

## How Do You Know If It's "Just a Phase"?

Distinguishing normal behavior from emotional issues



*By Betsy Royster, MA, LMFT  
Supervisor, Headway Outpatient Services*

Wiggly bodies and poor listening are common characteristics come fall when children and adolescents head back to school. So how do parents, administrators and teachers distinguish back-to-school excitement and normal developmental stages from a possible emotional or mental health issue?

Now a few weeks into the regular school routine, many parents may be noticing different behaviors in their child. Children go through stages of development and knowing when the development of your child is appropriate and when you should be concerned can be tricky.

Going back to school can bring out bad behaviors such as poor listening, not following directions or constant moving while in the classroom setting. These issues are normal when a child goes back to school, especially for those in elementary school. Appropriate relationship boundaries can be a behavioral concern for parents when dealing with teens and can begin in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grades.

These funny little stages should not be concerning. If you are concerned as a parent, don't hesitate to check out resources on the school website or join online social groups to see what other parents' issues are with their kids.

When you should be concerned about your child, however, is when behaviors such as acting out, not listening, or constant moving around the classroom don't subside after a longer period of time. Knowing just how long is normal can be challenging since every child develops at their own rate. If your child has not picked up on what is expected behavior in a classroom or school setting, it may be time to reach out for help.

Start by asking questions, observing your child in group settings and reaching out to the school's counselors. Many questions can be answered through these three supports. If you don't feel comfortable taking that big a jump right off the bat, ask family and friends. Friends and family may have experienced similar situations and can provide a caring perspective.

And if you're still unsure, [try our online assessment](#) to help you discern when it might be time to seek professional support. A trained professional can help you discern what is normal and what might require additional support.

*By Betsy Royster, MA, LMFT, Supervisor, Headway Outpatient Services*

*Betsy joined Headway in 2017 and has worked in the human services field for more than 20 years in clinical and managerial positions. She has worked with families and individuals of all ages and specializes in Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Emotion Focused Therapy, Narrative Therapy, and Hypnosis.*

*"I enjoy being an active listener and asking lots of questions," she says. "I enjoy mentoring my supervisees and being a resource to them."*

*Betsy loves music and the arts, and loves to recharge by traveling and spending time with her family and friends.*