps the entire grade 5) and to continue throughout the summer and into the first semester or year of middle/junior high school” (Anderson et al. 2000). The same goes for those starting high school. Transitional programs often are described as having three major components:

- procedural – the type of early orientation steps outlined above
- academic – it is often recommended that transition programs incorporate a structured study skills class that encourages students to take more responsibility for their learning (Dillon, 2008)
- social – social supports can be designed to help students fit in and make friends (Akos, 2006).

With respect to a support system, there are roles to be played by administrators, teachers, parents, and students. For example, an older student that made a successful transition the previous year can be particularly helpful serving as a model and a support for the new student (Ferguson & Bulach, 1997).

One recent installment to the middle school and high school system is assigning incoming students to a “family” or “academy” within the new school. This can facilitate transition by building a sense of community and belonging. Also, to heighten feelings of community and belonging, students can be encouraged to participate in organizations, clubs, and teams (Anderson et al., 2000).

“Children in classrooms with highly supportive emotional climates may increasingly become a cohesive group over the course of the academic year. Such cohesion may result when the teacher promotes mutual respect and inclusion among all students in the class” (Avant et al. 2011). Moreover, students in supportive classrooms are reported to engage in significantly less avoidance behavior than students in ambiguous or nonsupportive environments (Patrick et al. 2003). Students who feel that they are appreciated and are contributing something to their campus help create a fulfilling learning environment and successful transitions.

## Some Resources and References

### *Center Resources*

For more on all this, see the following Center resources:

*Common Psychosocial Problems of School Aged Youth: Developmental Variations, Problems, Disorders and Perspectives for Prevention and Treatment.*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/psysocial/entirepacket.pdf>

*Transitions: Turning Risks into Opportunities for Student Support*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitions/transitions.pdf>

*Supporting Successful Transition to Ninth Grade*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/transitionsninthgrade.pdf>

*Transitions to and from Elementary, Middle, and High School*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitionstoandfrom.pdf>

*Welcoming and Involving New Students and Families*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/welcome/welcome.pdf>

*Addressing School Adjustment Problems*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/adjustmentproblems.pdf>

### *Cited and Other References*

Akaos, P. & Galassi, A.P. (2004). Middle and high school transitions as viewed by students, parents, and teachers. *Professional School Counseling*.

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0KOC/is\\_4\\_7/ai\\_n6033397/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0KOC/is_4_7/ai_n6033397/)

Anderson, L. et al. (2000). School transitions: Beginning of the end or a new beginning? *International Journal of Educational Research*, 33, 325-339.

Barber, B. & Olsen, J. (2004). Assessing the transitions to middle and high school. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 19, 3-30.

Bohan-Baker, M. & Little, P. (2002). *The transition to kindergarten: A review of current research and promising practices to involve families*. Harvard Family Research Project. <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/>

Dillon, N. (2008). The transition years. *American School Board Journal*, 195, 16-19.

Duchesne, S. et al. (2009). Early adolescent attachment to parents, emotional problems, and teacher-academic worries about the middle school transition. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 29, 743-766

Fryson, S. (2008). Using discourse analysis and psychological sense of community to understand school transitions. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 36, 452-467.

- Kendrick, C. (online). Talking to children about their school anxiety. *Family Education*.  
[Http://school.familyeducation.com/back-to-school/anxiety/37623.html](http://school.familyeducation.com/back-to-school/anxiety/37623.html)
- LaParo, K. et al. (2000) Teachers' reported transition practices for children transitioning into kindergarten and first grade. *Exceptional Children*, 67, 7-20.
- Legters, N. & Kerr, K. (2001). *Easing the transition to high school: An investigation of reform practices to promote ninth grade success*. The Civil Rights Project.  
<http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/>
- Lorain, P. (online). *Transition to middle school*. National Education Association.  
[Http://www.nea.org/tools/16657.htm](http://www.nea.org/tools/16657.htm)
- Mizelle, N. (1999). *Helping middle school students make the transition into high school*. KidSource. [Http://www.kidsource.com/education/middlehigh.html](http://www.kidsource.com/education/middlehigh.html)
- Mizelle, N. & Irvin, J. (2000). *Transition for middle school into high school*. National Middle School Association. <http://www.nmsa.org>
- Patrick, H. et al (2003). How teachers establish psychological environments during the first days of school. *Teachers College Record*, 105, 1521-1558.
- Peach, S. (2011). *Coping with back to school anxiety*. UNC Healthcare.  
[Http://news.unchealthcare.org](http://news.unchealthcare.org).
- Peisner, L. (2011). Back to school anxiety a problem for kids. *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 3/3/2011. [Http://www.ajc.com](http://www.ajc.com)
- Pianta, R. et al. (1995). The first two years of school: teacher-child relationships and deflections in children's classroom adjustment. *Development and Psychopathology*, 7, 295-312.
- Sirsch, U. (2003). The impending transition for primary to second school: Challenge or threat? *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 27, 385-395.
- Smith, J. (2006) *Transition from middle school to high school*. National Middle School Association. <http://www.nmsa.org>
- Spangler A.T. et al. (2011). Classroom emotional climate as a moderator of anxious solitary children's longitudinal risk for peer exclusion: a child X environment model. *Developmental Psychology*, advance online publication.
- Theriot, M & Dupper, D. (2010). Students discipline problems and the transition from elementary to middle school. *Education and Urban Society*, 42, 205-222.
- 
-