

Supporting children through back-to-school worries

New terms bring new places, new faces, and time apart from the people children feel safest with. A bit of worry here isn't a sign that something's wrong, it's a sign that something matters.

Here's a few simple, evidence-based ways to help children move forward even when they feel nervous.

For parents

- Name it, don't fix it. Try: "It makes sense to feel nervous, this is new." Avoid rushing to talk them out of the feeling and instead be curious, including how this feeling shows up in their body. These are micro ways to practice acceptance like noticing and naming, rather than trying to fix or change
- Ask what they're looking forward to, not just what they're worried about. Friends? Golden time? Their favourite lunch?
- Keep goodbyes short, warm, and predictable. Long goodbyes often feed the worry rather than easing it.
- Notice and name their courage afterwards: "You felt worried and you still went in, that's brave."

For teachers

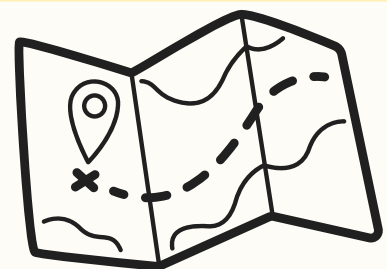
- Expect a wobble in the first weeks — it's developmentally normal.
- Build in small, early wins: a shared task, a buddy system, a task they're good at.
- Avoid over-reassuring or minimising ("there's nothing to worry about") as this can unintentionally suggest the feeling itself is the problem.
- Reinforce approach, not just calm: praise the trying, not the not-crying.

A metaphor children respond to: the brave explorer

Explorers don't wait to feel brave before they set off, they feel the nerves and bring them along for the journey. Try inviting a child to be a brave explorer: their fear can come in the backpack, BUT it doesn't get to hold the map. Ask: "What would the brave explorer do next?"

Try this: Pack a brave explorer kit

Draw or write down the child's worry on a small piece of paper and "pack" it into a drawn backpack alongside the things from school that they're excited about. This could be a friend's name, a favourite subject, a fun activity. The worry travels with them; it just doesn't take over.



Parents – say this at the school gate

"I can see you're feeling worried. That makes sense, it is new. I know you can feel worried and still go in. I'll be back at [time]. I love you, off you go."

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The idea behind this approach

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) doesn't aim to get rid of fear. It helps children carry their fear with them, rather than waiting for it to disappear first.

The goal isn't a fearless child; it's a child who can feel scared and still walk through the school gate, because they know what's waiting for them on the other side matters.