

How Back-to-School Affects Children's Mental Health



By Emma Martin LaPlant, MA, LAMFT

Starting a new school year can be a very exciting time, but it can also be confusing and scary. If a student is at a new school, it is not uncommon for students to miss their old school or old friends, feel lost or confused, lonely and unhappy until they make new friends, worried they won't be able to cope with the new demands of the school year, or worried that they won't "fit in." Even if a student is returning to their same school, each new school year comes with change and new challenges. All of these are understandable, but they can all affect mental health.

When to Get Support

While it is normal for students to have some difficulties adjusting to the new school year, some students may need more support. Research indicates the prevalence of childhood mental health issues in the United States to be as high as 20 percent of all children. At the high school level, the most common difficulties tend to be anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress, according to the National Institute of Health and school-based therapy research. If you notice any of the following, consider additional therapeutic support:

- Complaints of stomach aches, nausea, and headache
- Drop in grades or extremely low grades
- Multiple school absences
- Social isolation
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Extreme negativity or pessimism
- Excessive sleepiness, tiredness, or fatigue
- Excessive weight gain or weight loss
- Constant fidgeting, moving, or tapping
- Difficulties with attention and focus
- Frequent nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Diminished interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Repetition of phrases about death/killing or use of curse words

But in all the hectic activity of a new school year, don't forget to enjoy the excitement, and take care of yourself as well. After all, "It is not selfish to refill your own cup, so that you can pour into others. It's not just a luxury. It is essential." What will your self-care look like this school year?

Emma Martin LaPlant is the Supervisor for our District 191 School-Based team. She joined Headway in August 2016 and has worked in the human services field since 2011. Emma has previous experience working with children, adolescents, and their families in multiple different education venues, including The Annica Program, the Minnesota Autism Center and the Anova Center for Education. As a school-based coordinator, she collaborates with

therapists, families, and school administration to provide supportive and nurturing environments for students to learn, heal, and grow.