



**SCHOOL SMARTS  
FOR FRESH STARTS**

# **BACK TO SCHOOL GUIDE BOOK**

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## Introduction

A new school year means a chance for fresh starts and sometimes frustration as well. From adjusting to new schedules and added activities to managing expectations and figuring out how to balance it all, transitions can be challenging. We're here to support families, parents, and students as they navigate the changes together in this school season. Our experts are sharing valuable information and proven strategies to help make this school year a positive one for learning and growth while maintaining mental well-being.

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## 5 ways to help children through separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is something many families experience, yet it can feel overwhelming when your child struggles with goodbyes.

As part of our School Smarts for Fresh Starts series, Dr. Molly McCarthy, DO, psychiatrist at Rogers Behavioral Health in Nashville, answers common questions and shares practical strategies for childhood separation anxiety.

### What is separation anxiety?

The definition of separation anxiety is the fear or distress that children feel when separated from a parent or caregiver. It's a normal part of development, as young children form strong attachments and may worry about being apart. In most cases, it's a healthy sign of bonding. However, when the worry becomes excessive or disrupts daily life, it may require closer attention.

### When does separation anxiety begin?

Mild separation anxiety is most common between 18 months and 3 years when toddlers are learning independence but still rely heavily on caregivers. Many children experience another wave of separation worry when starting preschool, kindergarten, or even after long breaks.

### What are symptoms of separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety symptoms can show up in different ways, including:

- Crying, clinging, or tantrums when a parent leaves
- Refusing to go to school, daycare, or a friend's house
- Complaining of stomachaches or headaches before separations
- "Checking in" constantly for reassurance

### What causes it?

Separation anxiety is influenced by a combination of development, temperament, and environment. Transitions like moving, starting school, or a change in caregivers can trigger it. Parents' own anxiety about leaving can also unintentionally reinforce a child's worry. For example, if a parent hesitates or looks visibly upset during goodbyes, a child may sense something is wrong and become more distressed.

### What are unhelpful ways for parents to respond?

Some unhelpful ways parents sometimes respond include:

- Sneaking away: While it may avoid an immediate meltdown, it erodes trust
- Prolonging goodbyes: Linger or repeatedly returning can heighten a child's anxiety
- Over-reassuring: Excessive promises, like "I'll be back in exactly 10 minutes!" can make kids more focused on the separation



## What are helpful strategies for parents to try?

I recommend trying some of the following strategies to ease separation anxiety.

1. Practice short separations: Start small, then gradually lengthen time apart.
2. Create a goodbye ritual: A hug, special phrase, or wave from the window can provide consistency.
3. Stay calm and confident: Children take cues from parents' body language and tone.
4. Praise bravery: Acknowledge efforts, even small ones, like walking into school with less hesitation.
5. Prepare in advance: Talk about what will happen and when you'll be back, using simple and honest language.



## Why back-to-school starts with parents building resilience

### Why back-to-school starts with parents building resilience

As summer slowly fades to fall, change is in the air, for children and parents. New schedules and pressures can feel overwhelming, but this season also offers the chance to build resilience.

Rogers Behavioral Health's Dr. Patrick Michaels, PhD, psychologist and regional clinical director, looks at the emotional challenges of back-to-school for our series, School Smarts for Fresh Starts, and how parents taking care of their own mental health can set the tone for the entire family.

## What would indicate the separation anxiety is more concerning?

Separation anxiety may be more than a developmental stage if it:

- Persists beyond age 6 to 7 years old
- Interferes significantly with school, friendships, or family routines.
- Includes frequent physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches without a medical diagnosis
- Causes distress in anticipation of separation days in advance

It may be helpful to consult with your child's pediatrician or a children's mental health professional to explore whether they might have separation anxiety disorder and how to support them.

The key takeaway for parents is this: Separation anxiety is normal and often temporary, but the way parents respond makes a big difference. Calm confidence, consistent routines, and gradual practice can help children build resilience and independence.

### Why can the start of a new school year feel overwhelming?

The transition back to school can bring different challenges for students and parents.

Students may feel some anxiety about going back into the classroom, whether that stems from being with a bunch of new students or seeing friends they haven't been with in a while. A lot changes when kids move from elementary to middle school, or middle school to high school. Even starting a new sports team can stir up nerves and uncertainty. There are many reasons children may have difficulty readjusting.

Parents are also adjusting to new routines and demands, like waking up kids, getting younger ones dressed and to the bus stop or driving them to school on the way to work, helping with homework, and juggling practices and school events, all while managing their own responsibilities.

## Why is resilience important for stressed out parents?

Resilience is important for parents because it sets the tone. It's largely about balance and trying to figure out how to accomplish multiple, sometimes competing, priorities among children.

One of my favorite authors, Dr. Becky Kennedy, PhD, encourages parents to do their own emotional work and to really think about being the leader in the home, modeling healthy boundaries and self-care.

## How do I cope with parenting stress in a healthy way during the school year?

I think one of the biggest things parents can do is to try to work on managing their own emotions and expectations. Being aware of how you're feeling and finding healthy ways to handle stress can make a big difference. I recommend paying attention to your tone of voice when interacting with your children. They pick up on stress and frustration and may reflect those feelings back to you. Managing your emotions helps create a calmer, more supportive environment for everyone.

It's important for parents to:

- Get adequate sleep
- Exercise
- Establish a good routine
- Monitor alcohol consumption

A lot of times kids don't listen to what we say as much as they watch what we do.

## What are signs a parent may be experiencing emotional overload?

Parents certainly have their own feelings and frustrations, too.

Here are seven warning signs that stress may be building:

**1. Disconnection:** Nodding along as a child talks but feeling uninterested or emotionally distant.

**2. Going through the motions:** Doing what needs to be done but it feels empty.

**3. Loss of joy or meaning:** Activities or routines that once felt rewarding now feel dull or draining, like engaging with one's children.

**4. Changes in daily functioning:** Difficulty keeping up with responsibilities at work or maintaining social connections.

**5. Ruminating thoughts:** Repetitive, intrusive thoughts that are hard to shut off.

**6. Isolation:** Pulling away from others or spending excessive time on screens.

**7. Loneliness:** Feeling alone even when people are in the same room.

## Why should parents embrace a growth mindset during the school year?

It's helpful for parents to remember that we're all under development. Each one of us, children included, is a work in progress. We're constantly learning and developing. As Dr. Becky Kennedy says, even when children are experiencing difficulty, they're good inside. When parents embrace that and model a willingness to grow, it shows kids that it's okay to not have it all figured out. That tenderness, gentleness, and compassion can allow us to see that we're all trying to do the best we can with what we have. When we approach ourselves and each other with that kind of grace, our relationships become stronger and more meaningful.

**“Each one of us, children included, is a work in progress.”**

# 5 strategies to manage end-of-summer anxiety

## Why do kids experience end-of-summer anxiety?

It's normal for kids of all ages to feel nervous ahead of a major transition. The end of summer is exactly that—a big transition for kids and teens! There are changes in their daily routines, like when they wake up and go to bed, shifts in time spent with family members or friends, and expectations with homework, test-taking, and extra-curriculars being added back in.

Feeling nervous in anticipation of a new school year is common. If this is something your child struggles with, they're not alone.

## What can that look like in young children vs adolescents?

It's important to remember that children express anxiety differently as they get older.

### Young children

Young children may not always be able to share their worries in words and may instead express fears through their behaviors.

#### That may look like:

- Crying when the end of summer is mentioned
- Having tantrums or freezing when asked to do something related to school
- Becoming clingy with family members

### Older children

Older children may be able to more easily talk about their worries. Look for "what-if" statements such as, "What if I don't like my new teacher?"

### Adolescents

In adolescents, anxiety can look like avoiding the topic of school altogether or masking end-of-summer fears with negative comments such as, "I just don't get why I have to go to school. I'm never going to use most of this in real life."

Remember that at all ages, anxiety may not always "look" like anxiety. Sometimes, irritability about a certain topic can be a sign of anxiety. Avoidance is typically a good indicator of anxiety, which could include trying not to talk about, think about, or engage with the anxiety-producing situation.

## What are strategies for parents to help ease the anxiety?

There are several things that parents can do to help children of all ages with end-of-summer anxiety:

### 1. Ask your child how they're feeling about going back to school and if there's any part of it that makes them feel nervous

Discussing it is perhaps the most important thing to do.

### 2. Try to validate their feelings rather than dismiss them

This can look like saying, "I'm hearing you're nervous about having lots of homework again. It makes sense that you feel that way about a big change." While validation doesn't solve or remove the problem, it can make your child feel heard and connected to you, which increases their willingness to face challenges.

### 3. Ask whether there's anything about the return to school that excites them

Seeing friends again, resuming sports and clubs, or getting back into a favorite subject are common positives of returning to school.

### 4. Talk through what the transition will look like

Have conversations with your child in advance about expectations surrounding bedtimes, wake-up times, and when they should have their school bag packed or their outfits picked out. For younger children, assisting them through these tasks can be helpful, as can practicing getting ready in advance.

### 5. Involve children of all ages in the back-to-school process

Consider shopping together for school supplies (choosing ones they prefer can increase their excitement for the first day!) or going to the school building to register for classes.

Something you can do far in advance is to help your child maintain good habits over the summer. This will make the transition to school less drastic.

#### That can look like:

- Sticking to a consistent sleep-wake routine, even if that is a bit different than during the school year
- Participating in educational clubs or activities to keep the learning going over the summer
- Keeping up with expectations of chores or housework in the absence of schoolwork
- Enrolling your child in light tutoring to keep up good study habits

## How can parents differentiate between normal back-to-school jitters and more serious anxiety?

The difference between "normal" anxiety and more serious anxiety is a matter of how intense, long-lasting, and life-interfering the anxiety becomes. If your child feels anxious but it doesn't affect their choices, it's likely not as severe. "Normal" anxiety will usually increase as the first day of school gets closer and go away or reduce soon afterward.

#### Anxiety may be more serious if your child:

- Becomes more withdrawn from you, family members, or their friends
- Decreases their participation in activities they usually enjoy
- Appears preoccupied with their anxiety throughout the day and is not easily redirected to focus on other conversations or activities
- Isn't easily comforted regarding their concerns about school
- Shows signs their anxiety begins to "spread" to new topics
- Changes sleep, eating, or exercise habits drastically
- Avoids participating in conversations and activities related to end-of-summer and back-to-school

## What can parents do if they suspect it's not typical jitters?

If your child's end-of-summer anxiety seems more intense or long-lasting than what is typical for them, it's important to:

Let them know that you notice.

Ask them what they feel anxious about.

Try the strategies mentioned above.

However, if you feel your child needs more support in making the transition back to school, seek assistance from a counselor or therapist.

*By Sarah R. Lee, PhD, supervising psychologist for OCD and Anxiety Residential Care for Children, and OCD, Anxiety and Depression Residential Care for Young Adults*



## 3 practices to challenge perfectionism

While a new school year offers new opportunities, it can also stir up pressure to perform. For many students, school comes with high expectations, busy schedules, and the desire to get everything just right. But learning doesn't require perfection. With the right support and mindset, students can feel more confident and less overwhelmed.

As part of our back-to-school series, School Smarts for Fresh Starts, Emily Golding, MSW, LCSW, clinical supervisor at Rogers Behavioral Health in West Allis, shares strategies to help manage perfectionism and build a healthier approach to success.

### What is the definition of perfectionism?

Perfectionism is the need or urge to do everything "just right." People who struggle with perfectionism are usually high achievers, yet they often believe their accomplishments aren't good enough and feel they need to work harder. Perfectionism is often something we learn early on in childhood and can turn into an unhelpful pattern throughout our lifetimes.

### How can perfectionism differ from simply having high standards or being detail-oriented?

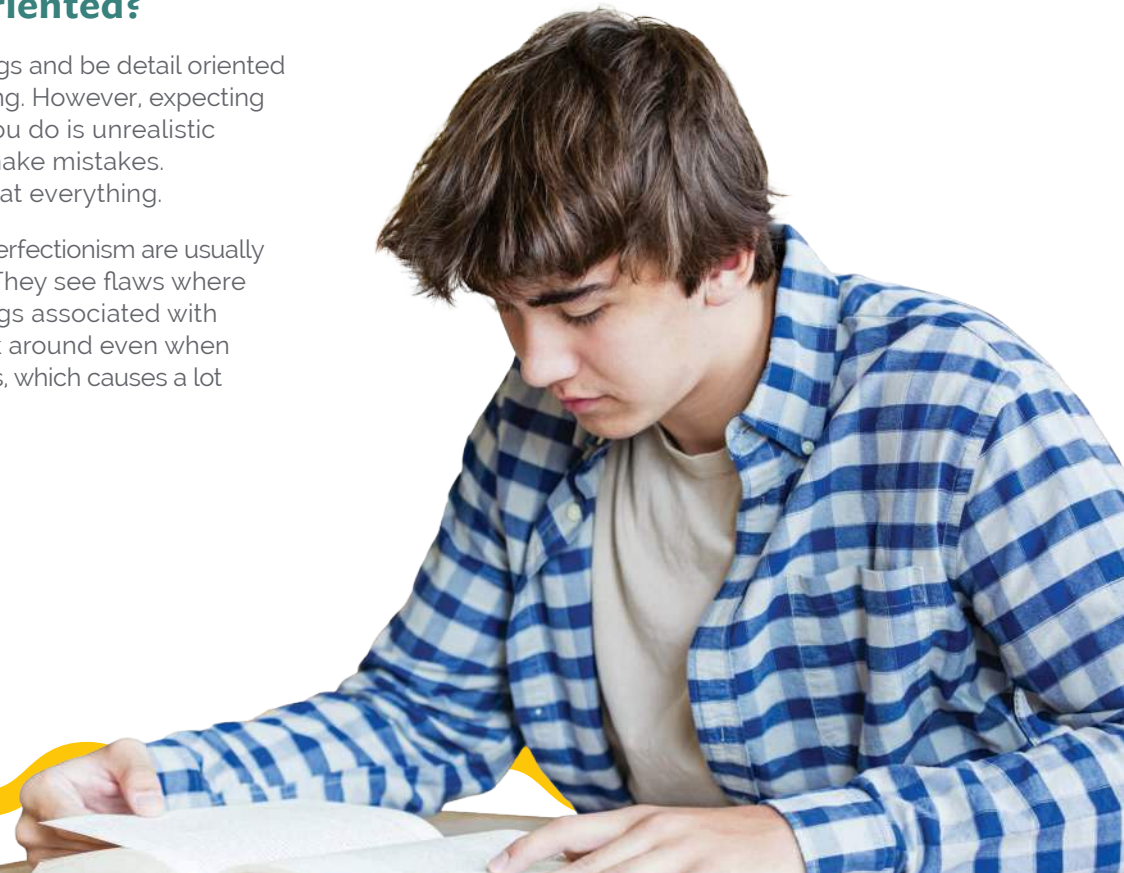
Wanting to be good at things and be detail oriented is not necessarily a bad thing. However, expecting perfection in everything you do is unrealistic because as humans, we make mistakes. It's impossible to be good at everything.

People who struggle with perfectionism are usually very hard on themselves. They see flaws where others may not. The feelings associated with perfectionism tend to stick around even when a person has met their goals, which causes a lot of additional stress.

### What are signs of perfectionism?

People struggling with perfectionism tend to:

- Feel irritable and angry: It's frustrating when they or others are unable to meet their high expectations.
- Turn thoughts and feelings about their abilities or performance inward: Perfectionism can result in self-criticism, which can lead to feelings of shame and thoughts such as, "I'm not good enough" or "I'm a failure."
- Worry what others may think about them: Preoccupation with how others perceive them can result in anxiety in social situations or school refusal.
- Feel overwhelmed: In their efforts to be "perfect" they end up making mistakes or giving up due to feeling overwhelmed and/or taking on too much.
- Try to be precise and avoid errors: Perfectionists tend to complete tasks over and over to get them right or redo part or all of what they've done. In order to avoid mistakes, they may engage in activities with more care and attention than is necessary.



### In your experience, what mental health challenges are most associated with perfectionism?

Perfectionism is associated with many different mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, OCD, and trauma. It can interfere with a person's ability to engage in enjoyable activities because of the belief that they're not as valuable or productive as other types of activities linked to performance or achievement. As mentioned above, perfectionism can also cause people to be very hard on themselves, which can lead to a negative self-image.

### What are some practical ways a person can manage perfectionistic thinking?

I have several suggestions for how a person can manage perfectionistic thinking.

#### 1. Be mindful of perfectionistic thoughts and feelings throughout the day.

Notice thoughts such as, "I can't turn this in until I know I'll get 100%," or if you're going through tasks very slowly and precisely, and/or reviewing, checking, or rereading over and over. The more aware we are of these perfectionistic tendencies, the more we can practice responding to them in alternative ways.

#### 2. Try self-compassion, especially when faced with not meeting expectations or making mistakes.

This could look like using more compassionate or balanced statements when noticing negative self-talk, such as "I'm doing the best I can," "I'm still learning", or "It's okay to make mistakes."

#### 3. Practice not being perfect!

Leave something unfinished, don't fix a spelling mistake, or engage with a new or unfamiliar activity without self-judgment.

### What advice would you give to someone who suspects their perfectionism is impacting their mental health but isn't sure what to do next?

I would recommend talking with trusted friends and family to see if they notice these tendencies and have any concerns.

If you notice that you're more anxious, self-conscious, overwhelmed, or disengaged from activities you used to enjoy, it may be time to seek professional help.

### How does treatment help a person move toward self-compassion or flexibility?

Treatment can provide different tools to help a person cope with difficult thoughts and feelings as they arise. Talking to someone about specific perfectionistic thoughts and behaviors can help a person better understand themselves and learn how to manage them in the future. Additionally, treatment will help a person identify and work toward individualized goals to help them challenge perfectionism and how it impacts their mental well-being.

The most common and effective treatment for perfectionism is cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, which helps a person challenge negative thoughts and change how they respond to perfectionistic urges.

### How can loved ones support a person who struggles with perfectionism?

If you're a parent, teacher, or friend who is concerned about perfectionism in someone you know, it can be helpful to do additional research and educate yourself on the signs and symptoms of common anxiety disorders related to perfectionism, such as OCD in addition to mood disorders like depression, or PTSD. Talk with the person about any potential stress or anxiety they may be feeling and encourage them to seek help as needed.

**“It's okay to make mistakes.”**

## Anticipatory anxiety: 4 ways parents can support students

Students heading back to school often feel a mix of excitement and nerves. For some, that anticipation can turn to ongoing worry about the unknown.

As part of our School Smarts for Fresh Starts series, Dr. Andrew Butchart, DO, psychiatrist and medical director for OCD and Anxiety residential care for adolescents, shares what anticipatory anxiety can look like in students and when to seek additional support.

### What is anticipatory anxiety and how common is it?

Anticipatory anxiety is feeling worried or uneasy about an event or situation that hasn't happened yet. It's very common. Most people can relate to feeling anxious and uncertain about how things in the future will turn out.

### What can anticipatory anxiety look like in students?

A child could express concerns about how they'll connect socially in a new group of people, whether they'll feel supported by their teacher, or if they can stay resilient enough to succeed academically. They may also struggle to pay attention or focus as a result of ongoing worry.

People can experience physical symptoms, such as:

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Muscle tension
- Shortness of breath
- Increased heart rate

### What are strategies for parents to help their students who may be experiencing anticipatory anxiety?

Four strategies I recommend are:

**1. Check in.** Ask a child to share what they're thinking or feeling, especially if you notice a change in behavior or find that they're avoiding situations.

**2. Validate.** I think it's important to help a child recognize that we all get a little anxious before a new or big event. There's also such a thing as good stress, which is the idea of wanting to be amped up to give a presentation or play in a game so we're performing at our best.

**3. Point out evidence of past successes.** For example, a parent might ask a child entering 3rd grade how it's similar to starting 2nd grade and having a new teacher. Help them think through how they were able to manage that change.

**4. Reassure.** Provide encouragement that the child can navigate whatever they're anxious about. It can get tricky if a child is repeatedly asking a question and a parent is providing the same answer. In that case, I would gently say you've answered their question and not give in to their anxiety.

### What are signs a person with anticipatory anxiety might need extra support?

If a parent is seeing anticipatory anxiety on the first or second day of a new school year for example, that is pretty typical. I would be concerned if there is a pattern.

Signs to watch for include:

- Ruminating
- Seeking constant reassurance
- Asking to avoid school or a particular event
- Seeming distracted or consumed by worry to the point that they can't enjoy activities they normally like, such as starting a new school year or engaging in hobbies or sports

### How does treatment help with anticipatory anxiety?

Mental health clinicians help normalize anticipatory anxiety and teach skills to manage it. Oftentimes, people get stuck in thinking about the worst-case scenarios, such as a student fearing they won't make friends or won't get along with their teachers.

We encourage a more balanced view by also exploring "best-case scenarios," like imagining this could be the best school year yet, making new friends, or having a favorite teacher.

Even if something is really challenging, it's important to remember that it won't last forever, and it's always a good idea to talk to a parent or trusted adult for help making the adjustment.



## 5 ways for families to redefine success and help kids thrive

We live in a world that rewards performance and productivity, but that constant push can quietly drain kids' joy, self-esteem, and sense of purpose.

As part of our School Smarts for Fresh Starts series, Dr. Peggy Scallon, MD, DFAPA, DFAACAP, chief medical officer at Rogers Behavioral Health's Oconomowoc campus and medical director of Depression Recovery residential care for adolescents, explains what achievement culture looks like, how it affects families, and what we can do to redefine success in a healthier, more meaningful way.

### What is achievement culture?

As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, I talk every day with kids and families who are struggling under the weight of expectations—grades, sports, college, activities, and social status. Many parents tell me they just want their child to be happy and confident, yet somehow family life has turned into a treadmill of achievement.

Achievement culture is the mindset that a person's worth comes mainly from what they do—their grades, awards, or college admissions—rather than who they are. For many young people, it can feel like there's no margin for error: the next test, game, or audition always looms.

While ambition and hard work are valuable, achievement culture can make kids believe success is the only thing that matters, overshadowing curiosity, creativity, and joy.

### What is the impact on children and families?

**When achievement becomes the main focus, kids may begin to feel:**

- Anxious
- Exhausted
- Disconnected from themselves

They can internalize the belief that they are only as good as their last performance.

Families feel this, too. Parents often sense invisible competition from peers, schools, or the college process, and worry that if they don't keep up, their child will fall behind. Over time, conversations can start revolving around grades and goals instead of shared experiences or laughter. Children need to know that their value doesn't depend on achievement; they are loved and accepted just for being themselves.

### How has the pressure to succeed changed over the years?

The pressure has grown dramatically. Academic rigor starts earlier, extracurricular schedules are packed, and college admissions feel more competitive and unpredictable.

Social media intensifies it all as kids see polished versions of others' successes and can feel like everyone else is doing better. Even well-meaning parents get pulled into the swirl, wanting to give their children every advantage. It's no one's fault. It's the water we're all swimming in, but it's worth noticing when that water starts to feel too deep.

### What are the signs that a child is feeling overwhelmed?

Children rarely say outright that they're under too much pressure. Instead, you might see:

- Emotional signs: irritability, tearfulness, withdrawal, or anxiety
- Physical signs: headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, or difficulty sleeping
- Behavioral signs: loss of motivation, perfectionism, or procrastination
- Social signs: pulling away from friends or activities they once enjoyed

These are signals that your child may be running on empty. A gentle check-in focused on listening, not fixing, can open the door to relief.

### Is there a healthy balance between achievement and letting kids be kids?

Definitely. Kids thrive when they're challenged and when they have space to rest, play, and explore freely. Balance doesn't mean lowering standards, it means broadening what we value.

Praise effort and curiosity as much as results. Encourage downtime without guilt. Let kids know that mistakes are part of learning and life. The goal is not to eliminate ambition, but to connect it to well-being and authenticity.

### How can families redefine success in ways that prioritize well-being?

Start by asking, "What kind of person do we want our child to become?" Most parents say things like kind, confident, curious, and resilient. That's a very different definition of success from a transcript or trophy shelf.

**Here are a few ways to keep that vision front and center:**

1. Support genuine interests rather than padding résumés
2. Praise persistence, creativity, and teamwork
3. Protect sleep and family connection time
4. Model balance and self-compassion in your own life
5. Celebrate small moments of joy and growth, not just big wins

When kids feel loved and supported for who they are, they build a sturdy foundation for lifelong motivation, confidence, and happiness.

Achievement isn't the enemy. It's the imbalance that hurts us. The world will always push kids to do more and be more, but families can offer something countercultural and deeply healing: the message that they are enough right now.

When success is defined not just by performance but by purpose, kindness, and connection, kids grow up not only capable, but whole.



# Why letting kids handle hard things is good for their mental health

Whether it's homework stress, friendship drama, or tension with teachers, most students will face challenges at some point during the school year. As a parent, watching your child navigate those tough moments can stir up stress and self-doubt.

As part of our School Smarts for Fresh Starts series, Rogers Behavioral Health's Carly Fox, clinical services manager at Rogers in Seattle, shares common parenting pitfalls and five supportive ways to help a child through difficulties and disappointments.

## Why can parents struggle when their kids are experiencing challenges?

When kids feel challenged, anxious, or overwhelmed, parents can feel unsettled. They might question their own parenting skills or wonder whether they've done enough to prepare their kids for adversity. Interestingly enough, kids are having a similar internal experience. They're asking questions like, "Can I get through this?" "Will I be okay?" When children are lacking their own confidence, they rely on the people around them to lift them up.

Consider the example of a toddler walking toward a new piece of playground equipment at the park, like a tall slide. Oftentimes, they'll look back to see their parents' reactions before deciding whether to go for it. If they see their parents behaving calmly and confidently, giving a thumbs-up, or saying, "You've got this," they're going to internalize that and feel reassured. That child is much more likely to eventually go down the slide than the child who looks back and sees their parent asking, "Are you sure?" with a worried look on their face.

When parents jump in to prevent their child from feeling challenging emotions, everyone feels good in the moment. The child feels relieved, and the parent feels like they've done a good job helping their child avoid discomfort. It makes sense why this pattern repeats itself because both parties feel better. However, over time, this pattern can unintentionally stifle emotional and mental growth.

## Why is it important for kids to experience difficulties and disappointments?

In my professional opinion, it boils down to this: the more kids experience situations not going their way, the more opportunities they have to build resilience.

### Resilience is tied to:

- Confidence
- Bravery
- Courage to try new things
- Sturdy sense of self

These are the traits we want kids to develop and practice.

I encourage parents to do something that feels counterintuitive, which is to allow your child to step into hard situations, then resist the urge to rescue them from the discomfort that follows. It's in these moments of struggle, when children face unknown or stressful situations and come out on the other side, that real growth happens.

## What are common mistakes parents make when trying to help their child through challenges?

I've talked with many parents who, understandably, want their kids' lives to be easy. That makes sense to me. Wanting to shield your child from pain or difficulty is a natural and loving instinct. At the same time, when we smooth out difficulties too often and try to remove every obstacle, we also remove the chance for kids to learn that they're capable of navigating challenging situations.

**“You’ve got this.”**

One common mistake I see parents make is stepping in too quickly to help. This can actually get in the way of their child building the skills to practice handling difficulties and getting through them on their own.

For example, some parents worry that their child can't handle going to summer camp, joining a soccer team, or hanging out with a new group of friends because it might make them anxious, so they pull them out of those opportunities. This inadvertently sends the message that they can't handle that stressor. Anxiety stems from difficulty tolerating uncertainty. When parents can reframe their role as giving their children more opportunities to face and work through uncertainty rather than fewer, their children will feel more confident and capable.

## What are more helpful ways to support kids through difficulties and disappointments?

I have five recommendations for how parents can support their kids in working through difficulties and disappointments:

- 1. Regulate your own emotions.** Find ways to manage your own feelings of discomfort. It's stressful watching the people we love struggle and experience anxiety. The calmer parents remain externally the better, even when it doesn't match how you feel internally.
- 2. Send the message:** "You've got this." By resisting the urge to step in and shield your child from difficult situations, you're signaling to them you know they're capable and competent. You're giving them the opportunity to learn two very important lessons: the worst-case scenario doesn't usually happen, and if it does, they can probably handle it.
- 3. Allow your child to sit with hard emotions instead of rushing in to fix anxious or uncomfortable feelings.** They will recognize they're capable of managing them and will learn that hard feelings pass. Parents can model for children that anxiety is an acceptable and expected reaction to unknown situations, so we don't need to fix it or immediately wish it away. When we treat anxiety as a normal emotional state, it can feel a lot more tolerable.
- 4. Validate their emotional experience without problem solving.** Consider saying something like, "It makes sense that school was hard today. I hear you. I wouldn't like it either if I didn't have anywhere to sit in the lunchroom." Then pause —this is the most

important (and hardest!) part. Of course, the urge to problem solve will always be there and you might be tempted to offer suggestions like, "How about texting a friend to see if they want to sit together" or "You can call me at lunch if you feel lonely." When we prioritize understanding problems over solving them, children are allowed to think through their own solutions instead of relying on the advice of their parents.

**5. Look for opportunities to practice being brave.** I encourage parents to look for opportunities for new and brave things their child can do. For younger kids, it could be something small like saying thank you to someone at the store or playing in a different room where they can't see their parents. For slightly older kids, it could be walking to a friend's house (or part of the way) on their own, calling the school themselves to let them know they're tardy, or raising their hand in class. For teens, it might be signing up for a class that none of their friends are in, running an errand without help, or applying for a job they know they might not get. Parents can ask themselves: how can I give my child safe chances to feel uncertain so they can practice sitting with discomfort and build confidence in their ability to handle it?

## How can parents tell the difference between what might be a temporary struggle and a more serious issue?

**I think a lot about what's called developmental domains, which include:**

- A person's social life
- Ability to take care of their body
- Getting regular sleep
- Maintaining academic progress

I would pay attention to significant and ongoing changes in one or more of those areas.

I would also watch for ripple effects. If doing one hard thing makes other things more challenging, that might be a sign that either there's a high level of anxiety to be concerned about or that a parent needs to slow down the exposure to hard things.

Let's say that your child can muscle through practice with the new soccer team, but they're so nervous about it that they're not eating or sleeping, and they're so drained that it's hard to go to school. That's probably a sign that there's a higher level of anxiety at play and professional help may be needed.

# 6 signs a child is struggling with friendships and how to help

Children of all ages, from toddlers to teens, experience and enjoy friendships. They play an important role in their development.

As part of our Fresh Starts for School Smarts series, Allison Dixon, LMSW, therapist at Rogers Behavioral Health in Atlanta, shares how parents can support healthy friendships and spot signs that they might be struggling.

## At what age do children typically start forming close friendships, and what does that look like?

Younger children see friends as someone being kind to them or someone to play with, while school-aged kids between 6 and 12 start to value and form close relationships. They tend to care a lot about fitting in and having equal give and take. For example, if a child invites a friend to a sleepover, they may expect an invite in return. Close friendships can look like wanting to sit next to each other at lunch, sharing snacks, and doing fun activities together, such as going to an arcade, movies, swimming, or bowling.

Kids 12 and older begin to develop deeper connections and start to understand how they impact their relationships. In addition to spending time together, they may enjoy texting, calling, and connecting on social media. Adolescents often navigate peer pressure and identity as they develop friendships.

## How do you define a “healthy friendship” for a school-aged child?

While kids care about being likeable, a healthy friendship should still involve things like kindness, respect, having fun, and caring about each other’s thoughts and feelings, even if opinions differ.

## What are some common signs that a child is struggling socially at school?

Your child might share with you that they don’t have any friends or may avoid the topic all together. They may feel awkward or confused about how to make and maintain relationships.

Social difficulties can show up in a variety of ways. **Some common signs you might observe with other kids or even at home with family include:**

1. Having difficulty carrying on conversations
2. Isolating at a social gathering
3. Refusing to go to school or leave home
4. Struggling to get along with others
5. Having trouble being flexible
6. Unable to pick up on social cues or body language

## How can parents tell the difference between a child who’s just shy or introverted and one who might be dealing with anxiety, bullying, or isolation?

A child who keeps to themselves may enjoy solo activities, like reading or painting. However, they still show an interest in making and keeping friends and might have one or two instead of being in a group.

Children dealing with bullying or isolation may seem anxious, sad, angry, jealous, and shut down.

## What mental health concerns can a child experience if they have persistent trouble making or keeping friends?

Kids consistently struggling socially may be dealing with underlying mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, OCD, trauma, ADHD, autism, and other developmental concerns.

Healthy friendships nurture a child’s mental health by helping to create a support system where kids feel confident, safe, and provide a sense of belonging.

## How can a parent support skills needed for friendships at home?

Parents can help by:

- Modeling healthy relationships with friends and family.
- Initiating spending time with their children playing games, reading books, or watching television shows that talk about friendships.
- Discussing boundaries and what to look for in a friend.
- Supporting children’s socialization efforts by offering to help with a carpool, hosting sleepovers, or signing up for sports and clubs where they can make friends with similar hobbies and interests.

## When should a parent consider reaching out for extra support, like school counselors or social skills groups?

I recommend considering reaching out for extra support if you notice that your child is:

- Withdrawing at home
- Struggling with schoolwork and attendance
- Losing interest in activities they once enjoyed
- Exhibiting changes in eating, sleeping, and keeping up with hygiene or chores
- Displaying changes in mood, such as increased sadness or irritability
- Getting into fights, running away, or other dangerous behaviors
- Sharing thoughts of death, harming themselves or others

Consider contacting a mental health professional, your child’s doctor, or school counselors to have your child evaluated and connected to resources.

## How do I build my child’s confidence so they’re more willing to try again socially after a hard experience?

Having discussions about their challenges can help kids understand what went wrong and what they can try to do differently. Providing empathy, curiosity, validation, and acceptance about their lives supports children overcoming difficulties and encourages them to try again when things get hard.

Consider starting a conversation by saying one of the following statements:

- “I know that it’s been hard to make new friends this year. Do you want to brainstorm ideas you can try?”
- “Why do you think it turned out that way?”
- “I’m proud of you for putting yourself out there. How did it go?”
- “How are you feeling about trying again? What do you think is getting in the way?”
- “I can tell this means a lot to you and I’m here to listen. What happened?”



# Teen mental health: Why routines matter

We often associate routines with young children—bedtime stories, bath time, and snack schedules—but teenagers benefit just as much from consistent daily routines.

As part of our School Smarts for Fresh Starts series, Meg Troestler, LPC, clinical supervisor at Rogers Behavioral Health Silver Lake Outpatient Center in Oconomowoc, shares common roadblocks and six important aspects of a successful routine.

## Why are routines important for mental health in teens?

Adolescents face big emotional, physical, and mental changes, and a routine offers something they can rely on. It brings predictability to their day, which can reduce stress and support their mental health.

Research backs this up. Routines have been linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression in teens, especially when they include enough sleep, regular meals, physical activity, and downtime. Routine also strengthens executive functioning; the brain's ability to plan, manage time, and stay organized, which is still developing in adolescence.

## What makes a successful routine?

A great routine doesn't need to be strict. It just needs to be consistent.

Here are six important parts of a teens' routine:

### Sleep:

Teens need eight to 10 hours per night, although most fall short.

### Meals:

Regular, balanced meals help keep energy and mood stable.

### Family time:

Even short check-ins or shared meals matter.

### Screen-free time:

Avoiding screens 30 to 60 minutes before bed promotes sleep quality.

### Movement:

Physical activity reduces stress and supports mental health.

### Study time:

Ideally, schedule time for studying at the same time each day to build focus.

## What are common routine roadblocks?

Life gets busy, especially during the school year. You may find these common barriers to keeping a routine:

**Overscheduling:** Sports, clubs, and homework can crowd out downtime and sleep.

**Technology distractions:** Phones and social media can eat up hours if left unchecked or monitored.

**Inconsistent expectations:** If parents aren't in agreement, routines fall apart quickly.

**Teen pushback:** Adolescents may resist anything that feels controlling or childish.

You don't need to eliminate every challenge; just recognize and plan around them.

## How can I create a routine that works for everyone?

Back-to-school season is the perfect time to reassess routines. Rather than dictating a schedule, involve your teens in creating one. Ask them what's working and what's not.

Here are some guiding points to try:

- Hold a family meeting to outline key commitments, like school start times and practices.
- Prioritize sleep. Make it a family value, not a punishment.
- Use a shared calendar or app to track responsibilities.
- Let teens choose when they do homework or unwind, within clear boundaries.

## How can parents provide support without being controlling?

Supporting routines doesn't mean micromanaging. Instead of nagging, ask open-ended questions such as, "When do you want to start homework tonight?" Give choices where you can, like how they wind down at night, while keeping certain expectations firm, such as no phones at bedtime.

Most importantly, model the behavior. If you want them to unplug, do the same.

Routines aren't about control, they're about care. They help teens feel safe, supported, and more in control of their busy lives.





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