

Are your kids prepared to return to school? Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk produced by SBH Health System and Broadcast from the beautiful studios at St. Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx, I'm Faith Daniel. An estimated 50 million children and teenagers will be returning to school shortly after long and relaxing vacation it can be difficult to transition back into the school routine waking up early attending class completing homework and engaging in after-school activities. For children starting school for the first time, or attending a new school it can mean a new routine and school environment. Getting back into the groove can be difficult and may cause some anxiety and not only for their children before their parents as well. With us today is Sara Schreiber a licensed social worker and behavioral health coalition at SBH. Welcome Sara.

Hi, thank you for having me.

Thank you for joining us! So let's just jump right into it and summer is sadly ending for us

I know, it's so sad.

It's so sad! But our kids are going to be returning to school!, and there is gonna be somewhat of a transition so can you tell us a little bit about how parents can prepare their children for this?

Sure, so no matter where your child is going to school or what age they're in, so whether they're starting kindergarten or pre-k for the first time or they're going to middle school or high school there's different challenges that come up. So one of the main things the biggest things I would say is, making sure that your child is ready for the first day of school. So that means knowing what supplies to get, knowing how to get to the school if this is a new school, knowing maybe if you can know who the teacher is, or know, you know the right people to speak to, especially if your

child has any special needs, or has any kind of special requirements that you would need to talk to the school about, making sure that you know who the person is to speak to because communicating with the school about your child's needs, is I would say one of the most important things.

Are there some like questions that parents can prepare to ask the specific person, say it's the school teacher, or it's the counselor, or maybe even the principal. Are there specific questions they should be asking?

Yes, absolutely. So there're a lot of different questions that the parents can ask the teachers, or the school personnel. So one of the main ones would be, how do I communicate with the teacher? So a lot of the public schools use class dojo, which is app that it's a great way to communicate. You could text the teacher through the app, they send notifications, they send pictures, they send reminders about class trips, and having paperwork filled out, so that would be knowing; does my school have class dojo?, how can I sign up?, how can I download the app?. That's one, one thing to know.

That's cool by the way, that did not exist in my time.

Yeah! Yeah, class dojo is really really useful. Another one would be, knowing who at the school to go to with any concerns, so like a parent coordinator might be that person, maybe it's a guidance counselor, maybe it's a school social worker. Depending on the school, right? every school is different, so just kind of asking who is the person to talk to about XYZ? and then you learn. Other questions to ask is, so this is for a grade school level kids, so they have the grading system, it's levels one through four. You want to know what would be considered a good grade. Right? like three and fours are considered a little but those are the higher grades, and if your child, the previous year was at a two let's say, you want to know from the teacher what can I be doing with my child

to get them to be a three and a four, to get those good grades. Also asking the teacher, how do you communicate with the parents about homework, do you just put homework and a homework folder and send it home; do you send a message on class dojo? Every teacher has different ways of communicating and just knowing how do you communicate.

And especially with everything you listed about like, grades about like, after-school activities and things like that, even me! I'm getting a little nervous about it. So even parents preparing these like lists, and everything, could be anxiety inducing, but for kids as well. So, how do we alleviate that? I know that they're thinking about all those things as well too.

mm-hmm. So you're saying, how do you alleviate back-to-school anxiety?

Yeah for a kid.

Yeah! It is hard you know everybody has different types, everyone can! have different types of anxiety, and especially around school. There's also you know, a parent might be nervous because their child's grade is gonna get harder, they're going on to the next grade, maybe homework is gonna be harder, and maybe a parent doesn't know how to help their child, as homework gets harder, the parents might stop.

Good point.

Yeah! I mean I remember when my math homework got too hard and my mom was like, alright! That's it! I can't help you anymore! So that happens, that will happen to everyone. You know you're not gonna remember the math that you did when you were in you know, eighth grade. So kind of just seeing what, what to expect maybe talking to people who have already been through that grade, talking to friends or family who have gone through that

grade, doing some research you know online, just what to expect for middle school let's say, if their child is going to middle school so just being prepared, I would say in that way, can help alleviate a lot of anxiety.

Are there any specific websites that you would recommend for parents to look at?

There are some, there definitely are some really good resources for schools there's especially if your child has ADHD

And I know it's natural for everyone to feel a little nervous about it I'm getting a little nervous thinking about it for all the kids. What would be like the anxiety being too long? So I know maybe for the first day or two, you know being a little anxious is normal, but say if a parent finds that their child has been anxious for like the first month or first two months. How do they react to this or what do they do?

Yeah! It's really I see that a lot. You know I work in Pediatrics at our outpatient pediatric clinic, and so around October time I start getting all my referrals, and some of those referrals are kids who are really anxious about school, and usually there's something going on at school that's not making them super comfortable. So the advice that I would have is for the parent to look into that, you know explore what is happening with your child that is making them not comfortable in school and see how we can address that. So some of the things that you can do as a parent in order to look into this is, you know, look at their friends, ask them about their friends, are they making friends, or maybe are they being bullied, and then how to know if your child is being bullied, which we can address soon, but other things about the anxiety would be how's their teacher? Sometimes, I've seen kids where the year before they had the most loving, amazing, warm, sweet teacher for kindergarten let's say and now they're in first grade, and their first grade teacher is no-nonsense you guys are adults now!, it's time

for first grade! And that is so so different than what they're used to. And it's a total culture shock and this is a child who really thrives off a lot of touchy-feely warmth from a teacher, and their new teacher isn't providing that for them, and that can be a huge source of anxiety for kids. And other things would be, so there's friends, there's teachers, let's say they're in a new school and the school just has a lot of other rules that they're really strict, they don't know about, they're getting into trouble a lot maybe your child's getting into fights with somebody in class, so how to know about that. So I would say you know back to communicating, it's super super important that you have this constant communication with the teacher, to know how is my child doing. Is my child getting into you know, are they getting into fights, are they making friends, are they being bullied, and also the teacher may not always know, but you can reach out to the teacher and say, hey! I noticed that my child was really anxious about the start of school that's normal, but now they're still anxious, there's still something off, have you noticed anything?, what do you think it is? Maybe the work is too hard, maybe your child has an undiagnosed learning disability. There are so many things that could be happening, and as the parent you're the one that knows your child best, and you should, you know, try your best to really explore what it could be, and you can definitely also use the help of social worker or therapist, you know the schools have school social workers, school guidance counselors, but we also you know if you bring them into our pediatric clinic they can get a referral to myself for the other mental health staff and we could try to work with you to figure out what's going on.

So it sounds like there's a lot of factors, there's a culture shock, so like the culture of the school is very important, and also like really knowing your child's personality is really important to. How do we create, how do parents create that trusting relationship with their child so that they do open to them about those concerns? Because parents have a big responsibility and there is no rulebook of being a parent, so yeah you know having a trusting

relationship with your teacher having a trusting relationship with your child, like how do they, how do they do that?

It's so important. One of the main things, just a general is making sure that your child knows that they can come to you with anything, and that you're not going to meet them with judgment, or with any criticism, and that if they tell you something is bothering them, that you're gonna believe them, and you're not gonna yell at them for it. Unfortunately I see a lot of kids, and unfortunately a lot of the kids will come and tell me, oh I tried telling my mom that I was being bullied, but she didn't believe me, or she didn't care, or you know and that's not, I do not believe that a parent would not care that their child is being bullied, it's that their child was set up for whatever reason to think that that's how the parent would respond, and so they didn't think there was any point in telling them. And it's really important as parents to really make sure that you are showing your children, you can tell me whatever it is that they're telling you, and I will be there for you, you know, and that that goes across the board so that's with being bullied, that's with failing a test, that's what if my teacher got me in trouble for nothing, a lot of parents will say oh you must have done something. Listen to your child, if you know you could say, oh what happened? and just let your child talk to you, and tell you what happened, maybe they did do something but you want them to be able to tell you instead of jumping down their throats before even hearing what happened, because next time they're not going to want to tell you, because of what happened. This whole theme also is really important just as safety, making sure your child knows if anyone does anything that makes them feel unsafe, you know if anyone touches them inappropriately, if anyone hurts them, they want; you want to make sure that they are able to come to you and they feel comfortable coming to you and telling you. So the same thing having those conversations with your child if anybody touches you you know. Especially in schools, children are vulnerable right, making sure to just let your child know that you are a person that will believe them. That if they come to you

and tell you something, you are not going to yell at them, you are not going to make them feel bad about themselves, you are going to believe them, and be there for them and take action.

And that's so important also for like long-term, just like being emotionally healthy, and just being able to talk to your parent, I think that like that in itself is like priceless, like being able to have like a safe relationship with your parent. And I think especially if your child is suffering with anxiety or even depression and they don't know, and they're able to talk to you about it then you'll be able to pick back up on those things. so what are some signs that parents could look forward to be like oh you know maybe this is a problem?, or when should a parent like go to the school counselor and say hey I think something probably wrong?

Yeah, so again it depends on the age, but let's say for middle school age and high school-aged kids, you know signs of depression would be lack of interest and doing things they used to want to do, steaming like they're really down and depressed all the time, not sleeping well, not having an appetite or overeating, feeling like they're letting everybody down, having trouble concentrating, all of those things can be signs that your child might be might be depressed and that depression might be stemming from, you know something going on at school, but it also just might be something that they've developed, and so it's important to just you know check in with your child. But I also want to note that 12 year olds let's say, that age they might have that sometimes, so this is not like this it means your child's depressed it also could be that they're going through puberty, it could be that they're just moody, it's super normal for like a middle school-aged child to start distancing themselves from their parent and it's all about their friends, and they always want to spend time with their friends. Your child may not be depressed if they're acting like that, they might just be a normal teenager but I've had parents come and bring their kids to me and tell me about these specific concerns. And it turns out their child's just going through

puberty they're having mood swings, they only want to talk to their friends, because they like their friends better right now, that's normal they have a normal child. But it means that the parent is really paying attention, and that they care about their child, and are worried about them, and often what I'll do is I'll help bridge communication with the parent and the child to make sure that you know they are communicating with their parent even though they're going through normal phases of child development.

And say if we switch gears a little bit and say if it's not necessarily an emotional issue, but if it's a behavioral issue, how should a parent respond to that? I know that sometimes parent could be a little defensive if a teacher comes to them and says hey this is a problem, so how do you, what do you think is a healthy approach for parents to take that kind of comment?

Right! No, that's a great, a great question. So when I talked about how I get a lot of referrals come October time, so the majority of the referrals actually are kids who have been sent home with a letter saying they cannot return back to school until they've been evaluated, or until they've seen a therapist. And these are kids that these behaviors are not necessarily new, all the kids that I've seen that you know, how are suddenly told they can't come back, it's not like this one thing happened and then there's they're now sent home. There's usually been a pattern of a behavioral issue for as long as, you know, for as long as the parent can remember, and so the my number one advice that I tell parents when I'm talking about back to school is, if you know that your child is prone to having tantrums, if you know your child is prone to acting out, or to not listening, don't let that don't wait for the school to figure it out, tell the school, say you know, hey! I am a little nervous because my child sometimes has trouble following the rules, and it could be really frustrating for me as a parent, so I know it might be frustrating for you as a teacher, and I want to make sure we're working together to make this the best school experience possible for my child. The teachers want what's best for the children, and

the parents want what's best for their child, so you guys have the same goals, and what I I've spoken to a lot of teachers about this topic and what they've all told me is that they can only help the child if the parent is communicating with them and letting them know what's going on. If there is some big change happening at home, tell the teacher, the teacher will now understand better instead of saying, oh what is going on? your child is out of control, you know. So let's say there's a new change in a family dynamic, a new baby, a new relationship, you lost your job, you got a new job, you have different work hours, somebody you know went to jail, somebody came out of jail, things like that. These big life changes that happen affect children way more than we give them credit for, and so it's really really important for you know, even if you might feel like oh that's none of the school's business, your child is in the school and your child is your business. So you know, letting the teacher know you don't need to spread, you know tell every, the whole world about your personal life, but letting the teacher know, hey, I just want to let you know there's been, you can be thinking, there's been a change in our family dynamic and so you know my son might be acting a little different this week I just wanted to give you the heads up. That will help the teacher be way more compassionate and understanding to your child's behaviors that week or that time period, and work with you and she'll give you updates, and they'll say you know, oh you know your child was, he actually had a really good day today, he only you know jumped out of his seat like three times, versus if they had no idea they might call you and say you know your child jumped out of a seat three times! What is going on? You gotta take him to the doctor. So just having that conversation letting them know, hey here's what's happening, here are my concerns, will change everything.

Yes that's such a good point. My best friend actually is a first grade teacher, and she was expressing the same thing to me about like communication being so important, that like as a teacher she's not working against anybody. Her goal is to work

with the parent, to work with her students, and honestly she's coming to the parent because she cares about her, this child so much that she like wants to address this issue, and I think if parents see it from like this teacher like really cares about this student I just want to like help them and work together. I think it will alleviate that like defensive reaction but of course, I get it, it's your child like you're gonna feel a little sensitive about it, and nobody wants to ever be critiqued in any way.

Yeah! I, I hear you. We actually had a similar situation, so my son just started daycare, and he the week before, he bit somebody and we were like oh my god, he's starting daycare, what are we gonna do, our son is a biter, and so we're like should we tell them? Should we not? and I thought about my advice that I give everybody. When we got there on the first day, you know we let them know, we said, just letting you know he bit somebody last week, and they said okay don't worry we know how to handle it, we'll look out for it, and we'll let you know in case that happens. And we said, we were so relieved, we're like, okay, good, like he's not gonna be labeled a biter, they're used to this, they can handle it, and now like everybody sort of looking out for it, and making sure that if it happens it'll be dealt with right away, instead of us getting a call and letting us know he bit somebody and it's a shock to them because you know even though we knew about it ahead of time. The teachers' pay a lot of attention when a parent makes a statement, which can mean you know being present, being communicative, they know oh yeah we know this parents really responsible so we can send home this letter, we don't need to necessarily call them for everything it just makes it makes a huge difference.

All right, so my final question is, if a parent wants to make an appointment with behavioral health clinician like yourself, what number should they call and how can they prepare themselves to come see you?

In our clinic we have two different types of behavioral health we have myself and I work on something called collaborative care, I work on a team with the pediatricians. And then we also have the PIC team, which is a therapist and a psychiatrist, and they are both bilingual. Any referral actually will go through the pediatrician, so what they would do is make an appointment with their pediatrician, discuss the behavioral health or mental health needs that they have, and then they can either get referred to myself or to the other mental health team, and we would take it from there.

Faith: Well, thank you so much Sara for joining us on SBH Bronx Health Talk again. For more information on services available SBH health System visit WWW.SBHNY.ORG. Thank you for joining us.

Yeah, thanks for having me.