

End of School Year Anxiety: Helping Kids Transition to Summer

The end of the school year often brings the anticipation and excitement of summer break to kids and teens alike. However, for some students, the end of the school year can be a time of mixed feelings, including fear, uncertainty, and increases in stress and anxiety. As adults, it is important that we don't underestimate how difficult this transition can be for some youth. Increases in stress and anxiety can result for a variety of reasons. This can include the anticipation of a new routine, loss of predictability, saying goodbye to teachers and friends, concern over the loss of social connections that school offers, worry about end-of-year exams and completing academic deadlines, concerns over the upcoming transitions to new schools or grade levels, and the expectations that come with graduation and taking on more adult responsibilities. Additionally, students who rely on the security that school brings may experience worries over having enough food to eat or a safe environment as the school year transitions to a close.

Children and teenagers don't always communicate their stressors as adults do (i.e., talking things out). Students who are experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety due to the upcoming end-of-school-year transition may begin acting out, complain of headaches or stomachaches, appear less focused or withdrawn, have difficulty regulating emotion, or even shut down. It is important to recognize that fear and anxiety in youth may also look like anger.

Unfortunately, anxiety loves certainty and that is something that we can't always offer to a young person who is worried about what is to come next. As caring adults, we can offer support, guidance, and resources to better equip students to cope with and manage upcoming changes, transitions, and stress that can come with the end of the school year.

Adults can help youth communicate what they are feeling by opening up and talking to them. If you are worried about a student who is struggling, check in with them. Ask, "can you help me understand how you are feeling?" or "what might be helpful to you right now?" Understanding what a young person is feeling and experiencing through their eyes allows adults to show greater empathy and validate their concerns. When adults can acknowledge a young person's feelings, they may feel better just knowing that there is someone else who understands how they feel. Additionally, by finding out what is causing youth distress, adults are more capable of helping them find ways to cope.

In addition to providing validation, empathy, and support, engaging in activities at the school level that provide meaningful closure at the end of the school year can help ease into new experiences and make change a little more tolerable for those students who are struggling with saying goodbye to teachers and classmates. Below are some examples of activities that can give students the opportunity to process and reflect on accomplishments, lessons, and memories they shared during the school year.

1. Create a Goodbye Board- this could be done in the classroom or via a virtual platform such as Google Docs. Provide students with a list of prompts to share memories, stories, and reflections from the school year. Devote some time to read the items on the board and comment on what you notice. Examples of prompts include:
 - In this class, I appreciated it when....
 - This class helped me think about....
 - One thing I learned how to do well this year was....
 - One thing that challenged me this year was....

- I am most excited for _____ next year....
2. Note Card from Teacher or other school staff- While it can be easy to get caught up in the busyness of the end of the school year, a goodbye note to students can be especially meaningful. Keep notes positive, encouraging, (and personal if possible). For staff who have multiple classes or too many students, create one note that conveys your main message, and then add a short personal sentence for each student.
 3. Share Gratitude- research tells us that gratitude offers benefits like a better sense of self-worth, greater stress resistance, and more overall happiness and optimism. End the year on a high note by asking students what lessons, experiences, or memories they're most grateful for from the school year. Have students list what they're grateful for, draw it or write it on the board.

Every student is going to have different feelings about the end of the school year. Being mindful that some students may be experiencing anxiety and discomfort as the days dwindle down to the last day of school allows us to be more aware of students who may be in need of extra support and/or resources.

References: Childmind Institute; Edutopia; Family Education; National Education Association; Scholastic