



Anxiety in Kindergarten

Starting kindergarten is an exciting time in a child's life. It means making new friends, learning new things, and developing independence. However, for some children, this transition is extremely challenging. Instead of seeming like a fun adventure, it can feel terrifying or scary and overwhelming. The first thing to remember is that a certain amount of anxiety (and tears) is normal. Most children (and their parents/caregivers!) have some worries about beginning school. After all, it is a new building, new people, new routines, and all of this is happening without the comfort of a parent/caregiver or family member at their side. Most children will settle into their new environment and routine within a month, but some require extra support to ensure a smooth transition.

Children look to the adults in their lives for guidance and comfort, so it is very important that you are presenting a calm, hopeful exterior (even if you are feeling different on the inside). As a parent/caregiver, you are a powerful role model for your child in showing them how to handle stressful situations. The goal is to model for them healthy ways to cope when feeling stressed – send them a message that you have confidence that they can handle things that feel scary!

This short video from AnxietyCanada has some wonderful tips for setting your child up for a successful start to their school day: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_5eiYlo1XM

**When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it's our job to share
Our calm, not to join their chaos.**

-L.R. Knost

To help set your child up for a good day at school, try some of the following strategies:

- * Remind your child about the **fun things** that are happening at school that day. Paint a mental picture for your child of what to expect. Talk about their new friends, the classroom routine, and their favourite activity stations. Tell your child that you cannot wait to hear about their day when you pick them up after school! (Excitement can be contagious!)
- * When packing your child's lunch, leave an **encouraging note** or even a drawing of a heart to remind them how much they are loved and how brave you know they are being.
- * **Validate** their feelings. It is important for your child to feel heard and know their feelings are valid and real. Making statements such as "there is nothing to be worried about" or "calm down" do not help, and may stop your child from coming to you with their worries. Instead, if your child is looking worried, say "I see that you have some worries and butterflies inside. That's okay, I do too. I know we can be brave." Parents/caregivers can say the same thing over and over in a soothing tone. Soon your child may begin mimicking the message to themselves ("*I am brave. I am brave.*") And remind your child if they are feeling unsure or worried while away from you, they can use their brave statements. The more they hear that they are brave, the more they begin to believe it!
- * If your child is struggling to separate from you, take opportunities to **practice**. For example, when going to the grocery store, ask your child to get something from the other end of the aisle (or slightly down from you). This goal is for them to experience small successes while separating from you. The item you have asked them to retrieve may be a special treat for them (increasing their desire to complete the task), or simply an item on your list, but either way, achieving the goal will increase their confidence! When your child returns to you, praise them with verbal compliments ("*I knew you could do it! You were so brave!*") and physical reinforcement (i.e., high fives, hugs). Let your child know how proud you are of their brave behaviour!
- * Just like we, as adults, are often nervous about **making new friends** in a new environment, your child may be as well. Connect your child with other children in the school and make plans (when possible) to have the children arrive at school at the same time to enter the school together. You can ask your child's teacher who they gravitate towards during the school day and try to meet those parents/caregivers. To encourage your child to come to school, you may consider asking the classroom teacher to choose a certain child in the class to greet your child at the entrance to the kindie pen/kindergarten play area or door. Also, if you know an older child at the school, ask if they can walk with your child.
- * At the beginning of the year, you may want to do **something special** that helps remind your child that you are thinking of them, such as drawing a small heart on your child's wrist as well as your



own or pointing out a freckle you share on your arm. Let your child know that if they miss you during the day, they can look to the heart and know that you have the same heart on your wrist. However, once your child begins to settle in at school, you will want to only draw this heart when they are having a bad day, as you do not want your child to form a connection to this drawing/item and feel that they are unable to function without it.

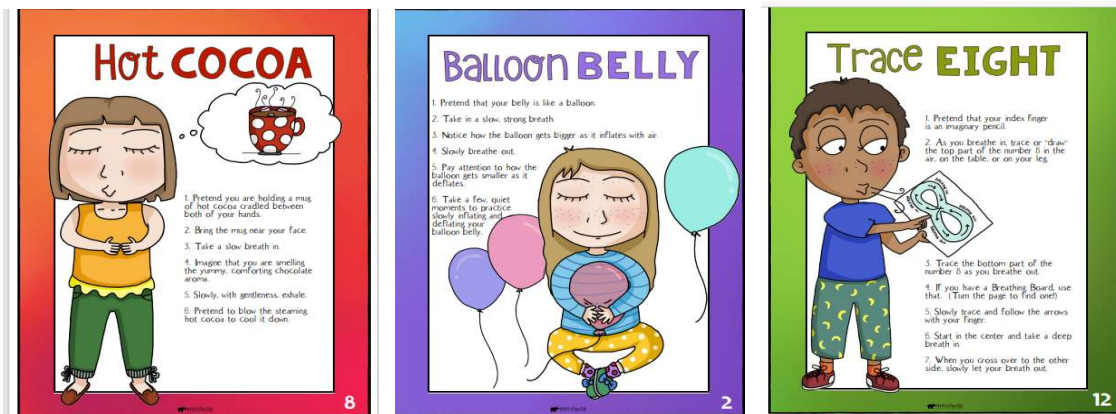
- * Check with your child's teacher if there is a place that your child can put a **family photo**; this would allow your child to 'see' you anytime they need comfort.

- * Similarly, you may want to create a **special fun way to say goodbye** that will make your child look forward to the drop off and help distract them from their worries. For example, a silly handshake, tug on your ear, or a funny saying – something that only happens at drop off. *child to develop a list of rewards for brave behaviour. Rewards do not have to be large, and instead, could be things such as: 5 extra minutes of screen time, being able to choose the family movie, or a cookie. Rewards can be applied to different brave behaviours, with smaller rewards paired with less stressful tasks, and larger rewards with actions that could be deemed more stressful. For more info see www.anxietycanada.com*
- * The **bond** between your child and their teachers within the school, is extremely important. This is the person who will provide them with comfort and reassurance during the day. To encourage this bond, you could try something such as teaching your child a joke of the day that they share with their teacher upon arrival, which will give them a comfortable way to engage with their teacher.

- * Also, **don't be late for pick up**. We recognize that sometimes parents are stuck in traffic, or events come up that we do not anticipate, but a late pick-up may cause a child who is already fearful to become extremely upset; this may negatively impact on drop off the next day.
- * Oftentimes, we as adults want to sneak out when we see that our child is settled and distracted, however, this can result in a fear of abandonment. Instead, give your child a warning that you will be leaving, then **say goodbye with a bright smile** and a reminder that you are excited to hear about all the fun things they did that day. Don't draw out the goodbye as this could actually upset your child who has finally (or will) settle. (Although this may help you feel better about leaving.)



- * Take time when your child is calm to **practice strategies** that they can use if upset. For example, teach them to breathe in deeply through their nose, feeling their belly expand, hold their breath, then release it slowly through their mouth. This **'belly breathing'** is incredibly helpful in quieting the brain, but must be practiced in a calm moment so your child is able to put it into practice when needed. Also, if your child is very upset (i.e., throwing a tantrum), this is not the time to attempt to rationalize with your child – their brains are not in a position to problem-solve. Instead, sit with your child and encourage them to use their belly breathing, only attempting to talk with them when they have calmed. There are many ways to introduce and describe belly breathing, for example:



(Breathing Exercises for Kids by Whole Hearted School Counseling)

- * And most importantly, **remain positive, encouraging and calm**. No matter how you are feeling on the inside, you must maintain a calm, positive face for your child. Our children look to us as their parents/caregivers to learn how to navigate new environments. If you look nervous, they will be nervous. Keep conversations with other adults about your worries to times when your child is not present. This is the time for optimism and confidence that all will be well and your child will do great. Believe in your child's ability to cope!
- * And finally, have confidence in your **child's teacher** to handle your child's feelings and take care of them while they are at school. Know that your child's teacher will reach out to you if they are concerned – they know what is typical for children this age.

Based in part of the work of Stephenie Gold, Director LEAP Clinic; Dr. Lynn Miller, Ph.D., R.Psych; Katia Jitlina, M.Sc.

If you are worried about your child, and your gut is telling you that something is wrong, don't hesitate to reach out for help – it can be a great benefit to both of you. Talk with your child's teacher about your concerns and what they have observed in the classroom. Gathering information about how often your child is experiencing emotional or behavioural difficulties, and what strategies are already being used, will be helpful. Within HWDSB, help is available. Through your child's teacher, you can reach out to the school Social Worker for support and guidance, access presentations and workshops, or learn more about groups that are offered to support parents/caregivers (i.e., Families Worrying Less Together). In the community, speak with your child's doctor/health team, or explore services offered through [Child and Adolescent Services](#) or [CONTACT Hamilton](#).