Getting back into the school groove

Marie’s 12-year-old son Tyler was set to start 7th grade in a new school in Madison County. The family was in the process of moving to this area of eastern Tennessee. Typically, Tyler was a bit hesitant at the start of school each year, but fared well once he got comfortable with friends and activities. This year, however, he was showing signs of being very upset about not knowing anyone at school. He mentioned not wanting to go, and he was acting out much more than usual. Marie could see a problem.

There’s always some excitement as the new school year starts, but there’s often a downside as well. Particularly if a child is making a transition to a new school environment, worries about the unknown can be intimidating and make the start of school unwelcome.

To ease kids’ fears, it can help to take some basic proactive steps:

**Acknowledge children’s common concerns.** Various nagging worries can exist. Who will my new teachers be? Will they be nice? Will I know anyone in my class? Will I be able to fit in? Am I wearing clothes that are cool enough? Who will I sit with at lunchtime? Will I get picked on at school? What if I miss the bus? What if there’s too much homework?

**Listen and reassure.** Find out if your child has worries about the upcoming school year. Talk specifically about how to resolve potential concerns about social, academic or extracurricular activities. Be reassuring and positive for your child.

**Have a plan and start the routine early.** Decide how you will manage everything from bedtimes to homework space to mealtimes to school transportation. Simulate the school-year wakeup time before school actually starts.

Prior to the school year, Marie tapped into her new employer’s ParTNers EAP to obtain some support for the family’s transition. In addition to getting some coping tips for Tyler from a licensed EAP counselor, Marie accessed Lifecare work-life services to learn about available community resources and convenience services in Madison County.
Coping with children’s anxiety

Heading to school for the first time, or making the transition to a new school, can generate jitters aplenty for a young student. If your child is in this situation, here are some ideas for fighting first-day fears.

• **Practice being apart.** If this is the first time your child will be away from you during the day, ease him or her into it. Start by setting up a partial day spent at a close relative or friend’s house.

• **Read about how others have coped.** You can reassure your child by sharing one of the many age-appropriate books that show children overcoming their worries about starting school.

• **Share your own similar experiences.** Describe how you felt when starting a new grade, school or activity. Explain how everything turned out fine, and that he or she will be okay too.

• **Don’t allow school avoidance.** Despite protests or crying spells, make sure your child attends school every day. Not doing so can reinforce the child’s fears over the long-term, making it increasingly difficult to attend school.

• **Demystify the school space.** If your child is starting school for the first time, ask if you and your child can visit the classroom prior to school starting. Explore the entire environment and answer your child’s questions. If it helps, see if your child can be paired up with a “buddy” student.

• **Preview the fun to come.** Remind your child about some of the enjoyable activities that he or she might participate in this year—clubs, sports, music, drama, student government, etc.

• **Prep early for each day.** A bit of planning can help cut down on morning chaos. Have your child set out his or her clothes and load the backpack on the night before school days.

• **Use a familiar a goodbye ritual.** Pick a fun phrase or gesture you can share with your child when parting each morning. Repeated use of a familiar phrase can give the child comfort.

• **Be calm and confident.** Even though the back-to-school jitters may be getting under your skin just a bit, strive to be calm, confident and positive. Tell children that it’s natural to feel uncertain, and you’re sure they’ll do great this year.

How to gear up for school in advance

Making the adjustment from the relatively lazy days of summer to the suddenly structured schedule of school can be jarring. Here are some steps you can take well prior to the opening bell.

• **Start the morning routine early.** Plan to curtail summertime sluggishness about two weeks prior to school’s start. Move bedtimes and wakeup times earlier until they match the school schedule.

• **Meet the teacher or attend an orientation.** If your child will be starting at a new school this year, contact the school and request a visit.

• **Review important dates, and complete forms.** Put important school schedule dates on the family calendar. Get started early on completing health and emergency contact forms.

• **Establish transportation plans.** Review the school’s bus stop location and schedule, in addition to drop-off and/or bike ride procedures. If your child walks or rides a bike to school, map out a safe route and do a “dry run” with him or her.

• **Review with children your after-school rules.** This can include who else is allowed in the house (if anyone), and procedures for checking in with you.
Help them shake off school-year stress

Sometimes we unconsciously create an environment where we seem to approve of our children not so much for who they are but what they are achieving.

To help reduce your child’s stress this school year:

**Don’t demand achievement.** Support your child’s learning, but don’t insist on excellence in every school-related activity. Provide your unconditional love regardless of their path.

**Trim activities if necessary.** If your child’s after-school activities are resulting in too much family chaos and homework stress, cut back on the activities. Try using dinnertime to de-stress and bond as a family.

**Prioritize adequate sleep.** Depending on their ages, kids need at least nine to 11 hours of sleep per night. Good sleep supports learning, memory, and the energy needed to be resilient.

**Be available.** If you notice your child having a bad day, do something simple together like a walk or a craft or playing catch. Non-pressure situations can lead to more sharing.

**Express your pride regardless.** Throughout the many ups and downs of school life, let your children know you’re always proud of them.

When to get help

It’s quite normal for a child to have some back-to-school worries. However, if your child exhibits symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, sleeping problems, persistent depression or other unusual behavior changes, you may want to consult with a healthcare professional.

Speak with your child’s pediatrician or a licensed behavioral health professional through your ParTNers EAP. If there are challenges with certain situational triggers at school, discuss the issues with your child’s teacher(s) or a school counselor as appropriate.

Your consistent involvement in addressing school problems will give your child the best chance to move beyond them, and will support the continuing healthy development of your child.