



EASE TRANSITIONS TO SCHOOL OR BACK TO SCHOOL AND BEYOND

By Marni Fuente

Summer is a nostalgic time for parents and a joyous, traditional break from the school routine for young children. However, transitioning to school or back to school in the fall—with its early rising, backpack-filling, new schedules and routines and homework—is exciting but also anxiety and stress producing for parents and children alike. Back-to-school or the start of "big kid" school represents a roller coaster of emotions for all family members and for different reasons, but these feelings are real and sometimes tumultuous, having an impact on the entire family.

Being aware of the bundled emotions at the start of the new school year and taking a mindful, self-aware approach can help set the entire family up for success.

Remember, even the most well-adjusted child may feel apprehensive about the unknowns of the new school year. This is especially true for children transitioning into kindergarten. Kindergarten is one of many large transitions in a young child's life that include transitions from elementary to middle school, middle to high school and perhaps a move to a new school or community. Other stressors can come from changes in a child's social support system like a new family structure through death or divorce, a close friend moving away, or simply the adjustment to a new teacher with a different personality and expectations.

Young children often have difficulty connecting the "what" and "why" of their feelings. This can lead to a flood of emotions and behaviors. It's important for parents, adults and teachers to listen to their children respectfully instead of dismissing their feelings or trying to 'fix' their emotions. Rather, we may allow children to feel and express their emotions: sad, mad, angry, frustrated, annoyed, nervous, excited, overwhelmed and a host of mixed feelings. We are their support system, so to do this successfully and in the most conscious way, we must be aware that the world is a different place than the one we



calm the chaos

supportive helps children build strong and lasting social-emotional, self-regulatory and resiliency skills. These are life skills which will help children during significant, transitional life stages and to cope well with all of life's challenges.

Stepping out of our busy lives to listen can also be a gift for us as adults. As we mature on our own life paths, we can learn, grow and try new approaches beyond those we inherited from our own parents.

One of my favorite sayings is, "Being in the present is a gift, that's why it's called the present." Our children have a wonderful way of reminding us how important living in the present can be; they truly live in the moment, awakening to the new day with a clean slate. Parents, teachers and caregivers often carry the weight of yesterday and years past on their shoulders. We can and should try to give ourselves the "gift" of a new day—a reset and restart with the sunrise. What we are tasked with, having and helping young children develop emotional balance and coping skills, is not easy and I often remind myself of this as a parent, friend and professional.

If we are mindful, calm adults, operating in our executive or rational-thinking states-of-mind, then we are able to reflect on what's happening to our children during key transitions and can help them negotiate their confluence of emotions ranging from excitement to distress.

Entering kindergarten is a major milestone in a young child's life after attending preschool. It represents the transition to "big kid" school with its alternate schedule and routines—new drop-off and pick-up routines, new teachers, bigger classes, the potential for changing classrooms,

grew up in. The landscape of the world and school looks different in every way—from the use of technology in smart classrooms and homes to dwindling schoolyards and green space. Expectations for the future look different and we are all unique. Every child will see, relate and react to the world in diverse and unique ways.

Adults in any child's life will need to respond with compassion by being present, "in the here and now," and by trying to see and understand each child's perspective. Active listening, which requires being fully present and attentive, helps adults and children engage in meaningful and relatable conversations with each other, which develops strong connections and relationships. The more we really hear children's feelings as a reflection of their needs, the easier it is to understand them—without needing to agree with them or feel responsible for their emotions. Taking this time with our children and being

older children and a larger school environment. There is also the social-emotional pressure of being the youngest, making new friends and fitting in. Some of these are immediate adjustments which would be difficult and stressful enough for adults, let alone young children. If parents and young children have practiced mindfulness and self-calming techniques ahead of the kindergarten (or any school) transition, then everyone, adults and children alike, will be better self-regulated when the stress and tension rise and it will be clear how effective these mindfulness strategies can be during crunch time.

Children entering kindergarten are still operating in an emotional state, and often can't isolate and explain all of their feelings, which elicits other behaviors. Taking time as a family to read, reflect and have conversations about going to "big kid" school for the first time helps children connect with their feelings, identify their confusing behaviors, build confidence in problem-solving, relate better to others and sort out the world around them.

Adults often forget how BIG the world can be to children—how their imagination and fears may drive their actions and leave them feeling vulnerable. We, as adults, may feel some of the same emotions but we must try to react differently and see through a different lens—one through which we can draw on prior experience in which we proceeded to solve problems and conflict using our executive state functions—our calm, rational selves. We may not always do it right, but we are evolving and can be more aware of our choices in handling life's stressors.

The goal for parents, teachers and family is to be aware of children's feelings and be supportive without intensifying children's worries. Adults will need to pause and reflect in order to respond positively to their children's needs rather than trying to change or dismiss their children's feelings or fix situations.

Saying, "Shhh," placating feelings or losing our tempers will not help children be problem-solvers. Adults will need to pause in order to be positively responsive and not reactive. We are moving so fast all the time, meeting the needs of the world and responding to a constant influx of information, that we may need to give ourselves a moment to regroup, breathe some fresh air for a few minutes and return from an emotional state to a calm, executive state.



VISIT

calmhcc.org and earlyliteracymatters.com for more information, family tips and professional development.



TAKE ON YOUR STATE OF MIND AND FEELINGS

As this summer ends, we can all try to slow each day down and do a feelings "check-in" on ourselves and then on our partners and children. We can notice topics that may come up during the conversation and circle back to them for follow-up. We can also observe our children at play to help them identify and handle their emotions.

Here are a few recommended mindful exercises and tips for helping children and families successfully ease back in to school:

• **PERFORM A "CHECK-IN" ON YOUR OWN STRESS LEVEL BECAUSE CHILDREN CAN FEED OFF OF OUR EMOTIONAL STATES.**

Children can't download CALM and manage their emotions if the adults in their lives are unable to do the same. If you are in an anxious, frustrated state, it's extremely difficult to respond to your partner or children in an open, engaged and mindful way.

• **GIVE YOURSELF TIME AND SPACE TO FIRST REFLECT, THEN RESPOND.** Children can sense the atmosphere around them and will act accordingly; if you are calm, then they will be when they seek you out for guidance.

• **READ AND DISCUSS PERTINENT LITERATURE OVER THE SUMMER IN PREPARATION FOR THE SUMMER-TO-SCHOOL TRANSITION.**

Check out these titles:

- ▶ First Day Jitters
- ▶ What Does It Mean to be Present?
- ▶ Alphabreaths: The ABCs of Mindful Breathing
- ▶ Breathe with Me: Using Breath to Feel Strong, Calm and Happy
- ▶ In My Room
- ▶ Sticks and Stones
- ▶ My Worry

• **READ ABOUT THE INITIATIVE IN HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY:**

The Children's Board of Hillsborough County, in partnership with Program Director Marni Fuente and Hillsborough Community College, funds the Quality Early Education System (QEES) at the college and its supporting programs Conscious Awareness Learning Model (CALM) and Early Literacy Matters (ELM). CALM and ELM staffs work collaboratively to help teachers, students and families develop sound social-emotional and literacy skills which go hand-in-hand to promote learning and academic success. To build a strong foundation for young children, adults must be willing, prepared and able to model effective mindfulness and social-emotional skills and support early literacy strategies at home. Together, parents, teachers and caregivers can build the strongest foundation for our children's future.