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When Should I Talk to My Child's Teacher...

— Todd Cartmell, Psy.D.

ABBY HAS BEEN COMING HOME FROM SCHOOL in a sour mood lately, and you discover that she has been running into problems with a few other girls on the playground at recess.

When working on daily reading or spelling words, you have noticed that Sean is more frequently becoming frustrated and upset when he runs into a word that he can't quickly and easily identify.

You have been looking on the school's website for posted grades and homework assignments and see that Joey has several incomplete assignments that you were not aware of.

Did I just describe your typical weekday afternoon? The ongoing dilemma of the parent of school-aged kids is that you are simply not there (at school, that is). You never get to see things first hand. On top of that, some kids adopt as their personal motto the advertising slogan that was popularized about clandestine trips to Las Vegas: *What happens at school, stays at school.*

True, you do get to see some of their work (e.g., the few papers

that aren't lost or crumpled beyond recognition) and you get to see test scores and grades on-line, assuming that the teacher has kept them up to date. But you didn't see first-hand what happened at recess or hear how the teacher explained the rubric for the project on Egypt that you will be helping your child with. When Jeremy says that the teacher never explained something, you don't have any way of knowing what the teacher actually did or didn't say.

With this in mind, here are some guidelines for when it is the right time to talk to your child's teacher:

When something significant doesn't make sense...

Notice the word *significant*. If there is confusion about a fact that is not urgent, encourage your child to talk to the teacher about it. This will help foster their ability to self-advocate and build their self-confidence. However, if you deem the issue significant, then call or email the teacher to get the information you need first hand.

If there is a behavioral or academic concern...

If your child is struggling in an academic area or with organizational tasks and the struggle is impacting your child's grade, causing undue frustration, or making homework take an excessive amount of time, then it is time for a teacher conference. You may be observing the first signs of a problem that may benefit from additional evaluation and/or school resources. Some kids qualify for help that comes in the form of a 504 Plan or I.E.P. (Individualized Educational Plan), the levels of additional resources that kids can qualify for if the school intervention team finds that significant problems exist.

When peer problems arise...

Another time to contact the teacher is if there is a *significant* problem with peers. Again, I emphasize the word *significant*, as you don't want to call the teacher every time a peer looks at your kid the wrong way. You can listen to your child's accounting of peer interactions and help him or her come up with a plan for responding wisely to negative peer behaviors. But if negative peer behaviors become increasingly negative or emotionally hurtful, then it is time, with your child's knowledge, to talk to the teacher about what is going on.

As a rule of thumb, teachers love involved and informed parents. Most teachers start each academic year or semester saying that you can contact them any time. So, if in doubt, take them at their word. ■

Todd Cartmell, Psy.D., is a child psychologist and author of 8 Simple Tools for Raising Great Kids.

Teachers love involved and informed parents. Here are some helpful guidelines.



Q&A

Q How do I know if my child's ADHD medications are working as they should?

A If your child is on a once daily stimulant, then it likely works the best during the school day and wears off soon after the child gets home. A hyper child in the afternoon doesn't necessarily mean the medication hasn't worked during the day. Speaking to the child's teacher may tell you more. Think about the symptoms a child had before starting medication (such as daydreaming, difficulty sitting still, etc.), and ask if those are better or not. Anyone who works one-on-one or in a small group with the child, such as a tutor, coach, etc., can also give information.

Verbal/email feedback from teachers is valuable, as are specific ADHD scales that teachers can complete to be given to your child's doctor. It may be a good idea to give the stimulant on weekends too, initially, so that you can see its effects throughout the day. If you're still not sure if the stimulant is making a difference, you can hold it (with the doctor's OK) for a few days, and see if there is a behavior change. ■

Deepti Sheno, M.D., is a child, adolescent, adult psychiatrist specializing in treatment of ADHD and anxiety disorders in children.

Preschool Anxiety — a Way to an Easier Goodbye

ALTHOUGH DIFFICULT, SEPARATION ANXIETY is a normal stage of development and should fade as your child gets older. For some children, preschool is the first test of separating from familiar faces. Saying goodbye on the first day of preschool can be tough for kids and parents alike.

Familiarizing your child with the new environment ahead of time is crucial. If possible, visit the classroom before school starts and meet the teachers. Read stories to your child about how fun school can be.

Provide a consistent "drop off routine" to ease the anxiety of change, and set behavioral expectations before separating at preschool. Offering a choice in picking an outfit for the day gives children a sense of control and can reduce the frustration of getting them ready for the day. If school policy allows, bring a familiar object



from home, such as stuffed animal or favorite blanket, to reinforce a sense of security. Make sure to acknowledge your child's feelings; just listening to your child's concerns can have a powerful calming effect. The more calm and assured you are, the more confident your child will be. If parents hesitate, kids will feel unsafe. Foster your child's trust by saying a firm goodbye, and then leave promptly; don't sneak out. Even body language can convey nervousness, so stand up straight and smile.

Praise your child's efforts and consider a reward system to reinforce even the smallest accomplishments. Try a visual point system, such as stickers or marbles in a jar, for the behaviors you expect of your child, and help her choose a reward after a set number of "good" days. Choosing something fun to do is the best reward (a movie or going to the pool works wonders).

If separation anxiety is excessive enough to interfere with normal activities like school and friendships, and lasts for months, consider having your child evaluated by a professional as it may be a sign of a separation anxiety disorder. Children with this disorder may exhibit school refusal, difficulty sleeping or nightmares, and physical symptoms of anxiety such as headaches or stomachaches. ■

Anna Mackender, M.D., another parent who learned how to say goodbye without the tears.

Launching Your College Freshman

THE PARTIES HAVE WOUND DOWN, and your teenager is officially a high school graduate, ready to head off to college. For some, this will be their first extended time living away from home.

Many families are surprised that conflicts erupt as departure approaches, but it's not abnormal. Underlying anxiety affects both teens and parents. Slow down, spend some relaxed time together, and voice your own mixed emotions. Express confidence in your child. He may not admit his own difficult feelings, but you will demonstrate that they are normal.

Once on campus, students must navigate the unfamiliar. Homesickness is common. Most college freshmen have said goodbye to a supportive friend group and are now among strangers. Anxiety to fit in can lead to unwise

choices as students experience pressure to drink or engage in other risky behaviors.

Academics also bring stress. Star students in high school are now among other star students, and classes are often more challenging. It's not unusual for a GPA to drop a point from the high-school average—a real confidence shaker. Students must also structure their own time, and it takes awhile to establish new routines.

Poor sleep and nutrition also affect wellbeing. Many students experience depression or anxiety, and some develop more serious mental health disorders.

So what's your role?

Here are some ways to support new college freshmen:

- Keep communication open. Listen calmly, and affirm their strengths. Offer advice if asked, but don't try to rescue.

- Encourage them to join campus organizations. If they were in a faith community at home, encourage them to seek that support in their new setting.

- Help set realistic expectations. Make clear that their personal value doesn't depend on momentary successes or failures.

- Be alert to signs of mood disorders or addictions. Learn what resources are available for health care, counseling, and academic support, and encourage them to access these without embarrassment.

- Encourage healthy nutrition, regular exercise, and sleep (though you may be ignored!).

In four years you all will be amazed at the growth and independence that has taken place! ■

Bev Burch, L.C.P.C., has sent two daughters off to college and enjoys helping others with their transitions.

