

Get Psyched for SCHOOL



Class is in session, and with that comes a mix of emotions, especially for those kids making the switch from distance learning. Here's how Latina therapist moms are helping their own children navigate the feels, big and small, as they settle back in.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER PHOTOGRAPHS BY PRISCILLA GRAGG



1

“Since the pandemic, my child is terrified of germs.”

With all the attention paid to sanitizing, disinfecting, and wiping, it's no wonder that children may be a little squeamish about getting on the bus or even using a restroom at school. “My 7-year-old went from not caring about eating a cookie that fell on the floor to being a super-diligent mask wearer and frequent handwasher,” says Vanessa De Jesus Guzman, a Dominican American mom and licensed professional counselor in Ridgefield, New Jersey. “And even though his *abuelos* are vaccinated, he's still afraid of getting them sick, which makes him nervous about being around others at school.”

► **THE SOLUTION:** It might be easy to dismiss such fears, especially now that so many Americans are vaccinated. But De Jesus Guzman advises validating your kid's worries by saying something like, “Being scared does not mean something bad will happen. Going back to school seems strange because it's new.” Next, reassure your child that their school is doing everything it can to keep students secure, and go over the school's safety protocols. Also point out the power that kids have in keeping themselves and others safe by wearing a mask. Finally, help your child recognize when they're anxious so they can better cope with it on the spot. “Review what nerves might feel like in different parts of the body,” De Jesus Guzman says. That way, your kid can connect the dots (“There are butterflies in my tummy; I must be nervous”) and employ a self-calming technique, such as taking deep breaths.



2

“Quarantine sapped my kid's social skills.”

After so much time spent in virtual classes, many students are starting the year behind when it comes to the basics of socializing, says Citaly González, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist in Berwyn, Illinois, and a Mexican American mom of two. “Interaction with peers is crucial for learning to read body language and facial cues, and that's harder to do with masks and social distancing,” explains Dr. González. She sees it with her 5-year-old son, who was once nicknamed “party bus” by his teacher for his friendly demeanor. In the past year and a half, though, he has become more hesitant about connecting with others.

► **THE SOLUTION:** “Work on reading emotions in a person's eyes, which masks don't cover,” Dr. González says. You can try simple exercises at home, such as a game of “Can you tell what I'm feeling?” while masked. Ask your child whether it's easier to hear you when they look at

your eyes or away. Then create as many opportunities as you can for your child to hone these skills with other kids at the playground or on a playdate without your interference. Later, talk about how it went. “If it didn't go great, no worries. Just role-play things your child could've said or done differently,” Dr. González says.

3

“Separation anxiety is getting intense.”

Saying adios to 24/7 family time will probably take getting used to. For some anxious children, that may translate into symptoms such as stomachaches, trouble sleeping, and even outbursts at the mention of going back to school. “I observe it in so many of my patients and even my own 6-year-old son,” says Susana Marquez, Psy.D., a Guatemalan Salvadoran licensed marriage and family therapist in Long Beach, California. “A child's family is their safe haven, and that sense of comfort and peace was needed more than ever in recent times.”

► **THE SOLUTION:** Dr. Marquez suggests letting kids choose a small comfort or security item that reminds them of a parent, such as a key chain, to keep in their pocket or backpack. Lunch-box notes that provide encouragement or promise fun activities after school are also a great way to show support, she adds. Even so, the drop-off tears could come. “When that happens, you can say, ‘I understand you're feeling sad. We had a lot of fun at home, but you're going to have so much fun with friends here too. I can't wait to hear all about it when I pick you up,’” Dr. Marquez recommends. And then walk away, having faith that your child will recover quickly and still have a good day. If the anxiety continues for six weeks or longer, though, you might want to investigate further with a counselor.

**PAY ATTENTION TO THE NERVOUS ENERGY YOU
MAY BE GIVING OFF, SAYS VANESSA DE JESUS GUZMAN.**

**“ONCE YOUR CHILD SEES YOU RELAX, THEY'LL
PROBABLY CALM DOWN TOO.”**



Hover your phone's camera for advice on recognizing anxiety in kids.

4

“My kid is feeling academic pressure.”

The substantial learning loss that children experienced during the pandemic may affect how excited they are to return to the classroom. “My 5-year-old son fell behind, and his confidence took a hit,” recalls Violeta Parilli, a Venezuelan marriage and family therapist in Coral Gables, Florida. “When he went back to in-person preschool last year, his teacher said he refused to sing the alphabet with his classmates at first because he wasn’t sure if he knew it anymore.”

➤ **THE SOLUTION:** Remind your child they’re not alone—schools across the globe were affected by the lockdowns. “That will help your kid realize that most students are in the same boat,” says Parilli. “And avoid saying things like ‘Don’t worry about it,’ which may come off as dismissive.” Instead, empathize: “If I were in your shoes, I’d also be stressed.” Keep the conversation flowing too. “It’s the daily check-ins of ‘How’s math going?’ over dinner that really support a child, not sporadic talk when a problem arises,” Parilli says. Remember that kids are more resilient and that they’ve adapted in amazing ways in the past year. “Students will probably catch up. And if your child’s academics have suffered, reach out to your school and ask, ‘How can we work as a team to help my kid?’”

5

“Routines have gone out the window.”

Regular wake-ups, meals, and bedtimes may seem like a thing of the past, but they’re crucial to giving kids the structure they need to thrive in the new school year. “Instilling pre-pandemic routines can lead to a hard adjustment for children,” says Vivian Rodriguez, Ed.D., a Dominican American school psychologist in Whittier, California, whose 10-year-old son isn’t entirely ready to give up his more loosey-goosey schedule.

➤ **THE SOLUTION:** Don’t get stuck on timetables—it will only stress everyone out. “As Latinx parents, we can be rigid with our rules but aim for a gentle reentry,” Dr. Rodriguez says. Before school starts, have the whole family wind down their evenings earlier by 15 minutes to an hour. That means no visitors after a certain time and trading in TV before bed for a screen-free activity. In the mornings, set your alarm to go off a little earlier, even by just ten minutes. “More time in the morning lets you sneak in moments of peace with your child, such as breakfast or stretches together.” Even when school is in full swing, aim for flexibility. “Figure out the rhythm of the week, and on days with more homework, keep activities lighter,” Dr. Rodriguez says. “Then tweak as you go along.”

DON’T FORGET ABOUT YOU!

Parents are experiencing their own back-to-school jitters. Try these quick tips to find support.

- **Ground yourself.** “When you start getting anxious, reign in runaway thoughts by bringing yourself to the present,” Dr. Susana Marquez says. To do that, focus on activating your five senses. When you’re prepping lunches in the morning, for example, pause for a moment to think about the coolness of the countertop under your hands, take a deep breath, and focus on the scent of coffee brewing nearby, and so on.
- **Stay off social.** “Your thoughts about school starting may be completely

- different from another parent’s,” points out Vanessa De Jesus Guzman. “The best thing you can do is take a few weeks off from social media to avoid the comparison trap, which can lead to more frustration.”
- **Find your crew.** “Think about the parents you used to hang out with at the playground or at drop-off and ask yourself, ‘Who is helpful to be around and who is not?’” Dr. Vivian Rodriguez suggests. Then concentrate on building that community with the select few who lift you up.



CONVO STARTERS

Encourage kids to open up with these prompts.



AGES 3-4

“What will help you feel strong at school?”

This question enables preschoolers to be more in control of their emotions, Dr. Citaly González explains. And if your kids answers, “Dressing like a superhero”? Go ahead and let them wear their favorite Black Panther T-shirt!



AGES 5-6

“Can you draw a picture of yourself at school?”

Ask your child to doodle a self-portrait. Next, draw a thought bubble, speech bubble, and heart next to the figure, and ask your kid, “What’s this person thinking? What are they saying? What are they feeling?” The activity helps school-age children separate themselves from their emotions, which may make it easier for them to open up.



AGES 7-8

“What’s the best thing you did today? And something you wish was different?”

These kinds of open-ended questions give big kids the freedom to share as much as they like, Violeta Parilli says. “And even if your child doesn’t want to chat, they’ll know you’re there to listen when they do.”



AGES 9-12

“What are your friends looking forward to or nervous about this year?”

Think of this as a roundabout way of asking tweens what they’re *really* thinking, since “older kids are less likely to be guarded when talking about their friends instead of themselves,” Dr. González notes.