

Beating the

by Peter Lavelle

Back-to-School Blues

Reprinted from ABC website: Health Matters: The Pulse <http://www.abc.net.au/health/thepulse/s1842814.htm>

IT'S BACK to school time. Time for school aged kids to sharpen pencils, pull on the blazer, hoist the over-sized school bag over the shoulder and trudge unwillingly to the bus stop with not much to motivate them other than the prospect of mum's sandwiches and an apple at lunchtime. Still, most kids cope well – some even look forward to meeting their peers to settle the important questions the universe poses such as who's in, who's out, what's hot and what's not.

But about one child in ten finds going back to school a traumatic experience. Changes in routine—new teachers, new classes, new classmates—can cause anxiety and apprehension.

It can make them feel sick, fearful, angry and aggressive towards others. It can make them 'go silent'; withdrawing from family activities, and not wanting to eat. They may try to get out of going; hiding, purposely missing the bus, or developing a tummy ache or a headache that suddenly improves when they're allowed to stay at home. Some develop

genuine symptoms like vomiting and diarrhoea.

The greater the degree of change, the more likely the symptoms are, says Margot Trinder, educational psychologist, former teacher, and coordinator of the schoolkids' mental health initiative KidsMatter*.

The transition from primary to secondary school for example causes difficulties for many kids, she says. There's more routine and less decision making in the primary school environment compared to the secondary school where there are more classes, more teachers, more decisions to make—the change can be bewildering for some children.

All children experience some of these symptoms in the first few weeks. They usually settle down after four to six weeks, though it may take a whole term. Kids that adapt best are those who are independent, can problem solve well, and are not embarrassed to ask for help.

But if they don't, what can parents do?

Before the school day starts parents might draw up a list of things that are going to happen that day, so the child knows what to expect.

And at the end of the day both parent and child might discuss any problems that happened during the day and what to do about them.

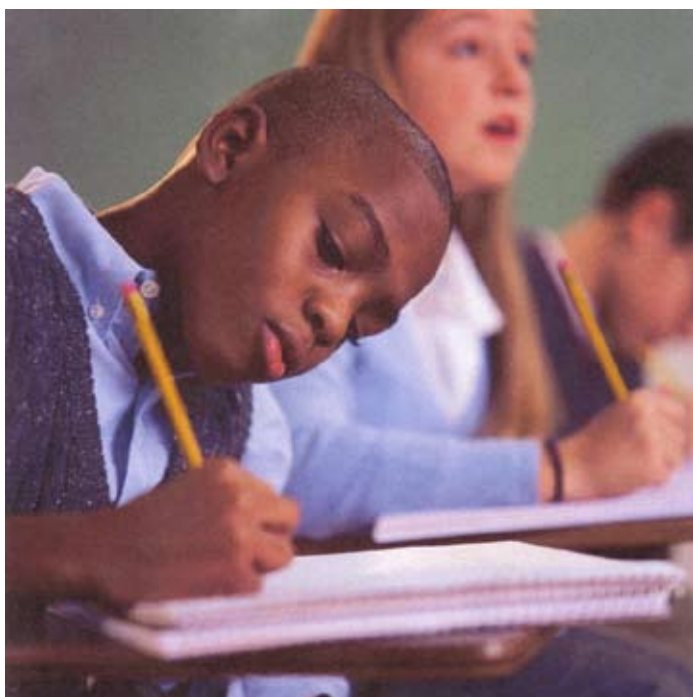
Parents shouldn't give in and allow the child to stay home—this reinforces the avoidance behaviour and only makes it more difficult for the child to go to school the next day.

Deeper problems?

However, if there's a long history of ongoing anxiety and things aren't improving, then the child may benefit from seeing a psychologist. The child may have mental health problems—anxiety or depression—that need to be addressed and treated. The child may benefit from psychotherapy, usually a modified form of cognitive behavioral therapy developed especially for kids.

Some schools have their own full-time or part-time psychologist that will treat the child. Or it may be appropriate for the parents or carers to take the child to their GP for a referral to a psychologist.

Parents can get a Medicare rebate for a portion of the psychologist's fee for up to 12 sessions if referred by a GP.



Settling in strategies

If the child is usually confident and has managed well in the past, they probably only need a little help to get through the transition. Parents should get together with the school—meet with a school counsellor, or teacher—and come up with strategies to help the child settle in.

***KidsMatter is a mental health prevention and early intervention initiative developed by the Australian Government Dept of Health and Ageing, beyondblue (the national depression initiative), the Australian Psychological Society and others. For more info see page 27.**