

Another Brick in the Wall...Building the Foundation for a Successful School Year!

By resident education specialist **Perk Musacchio**

It's August! The phones ring and texts fly. What's the excitement? Class lists are out! Every school year brings excitement and trepidation about the unknown. What if my teacher doesn't like me? Is there a friend in my class? How do I work my locker? Change and the unknown can be anxiety provoking for everyone.

This can be especially true when students are presented with a new classroom environment, high expectations (unrealistic or self-imposed), rigorous curriculum, high stakes testing, and juggling work, school and extracurricular activities. In short, being overscheduled, exhausted and ready to crash and burn. Unfortunately, there has been a recent increase in the rates of anxiety and depression among children and teens, so it's important for adults to recognize this **and** more importantly, do something about it. So what can we do to help reduce anxiety and stress?

***Set the school sleep schedule before school starts.** It can take a few weeks for bodies to adjust from a summer sleep schedule. Gradually adjust bedtimes and wake up times so that by the time school starts, your child is getting adequate sleep. These suggestions are endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics:

Infants- 12-16 hours (including naps)

1-2 years old- 11-14 hours (including naps)

3-5 years old- 10-13 hours (including naps)

6-12 years old- 9-12 hours

13-18 years old- 8-12 hours

***Plan food options.** Teaching your child how to pack a snack and/or lunch provides an opportunity to build responsibility and discuss food choices that promote good nutrition. Include healthy fats, proteins and limit carbs (empty calories). This will allow your child's blood sugar level to remain even throughout the day and avoid a dip that will affect energy, concentration and behavior.

***Get excited together.** While ordering your school's prepackaged supplies can be convenient, it takes away some of the excitement of starting a new year. If supplies have to be ordered, selecting a new backpack or lunchbox might provide the same exhilaration. What about an outfit for the first day of school? The ritual of picking out new school clothes is exciting for some children and annoying for others. Use your judgement, but sometimes just such an outing can help reduce anxiety and increase excitement.

***Visit the school.** Take advantage of orientation opportunities. Some schools have formal programs to meet teachers, visit classrooms, and practice using a locker. If your school doesn't, call and ask if your child can stop by for a brief visit. If your child is one of those "go with the flow" kind of kids, then be thankful and don't make a worry when there isn't one. For years, children showed up on the first day of school with no preparation, met their teacher and classmates for the first time and did just fine.

***Practice saying good-bye** and leaving your child for periods of time prior to the start of school. If your child has trouble separating, don't hang around. Trust the staff and leave. It will be hard, but typically, as soon as you are out of sight, your child will stop crying and get involved in classroom activities. Children have to learn that they can trust Mom or Dad to return and all will be well while they are gone.

***Communicate with your child's teacher.** Developing an open and respectful line of communication with the teacher will always serve your child well. However, it's important to teach your child to self-advocate and become comfortable speaking with adults. As your child grows, you can role play the necessary conversation or encourage your child to write a note to express a question or concern. Strong communication skills are critical for success in life. However, if there is a time when your child needs more support, you may need to get involved. In that case, contact the teachers, school counselor, psychologist, nurse, or principal. Tip: Whenever possible, start with the teacher.

***Create routines.** Children like predictable routines to feel safe and secure. Discuss your family's AM and PM routines. Post them where everyone can see. Remember that it can take 30 days of practicing a new behavior to start a new habit, so your children may need some guided practice until they are independent. That's every day, in the same way, for 30+days. Educators always use "The First Six Weeks" rule. That's how long it can take kids to feel confident with routines and gain a sense of independence.

Perk Musacchio is the co-author of *A Student's Guide to Communication and Self-Presentation* and *No Manual, No Problem: Strategies and Interventions to Help Your Child Thrive in Today's World* and the originator of the PeaceWalk®. For more information, visit her website at www.skillstosoar.com.