

For Information Contact:

Hillary Turner at 703-907-8536

hturner@psych.org

Jessica Mikulski at 703-907-8640

press@psych.org**For Immediate Release:**

August 19, 2005

Release no. 05-49

Starting School: Tips for Parents

In the coming weeks, millions of children will start school for the first time. For most, this will be an exciting and positive experience. However, it also represents a major transition, which can be challenging for some children. Parents, teachers, and other adults can help reduce the anxiety associated with starting school. The following are specific suggestions:

- Spend time talking to kids about school before classes begin. Describe what school will be like and what will happen throughout the day.
- Bring kids to visit the school in advance. If possible, show them their classroom and other important landmarks, such as the playground, lunchroom, and the rest room.
- Let kids know that it is OK to feel nervous or worried when starting school. Reassure them that everyone feels a little anxious when they do things for the first time.
- Help kids establish a regular routine to get ready for school. Let them participate in making choices about what to wear, what to have for breakfast, or what to bring for lunch.
- If kids are particularly anxious, consider sending a small reminder of home, such as a photograph of the family or a picture of a favorite pet.
- Arrange for kids to spend time with classmates outside the school. Having friends always reduces school anxiety.
- Spend time talking to kids about what happened in school. Chances are they'll have many stories. Give kids plenty of positive feedback about their new experiences.

“Anxiety about starting school usually passes within the first few days or weeks. However, if kids are having excessive or ongoing difficulties (e.g., problems sleeping, frequent temper tantrums, reluctance or refusal to go to school, etc.), further evaluation may be needed,” said David Fassler, M.D., American Psychiatric Association Trustee-at-large and a child and adolescent psychiatrist. “Talk to your child’s teacher and/or family doctor. If difficulties persist, consider a referral to a trained and qualified mental health professional.”

Free public information about mental health is available on APA's consumer Web site at www.healthyminds.org.

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