



How to Handle a Tough First Day of School

By Deborah Farmer Kris

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On her first day of preschool, my daughter woke up ready to go! She was joining the Owl class, and so she put on an owl shirt, helped me pack her lunch, and grabbed her blankie for nap time.

The day didn't go as planned.

About 30 minutes after drop-off, I got a call saying she had been accidentally placed in the wrong class, so they were taking her over to the Bear class instead.

Two hours after that, I got a call asking if she had lunch. Apparently, it got lost in the shuffle of moving rooms. And when I picked her up, she wordlessly handed me her wet blanket. She had spilled her water on it just before nap time.

In these moments, I try to take a deep breath and check my own emotions first. If she had watched me, say, yell at the principal for the placement error or rush in to meet her with a panicked look on my face, it would have escalated an already tough day. What she needed was my reassuring calm that she was okay and that tomorrow would be a little easier.

Kids bring so many emotions to the first week of school: excitement and fear, wonder and worry. So when something goes wrong — from someone mispronouncing their name to not understanding the directions, from missing home to dropping their lunch on the floor — it can feel overwhelming.

Here are four ways you can help kids navigate heading back to school.

1 Talk about what to expect in advance.

Fred Rogers once said, “When children know ahead of time what’s going to happen — and not happen — they can prepare themselves for what’s coming. They can think about it and get used to their feelings about it.”

Talk to your child about what school will look like in simple, practical terms. What are the names of their teachers? What will the morning routine at home look like? What will they need to put in their backpack each day? How will they get to school? What will they eat for lunch? How will they get home?

Watch the Daniel Tiger back-to-school episode where his mom sings, “When we do something new, let’s talk about what we’ll do.” Or read back-to-school books together such as:

- Daniel Goes to School (A Daniel Tiger book), by Becky Friedman
- The Kissing Hand, by Audrey Penn
- Wemberly Worried, by Kevin Henkes
- The King of Kindergarten, by Derrick Barnes

When you talk about what to expect, you can answer many of their unspoken questions — and better help your child navigate those unexpected moments that arise.

2 Prepare for big emotions.

It takes a lot of energy to adjust to a new routine and get to know new teachers and classmates. As one of my favorite kindergarten teachers reminds families, it takes most children six weeks to adjust to a new school year. Those after school tantrums are normal and don’t mean they are having a terrible time at school!

Kids often hold in their emotions during the day. After all, you’ve spent years helping them develop strategies to manage their behavior and work well in groups. But undoubtedly at least one thing happens every day that makes them feel worried, sad, or confused. Those feelings often come spilling out in the safety of home. Create a predictable after school routine, including a snack and some downtime. And when your child does have a meltdown, stay close and stay calm. The storm will pass, and then we can help them work through the emotions behind it.

3 Express your confidence in them.

Children read our emotions for cues about how they should react. If we express our confidence in them, they will pick up on this.

Last year, like just every other parent in America, I was really nervous about what the school year would bring! But the night before the first day, I told my rising first-grader: “I am so excited for all the books you are going to read, all the words you are going to write, all the pictures you are going to draw, all the structures you are going to build, all the math you are going to learn, and all the ways you will become stronger and kinder and more responsible. I love watching you grow!”

When something goes wrong, you can also use it as an opportunity to express your confidence in them:

- Thanks for telling me what happened. We will figure this out together.
- Wow, that sounds like a tough situation at recess. You did the right thing to tell your teacher.
- I know you were really nervous about ____, but you did it. You are so brave.
- Learning something new can be so frustrating. But you keep working at it. That’s perseverance.

4 Reach out to the teacher.

The parent-teacher relationship is so key to helping kids thrive. If you notice your child struggling academically, socially, or emotionally, reach out to your child's teacher. If you have questions about the classroom or your child's progress, reach out! You do not need to wait for the first parent-teacher conference to make contact.

When I taught elementary school, I would send home a letter in August asking, "What do you want me to know about your child? What are some of their strengths and interests? Do they have any hopes or worries about school?" Now that I'm a parent, I send my own email each year, sharing a few details about my kids that I think will be helpful for the teacher.

Finally, it's totally normal if you as the parent are having anxiety about the start of a new year. We are all working so hard to take care of our kids that we sometimes need a reminder to take care of our own needs, too. As Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, California's Surgeon General and a pediatrician, told me, "Our emotional wellbeing is the most important ingredient for our children's emotional wellbeing. Self-care is not selfish."

Deborah Farmer Kris is a writer, teacher, parent educator, and school administrator. She works on parenting projects for PBS KIDS for Parents and writes about education for MindShift, an NPR learning blog. Deborah has two kids who love to test every theory she's ever had about child development! Mostly, she loves finding and sharing nuggets of practical wisdom that can help kids and families thrive — including her own. You can follow her on Twitter @dfkris.

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