How to help your child overcome their beginning-of-the-year anxiety and adapt to school life:

The start of school is a milestone in your child’s development and is often anticipated and dreaded at the same time – from both children and parents. Children starting school - whether it is nursery, KG1, KG2 or even first or second grade – feel anxiety as they have no idea what to expect and are in a new and unfamiliar environment. Most children won’t know how to articulate this feeling and so act out and deal with this fear of the unknown and of being away from what is familiar to them by crying, regressing to baby talk or thumb sucking, throwing tantrums, wetting themselves, clinging to parents or even closing themselves off from others and disengaging from all communication. While for many parents their main source of anxiety is usually seeing their child upset and the fear that their child may feel abandoned. You are not alone nor is your child an oddity, millions of parents deal with the beginning-of-the-year anxiety that accompanies their children’s transition into preschool, kindergarten and even elementary school. Children, worldwide, regardless of where in the world they are located, will usually exhibit anxious behaviors at the beginning of the school year.

Don’t be apprehensive about your child acting out, as these are all normal behaviors and your child will overcome them, adapt to this transition and enjoy school. School will become their second home, or their home away from home. Bear in mind that when placed in any new situation, all children (and parents, too) are going to need to take time to adjust, and so your child will require a period of time to figure out their comfort zone and what is required of them to fit in to their new environment.

There are steps you can take as a parent/caregiver to help your child overcome their anxiety and adapt to their new environment and enjoy their school year. The following may help:

1. Take away as many “unknowns” as possible:
   - Let your child know what to expect. Talk to them about what they may do in school, such as group play, activities, art, lunch, playground time, and so on.
   - Let them know they will be meeting new children and how they will make new friends.
   - Reassure them that everyone will be new/starting KG1 or KG2 and they, too, will be feeling the same way.
   - Give them examples of older siblings, cousins or friends who are in school and what they do.
   - Visit the campus with them and take them to the playground to play.
   - If they have a friend who will be going to school with them, set up a play date together in the playground (even if it is for only 5 minutes). This will help them begin to adjust.
   - Talk about your own experience at school, the fun activities you enjoyed.

2. Open communication -Talk about their feelings and normalize them:
   - Allow your child to talk about their fears and reassure them that it is normal. To normalize their feelings remind them that everyone, including other students, even their teachers, may feel scared and nervous during their first day or even first weeks of school.
   - Some children may not be able to verbalize their feelings, so probe a little and ask them direct questions, such as; Are they are afraid of going to school? Why are they afraid of school? Are they afraid of meeting their new teacher or of meeting new children? Keep
asking direct questions and continue to emphasize that all children feel this way, even children that don’t show their feelings, and that they are not alone.

- While talking with your child maintain a relaxed and positive tone. This will help set them at ease.
- If you are nervous try not to let them pick up on your feelings as it will translate into greater anxiety and fear for them.
- Continue during the first weeks of school and even during the school year to encourage your child to talk to you and discuss their fears, happiness, incidents and problems. Set up a time every day, where they can have your undivided attention and you can listen to them. It can take 5 or 10 minutes of your time, but this will increase their self-confidence and allow them to resolve any feelings or even problems they may be facing. It will also help your child see that they don’t have to be afraid of voicing their fears. An additional benefit is that by talking to you they can also learn to problem solve. At the same time, it is a way for you to stay informed and aware of any issues your child may be facing.

3. Be prepared, set up a nightly routine and early bedtime:
   - Help your child prepare their clothes for school from the night before, discuss what they would like to eat for lunch and let them be involved in packing their lunch.
   - Allow your child to prepare their school bag and all the items needed for school from the night before.
   - The more prepared and organized both you and your child are from the night before, the less rushed you will be in the morning and the less anxious your child will be. Increased anxiety at home will increase school anxiety and consequent behavior.
   - Make sure your child goes to bed early so they get enough sleep and are not tired and grumpy the next morning from lack of sleep.
   - The more relaxed, awake and organized your child is, the more comfortable they will be at school.
   - By setting up a consistent routine with your child you are helping them learn new skills, such as how to organize their time.

4. Arrange a play date with another child from the class:
   - Try to arrange a play date with another child that is in the same class or school as your child. This will allow your child to see a familiar face in school and may help decrease their anxiety.

5. Pay attention to your own behavior:
   - Be enthusiastic about them entering school or moving on to KG1 or KG2. If you are excited and confident, then, so too will your child. If you feel guilty or worried about leaving them at school, your child will probably sense this and this will increase their fear and unease, as well as, the resulting behavior.
   - Try to ease your fears. The more calm and assured you are, the more confident your child will be.

6. Learn other children’s names:
• When you say “look __________ there is __________, why don’t you go say hi or sit next to him/her”, it makes school seem so much more familiar and safe.

7. Bring to school a comfort object:
• Have your child bring to school a stuffed animal, favorite blanket, special doll or any object that is a comfort to them.
• You can also allow your child bring photos of the family to school. This will comfort them as it will feel as if their family members are with them at school and if they miss you, they can look at the photos for comfort.
• These little reminders of home will help ease some of the separation anxiety and provide children with a real sense of security in an unfamiliar environment.

8. Involve/Introduce the teacher to your child:
• Your child’s teachers are warm, caring and experienced individuals who can anticipate their students’ needs and have vast experience within this area and will help your child adjust.
• Introduce/reintroduce yourself and your child to their teachers. Chat with them and fill them in on any important information they may need to know. Let your child see that you are comfortable with their teachers and trust them. This will aid your child in forming an initial relationship with one or all of their teachers.

9. Saying goodbye:
• Always say goodbye to your child. Don’t sneak away. It may be hard to say goodbye and, as a result, tempting to sneak away but this will only increase your child’s fear and anxiety and their sense of trust and security in you will be threatened.
• You can stay with your child for a little while, either encouraging them to play or just sitting or standing on the side and let them get involved in an activity. Once they are involved in an activity then this is your cue to leave. Say goodbye and remind them you will see them soon/or afterschool and leave.
• If your child is still clinging to you or crying allow a teacher to take them, say good bye and let them know you will see them soon.
• No matter how hard it is, try not to prolong your goodbyes and be firm. If your child feels you waver or that you are upset then this will further increase their anxiety.
• Try to develop a goodbye ritual with your child, maybe discuss this before school starts and allow your child to decide on it. It could be a special hug or even a saying such as “see you later alligator/sweetpee/pumpkin/etc., a high five or blowing them a kiss from the door. Goodbye routines/rituals are comforting to children and allow them to understand and prepare for what will happen next.

10. Avoid comparing your child to others or Telling them off for crying:
• Avoid comparing your child to other children, such as saying, "Look, ______ doesn't cry when his mom leaves, why can’t you do the same?” When you compare a child to another you are passing on the message that your child isn’t good enough and that someone else is better than them. This lowers their self-esteem and, in the process, further increases their fears and anxiety. It may also have long term consequences.
• Don’t’ chastise your child for crying, try to make a supportive statement such as “it’s hard to say goodbye but I will see you in a few hours. I love you” or “I know you are scared but you will see there is nothing to be scared about and soon you will love coming here. Remember I love you.”
• Showing your love and understanding may help ease a little of the anxiety because they feel secure in your love. In contrast, children who are mocked or told off for crying may feel shame and that they are doing something wrong by crying or showing their fear (when in actual fact their reaction in normal) and, as a result, will exhibit greater signs of anxiety and acting out behavior.
• Every child has a process in order to adapt, respect that process and their transition will be smoother.

11. Consistency in going to school:
• Some mothers/caregivers after seeing their children’s negative reaction to school will give in to their whining “I don’t want to go to school today”. They allow their child to miss school.
• This is a bad idea as it denies your child the ability to grow and develop on a social and emotional level and it doesn’t allow them to learn how to work through negative feelings and will set a foundation in their life for avoiding problems.
• Consistency is the key in making school a part of your child’s new routine. Going to school on a regular basis, especially if you are taking them will provide your child with a sense of anticipation and when you pick them up at the end of the day or meet them at home at the end of the day, this will reinforce the idea that you came back or were waiting for them just like you said you would.

12. Praise your child at the end of the school day and Keep reiterating how much you love them:
• When you pick up your child from school or when they come home from school praise them for their bravery. Tell them how proud you are of them for going to school and for being brave.
• Keep reminding your child that you love them and keep repeating that you love them as this will reassure them.
• Praising your child and reiterating your love for them will increase their sense of security and self-worth and encourage them to take steps to let go of their anxiety.

Transitions are opportunities for children to grow and develop. At ACS, the Early Years community (teachers, counselors, Principles, etc.) partner with you, the parents, in making our children feel safe and secure as they move on to a new educational setting. We welcome you and your child into the EY family and look forward to seeing you this year as we embark on this wonderful journey of learning and exploration with our Nursery, KG1 and KG2 children. If you have any questions please feel free to contact us.