

Back-to-school a stress for parents

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To me, the handling of back-to-school pressures is easily recognisable as a feature of change management, today's most topical anti-stress intervention.

In this context, the most obvious aspect of change is the ritual switch-over from one kind of daily routine to an entirely different one, conducted within a different mindset. I happen to believe that the pressure on a child can, at these times, be more imagined than real.

They may do a lot of grumbling, but once back in the classroom, they will usually swim naturally in the familiar water. The exception is in that a small minority of cases, where the child is genuinely fearful of something or someone, such as a teacher who dislikes them, being bullied in class, or a lesson that is incomprehensible to them no matter how hard they try. In such cases, good parent-teacher liaison, rather than stress counselling, is the best answer.

In fact, returning to school or college and meeting with old and new friends, all of a similar age, should be a stimulating and enjoyable experience. For many pupils, most of the serious stress comes at the time of late teenage exams, when the school holidays have to be treated as an extension of the term, full of revision courses and projects that increase the demand for personal performance - the pressure of which often cancels out the whole point of a holiday break. It is also possible to detect an element of fear in the individual student, that manifests itself in a frantic effort to catch up with others in the same year. However, an effort rooted in fear tends to destroy the calm confidence needed at a time of an exam. I could relate in detail many cases of exam stress causing disaster, but I don't think I need to. They are all too common.

Then there are changes in the younger child itself, often marked decisively by the educational milestones: a new term, new year, new school. Again, I have found that these times are liable to stress out the parents more than the child, who is often too busy to notice what's changed. Remember, these are milestones for parents too.

Logically, you would expect parental stress to rise with each stage of education, according to its perceived importance. A completely different stressor, for parents, is the increasing cost of a child's total education, whether or not there are school-fees involved. Clothing, text-books, transport and holidays have all increased dramatically in recent years as inflation and the cost of living rises inexorably.

However, I personally see it the other way round. To me, the first day at kindergarten is the seminal moment, when the child's eyes and ears are most open to its unfamiliar surroundings, and it is most responsive to atmosphere and environment. A good first day at school seems to establish a solid foundation for years of learning to come.

I must have over-emphasised this to one highly protective mother who was so stressed about her son going to school for the first time, that it clearly communicated itself to the little boy, who started to become anxious. The last few days before school were difficult for her, and on the crucial morning, she was unable to cope. An uncle had to drop off the little fellow on the way to his office. Fortunately, his own more detached attitude seemed to soothe the child. After handing him over to a teacher, his uncle just told him "Well, I'm on my way to do a day's work, and so are you!" So it happened that his school career was launched in the right atmosphere, and it is still going well as I write.

How to switch

- Back-to-school pressures are basically how to manage change

- The switch from holiday to term-time should be happy, not unwanted
- The first day at kindergarten can be the most significant change