

BACK TO SCHOOL

What to Do if Your Child is Unhappy at School

By Rebecca E. Kotkin

Studying and learning have always been cornerstones of Jewish values. As the "people of the book," Jewish families have always placed great emphasis on education and encouraged their children's success in school. As a result, Jewish parents are very concerned their child appears reluctant to go to school or unhappy while there.

While many kids sometimes grumble about their day, if your child routinely seems anxious about school or reluctantly boards the bus each morning, there are

steps you can take to help her adjust to classroom challenges. Although situations frequently resolve themselves without parental intervention, attention to the problem may get your child in a more positive frame of mind sooner rather than later.

First talk to your child. Even if your daughter does not volunteer information, gentle probing may help isolate the cause of the problem. Ask specific questions such as "Can you tell me what it is like to ride the bus?", "Who do you play with at recess?" or "Do any of the children exclude others during free time?" The more concrete you can be with your queries, the more you are likely to get to the bottom of the problem. If your son grumbles about a particular subject, ask directly "What is it you don't like about math?" If his answers seem vague, keep exploring. Suggest a number of possibilities from which he can choose: "Is it that you have too many problems to answer without a break?" or "Is it that the other children finish their work before you do?" Although it may seem like a fishing expedition, eventually most children will reveal something that can explain their unhappiness.

If your child refuses to sit and talk about school, try engaging her in another activity to help her relax. School psychologist Beverly Albert suggests sitting and drawing with your child. "Most children like to color. As they work, they tend to relax. You can frequently get them to talk about different things about school that way." As your child is designing a picture, casually ask her what about school bothers her. Start with vague and general questions such as "What do you like most about school?" or "What was the hardest part of your day, today?" Gradually become more specific. Listen for clues that you are close to the problem. These may range from a raised or lowered voice or teary eyes to a hasty change of subject: each child is

different, but you will probably notice if you have struck a nerve. If your child hesitates or says she doesn't want to talk about a particular issue, change the subject and then lead the conversation back to what you think is bothering him. If you are suspicious when your child insists a situation does not disturb her, ask if "any of the kids" or "the other girls" are upset about it. It may be easier for her to admit the problem if it seems less personal.

Another way to draw out the issues is to try role playing with your child. Offer to play the part of a student or teacher and encourage your child to direct the scene to mimic actual classroom dynamics. Challenge your child to treat you as he feels treated in class. Puppet play is another option; it gives your child the opportunity to take multiple roles and demonstrate social interplay within the classroom. "A lot of stuff comes out in puppet play," says Albert. Interchange roles with your child and you can get incredible information. You can steer it in any direction you want and keep exploring.

Although many parents hesitate to call the school, the next step is to talk to the teacher. Compare your observations to those of the teacher to find out if your son is

really happier in school than you suspect. Children may exaggerate school problems when they are really just interested in more parental attention or just reluctant to separate from their mother or father in the morning. Arrange to observe your child in as many school settings as is practical: in the classroom, at physical education, in the lunchroom, or at recess. Ideally, your child should not realize you are watching. Ask if you can spy on the playground from a classroom window; view the class in progress from the hall or the gym from an outside door. When you see her laughing with her friends or engaged in classroom discussion, you may discover she is more happy and adjusted than she lets on.

If your child insists that the problem is the teacher, do not immediately discount his comments. There may be a personality conflict or the pairing of your child with that teacher may not be ideal. Since most schools will not switch a class assignment, there may be little you can do to change the arrangement; but, you can help your child cope. Explain to your son that he can learn from every relationship and that you understand how he feels. Encourage him to look for the good in his day with comments like "Well, you do

enjoy the reading group and Mrs. Smith's science lessons are interesting to you." Children are generally very resilient and can accept an imperfect situation and make the best of it. Most important for your child is that he understand that you believe him and respect his assessment of the situation, even if you cannot change it.

Reassure your child that she can discuss with you any school problems and that you will try to help. Clarify your own expectations for your child. He may be reacting to pressure he perceives coming from his parents. Share stories of how you managed school dilemmas as a student. Describe the time you thought your teacher hated you but you later learned that you were among her favorites. If you cannot get any information from your child and the situation does not improve, talk to the teacher or consult the school psychologist. Explain that your child is unhappy at school and ask that they observe him. Don't ignore signs of unhappiness. The school year is long; you want it to be as positive an experience as possible so your child can develop the love of learning that Jewish people have long shared. ✪

Rebecca E. Kotkin is an attorney and the mother of twin daughters and a son. She is a contributing editor to *JBooks.com*. Article reprinted from *jewishfamily.com*.



Back To School

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Supreme Court Decision Applauded by Jewish Community

AVI CHAI's Amicus Brief Spearheaded Court's Decision

In June, when the Supreme Court passed down their ruling enabling government money to be used to provide computers and other secular materials for religious schools, it was hailed by advocates for Jewish Day Schools as a victory.

Among those advocates is a group called AVI CHAI, which operates in both the US and in Israel. The AVI CHAI foundation is a private foundation established and endowed by the late Zalman C. Bernstein in 1984. AVI CHAI has two basic goals: to encourage Jews in the US and Israel to

become more deeply involved with Jewish learning and observance; and to promote mutual understanding and sensitivity among Jews of different backgrounds.

In North America, one of their primary efforts has been to encourage the growing Jewish Day School movement. They have supported, among other things, grants to assist in marketing new high schools, interest-free loans for improving facilities, advanced training for educational leaders, and special programs to help Day School newcomers catch up with

the Jewish know-how of their peers. They provide start-up Jewish libraries for students transferring to Jewish high schools, and are testing innovative ways of reducing the costs of Jewish schooling.

One such innovation was an experimental program that they tested in Atlanta and Cleveland. The question they wanted to answer: Does lack of money prevent families from sending their children to Jewish schools? For two years, AVI CHAI awarded

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Not yet! Not yet!

A Mom's View of Back to School

By Erica Meyer Rauzin

Someone isn't ready to go back to school.

Someone doesn't want to quit buying camping supplies and start buying school supplies.

Someone doesn't want to go back to bedtimes and lunch bags and early breakfasts and carpools.

Someone isn't prepared for schedules, stiff clothes, and the work week routines.

It's not the fourth grader: he's ready to see his friends.

It's not the eighth grader: she's excited about the junior varsity volleyball team.

It's not the eleventh grader: she's glad not to be a sophomore anymore, and she's about to get her driver's license.

It's me.

Don't tell the kids, but I'm not ready. I'm not even interested. I need another couple of weeks, at least, of summer life. I'm not through with sleeping late and staying up for midnight movies. I'm not finished being outdoors

and wearing denim and eating ice cream for lunch. I know that back to school is inevitable, even worthy, and I'll get there, but I'm not there yet.

Can I just skip from this week to Rosh Hashana? Please? Can I omit the back to school gearing-up process? I'd like a hall pass, okay?

Just throw me another week without homework and class projects. Give me another peaceful Shabbat or two, without school deadlines or the kids' "drive me to the movies" social demands pouncing on me at the instant of Havdallah. I haven't recovered from the last school year yet, and —duck! —here comes the new one.

I know that academicians understand that back-to-school is a big adjustment. Suddenly, they are sitting down instead of running around; they are dressed up each day; they are laden with books and papers; they aren't free to travel, picnic and party anymore ...and that's just the

teachers.

I'm reminded of the old joke about the mother standing over her son's bed insisting: "Roger, you have to get up and go to school. It's the first day. You have new clothes to wear. They expect you." And Roger mumbles, "Give me just one reason I have to go." And Mom answers, "Because you're the principal."

Well, because I'm the Mom, I'll keep my reluctance to surrender summer to myself. As far as the children know, I just can't wait to get out there in the fray, to stand in line at the school uniform store, to regain my status as carpool queen, to help with algebra homework and science projects involving bugs and caterpillars, to wake them up when they (and I) would rather be sleeping, and to do it all with some sense that they (and I) should be getting some joy from it ... maybe not the joy of summer, but certainly the joy of learning and of accomplishment.

So, parents, unite. It's time for poster board, bags under the eyes, soccer balls under the seat, and homework after every meal. Get ready, get set, get going. You have nothing to lose but your tan. ✪

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