

Stick to the script

Ease back-to-school jitters with the right words. BY LISA EVANS



Emotions run high for both parent and child on the first day of school. While you may feel nostalgic watching your little one strap on his backpack, you're also excited about his starting a new and important life phase. Children, too, can feel anxious about entering a new environment. Your parting words can make the start of school a smooth tradition or a complete disaster.

DON'T SAY: DON'T WORRY

Although your first instinct may be to reassure your child at the mention of every fear, Sarah Chana Radcliffe, Toronto psychologist and author of *The Fear Fix*, says dismissing emotions

leaves the child stuck with their fears.

DO SAY: I KNOW YOU'RE SCARED AND THAT'S OK

Acknowledge the emotion by repeating it, assuring them that it's a normal feeling and that it won't last forever. This can allow nervous children to process their fears faster.

DON'T SAY: I'LL STAY AS LONG AS YOU WANT

Jennifer Brown, kindergarten teacher at Toronto's Silverthorn Community School, says letting your child think you'll stay only prolongs the inevitable separation. "There's a transference of

who they turn to for their needs and comfort and that doesn't happen if mom and dad are still there," says Jennifer.

DO SAY: I'M GOING HOME AND I'LL MEET YOU OUTSIDE AT 3:30

Simply saying "I'm leaving" can worsen separation anxiety. Sarah recommends talking about what you're going to do while your child is at school. "Knowing your activities helps ground them and allows them to still feel connected to you," she says. Pointing out a tree or a fence post where you'll be waiting for them at the end of the day can also help to calm their anxiety and gives finality to the day.

DON'T SAY: I MISSED YOU

"In many cases, the first separation can be harder on the parent than the child," says Sarah. Even if you did miss your child, sharing how sad the separation made you feel will burden your child with guilt and makes it more difficult to enjoy school.

DO SAY: TELL ME ABOUT YOUR DAY

Creating a ritual to share stories about your day can make going to school seem fun and exciting.

DON'T SAY: WHY ARE YOU STILL UPSET?

Don't worry that something is wrong with your child if they take longer than others to adjust. Brown says it isn't uncommon for kids to take a month or two to get over separation anxiety. If your child is still struggling after two months, it may be time to get some professional help.

DO SAY: I KNOW THIS HAS BEEN DIFFICULT, BUT IT WILL BE OK

Talking about school in a positive way and reinforcing the idea that school is important and fun can help ease the transition. "They've got a lot of school ahead of them so you want those initial years to be positive," says Jennifer. ○

Get more back-to-school tips and tricks at ParentsCanada.com/backtoschool.

THE ANXIOUS BODY

The start of school is bound to cause butterflies to swirl in the tummy of both parent and child. Physical reactions to anticipatory anxiety are normal, says psychologist Sarah Chana Radcliffe. If anxiety persists, consider these natural remedies in consultation with your healthcare provider.

→ **Chamomile Tea**
This child-friendly herbal beverage can be sipped before bed to help calm mild nervousness.

→ **Yoga**
Children can benefit from yoga because it helps them practise relaxation techniques such as breathing and meditation, which come in handy in anxious situations or at bedtime.

→ **Muscle Relaxation**
Lay with your child at bedtime with the lights out and do a toe-to-head muscle stretch and release. Start with wiggling the toes and work your way up to the head, joint by joint.

→ **A hot bath**
Another great way to ease nerves and promote sleep is a long, warm bath before bed. Fingers may look like raisins, but a good soak can help your child prepare for sleep.

→ **Still sleepless?**
Speak to your child's healthcare provider about other treatment alternatives.