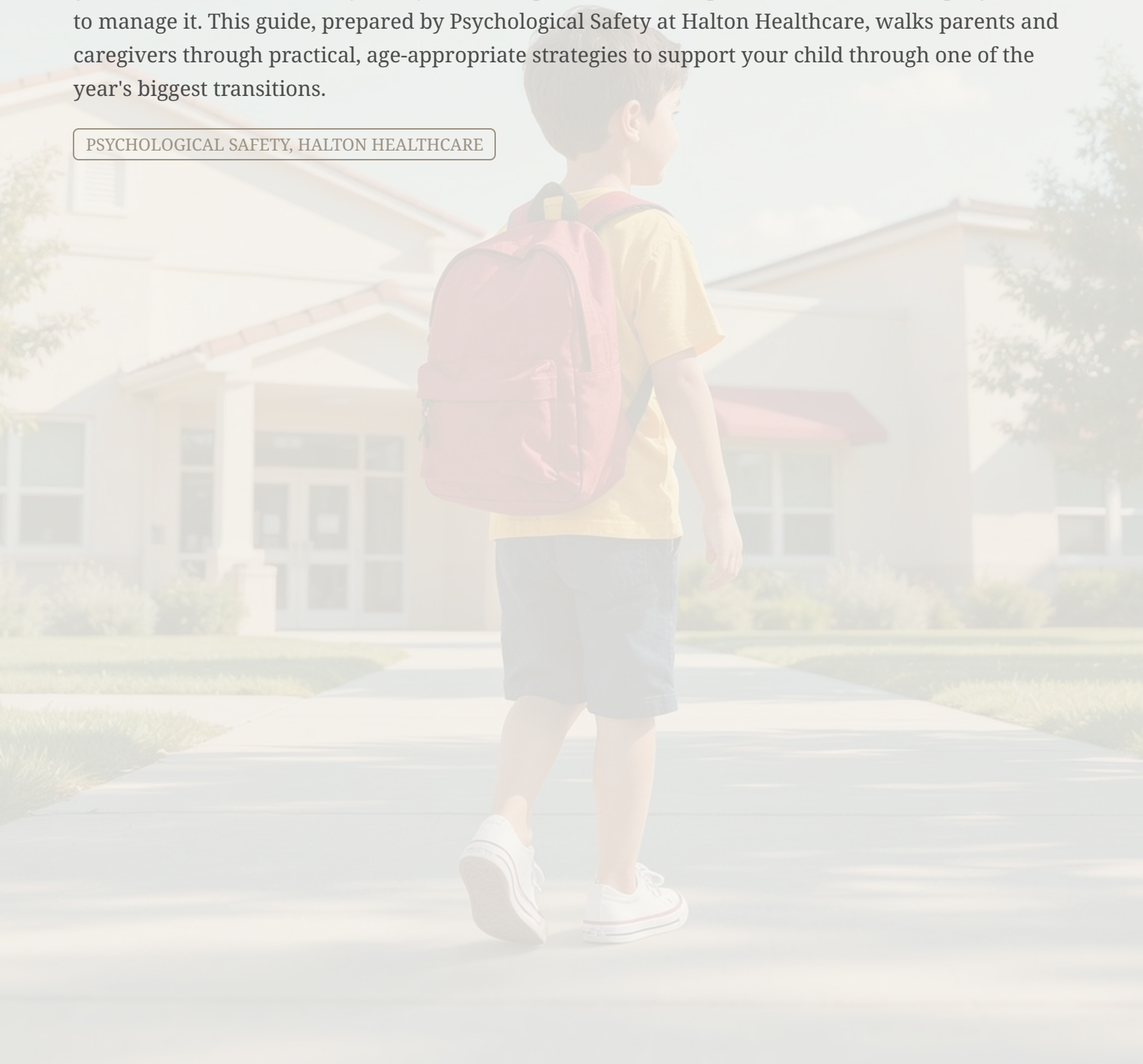


# Back-to-School Anxiety: Helping Your Child Start the School Year with Confidence

The return to school can bring excitement, but it can also bring worry. New teachers, unfamiliar routines, academic expectations, friendships, and simply getting back into a schedule can create real stress for children and teens. Some anxiety is a completely normal part of transitions — the goal is not to eliminate every worry, but to help children develop the confidence and coping skills to manage it. This guide, prepared by Psychological Safety at Halton Healthcare, walks parents and caregivers through practical, age-appropriate strategies to support your child through one of the year's biggest transitions.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, HALTON HEALTHCARE



# Why Back-to-School Anxiety Happens

Anxiety around the start of the school year is one of the most common experiences children and teens face. It is not a sign that something is wrong — it is often a signal that a child is aware of change and is trying to make sense of it. New environments, new social dynamics, academic pressures, and the loss of summer freedom all converge in a short period of time, making September a uniquely demanding month for young people.

Children and adolescents process transitions differently depending on their age, temperament, and past experiences. A child who sailed through kindergarten may hit a wall in Grade 6. A teen who seemed unfazed by change may suddenly struggle when facing high school. The key is not to compare your child to others or to a previous version of themselves, but to stay curious, connected, and responsive to what they need right now.

## New Routines

Early wake-ups, packed schedules, and structured days after a relaxed summer can feel overwhelming.

## Social Pressure

Friendships, fitting in, and navigating peer dynamics are top stressors at every age.

## Academic Expectations

Fear of failure, new subjects, and performance pressure can weigh heavily on young minds.

## The Unknown

New teachers, new classrooms, and unfamiliar environments trigger uncertainty and worry.

# Early Elementary: Ages 4 to 7

## YOUNGEST LEARNERS

For younger children, anxiety often shows up through behaviour rather than words. They may become clingy, have difficulty sleeping, complain of stomach aches, or repeatedly ask questions about school. This is completely developmentally normal — young children do not yet have the emotional vocabulary to say "I feel anxious about starting school," so their bodies and behaviours do the talking for them. As a caregiver, your calm and steady presence is one of the most powerful tools you have.

The most important thing you can do for a young child is help them feel safe and predictable. When the world feels big and uncertain, routines become anchors. Practicing the morning routine before the first day, visiting the school building in advance, or simply walking the route together can help a child build a mental map of what to expect — and that familiarity reduces fear significantly.

### Talk About School Positively

Avoid saying "There is nothing to worry about" — this dismisses their feelings. Instead, say "It is okay to feel nervous. I will help you figure it out."

### Practice the Morning Routine

Run through the routine before the first day so it feels familiar and manageable, not rushed and chaotic.

### Visit the School Together

Walk the route, explore the playground, or peek inside the classroom if possible. Familiarity builds confidence.

### Keep Goodbyes Calm and Brief

Drawn-out goodbyes increase anxiety. Be warm, confident, and consistent — a quick hug and a reassuring phrase go a long way.

### Create Something to Look Forward To

Give your child a predictable reward after school — a favourite snack, an activity, or a special conversation together.

# Middle Childhood: Ages 8 to 11

## GROWING INDEPENDENCE

At this age, children are increasingly aware of how they are perceived by peers and measure themselves against others academically, athletically, and socially. Back-to-school anxiety for this group often centres on academic performance, friendships, fitting in, sports teams, and being away from the security of home. They may also be more likely to internalize their worries rather than express them openly, so parents and caregivers need to stay actively curious and create regular opportunities for conversation.

One of the most important shifts you can make with children in this age group is moving from problem-solving for them to problem-solving with them. When a child says "I am scared I won't have any friends," resist the urge to immediately reassure or fix. Instead, ask questions that help them think through the situation themselves. This builds the resilience and self-efficacy they will need not just this September, but throughout their lives.

### Questions That Open Conversations

- "What part of going back are you most looking forward to?"
- "What part feels hardest right now?"
- "What do you think might help with that?"
- "Is there anything I can do to help you feel more ready?"

### Practical Strategies That Work

- Help them separate what they can control from what they cannot.
- Break big worries into smaller, more manageable steps.
- Re-establish consistent sleep, meals, and screen time routines before school starts.
- Encourage physical activity — it is one of the most effective natural anxiety relievers.
- Encourage problem-solving rather than immediately solving the problem for them.

- Instead of "I am going to have a terrible year," help your child focus on getting through the first day — then the first week. Small steps build big confidence.

# Tweens and Teens: Ages 12 to 18

## ADOLESCENTS

For adolescents, back-to-school anxiety can be far more complex. Grades, social pressure, appearance, relationships, bullying, social media comparison, and uncertainty about the future all become part of the landscape. Teens may also be significantly less willing to talk directly about how they are feeling — not because they do not feel it, but because vulnerability in front of a parent can feel risky at this stage of development. The art of supporting a teenager through anxiety is often about creating the conditions for conversation, rather than forcing it.

Low-pressure, side-by-side activities tend to work better than sitting down for a formal "let's talk about your feelings" conversation. Walking, driving somewhere together, cooking a meal, or watching something they enjoy can all create natural openings. The most important role a parent can play is to listen first — fully and without immediately pivoting to advice, reassurance, or solutions. A teen who feels genuinely heard is far more likely to keep the conversation going.

### Choose Low-Pressure Moments

Conversations in the car, on a walk, or over a meal can feel far safer than a formal sit-down discussion. Let the setting do some of the work.

### Listen Before You Advise

Resist the urge to immediately fix, reassure, or problem-solve. Ask what they need — sometimes they just want to be heard, not helped.

### Identify Trusted Adults at School

Help your teen identify one or two adults at school — a teacher, counsellor, or coach — they feel comfortable approaching if things get hard.

### Encourage Realistic Expectations

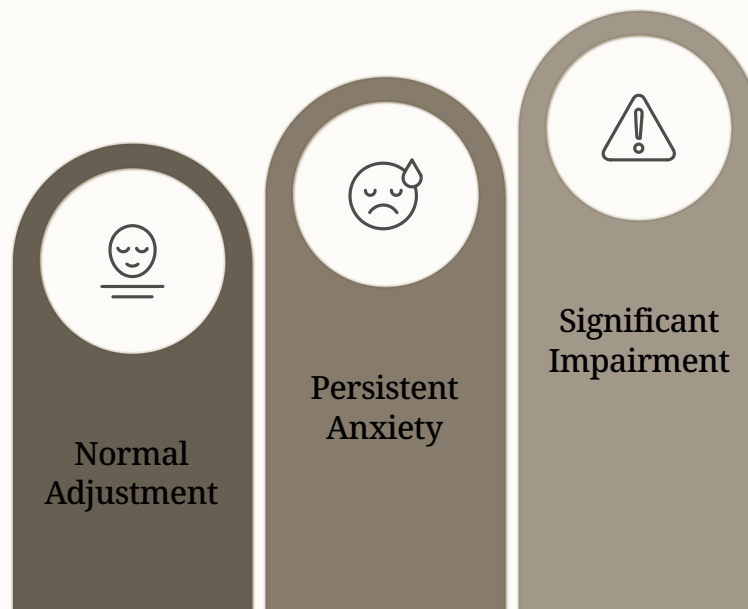
They do not need to have the entire school year figured out in September. Encourage them to focus on showing up and taking it one step at a time.

### Watch for Warning Signs

Significant changes in sleep, appetite, mood, school attendance, or social withdrawal may signal that additional support is needed. Trust your instincts.

# Signs That Anxiety May Need Extra Support

It is normal for children and teens to feel nervous in the first week or two of school. Most of the time, with reassurance, routine, and patience, those feelings settle. But sometimes anxiety does not ease on its own — and knowing when to seek additional support is an important part of parenting. If you notice that anxiety is interfering with your child's ability to attend school, sleep, eat, maintain friendships, or engage in activities they once enjoyed, it is time to reach out for help. Early intervention makes a significant difference.



The transition from "normal nervousness" to "anxiety that needs support" is not always obvious, and parents often worry about overreacting or under-reacting. A good rule of thumb: if you have noticed a change that concerns you and it has lasted more than two to three weeks, or if your child is expressing a desire to avoid school consistently, reach out to your family doctor, your child's school counsellor, or a community mental health resource. You do not have to wait for a crisis to ask for help.

# A Message for Parents and Caregivers

Children often take emotional cues from the adults around them. If you are anxious about back-to-school — worried about your child's friendships, their academic performance, whether they will be happy — your child will likely pick up on that. This does not mean you need to perform false cheerfulness or pretend you have no concerns. It means modelling healthy coping: acknowledging your own stress, taking breaks, and demonstrating that you can work through uncertainty without being overwhelmed by it.

You do not need to appear completely calm or have all the answers. What children need most is to know that you are present, that their feelings matter, and that you will face this together. Saying "**I can see this is really hard for you**" can be much more helpful than "**Don't worry about it.**" Validation does not make anxiety worse — it reduces the shame and isolation that can accompany it, and creates the safety a child needs to keep talking.



## Listen

Give your child space to express their worries without immediately correcting, reassuring, or minimizing. Full attention is the greatest gift.



## Validate

Acknowledge feelings without judgment. "That sounds really stressful" goes further than any piece of advice you could offer.



## Stay Connected

Keep showing up — at bedtime, at dinner, in the car. Consistent connection is what makes children feel safe enough to open up.



## Model Coping

Show your child how you manage your own stress. Naming your feelings and demonstrating healthy coping teaches more than any conversation.

# Halton Mental Health Resources

If anxiety begins interfering with your child's school attendance, relationships, sleep, or everyday functioning, please do not wait for things to become a crisis before seeking support. Halton Region has a range of mental health resources available to children, youth, and families. Reaching out early is a sign of strength — and it can make a significant difference in your child's trajectory.

## ROCK — Reach Out Centre for Kids

Child and youth mental health services for children from birth to 17 and their families, including counselling and crisis support.

**24/7 Crisis Line: 905-878-9785**

## Halton Healthcare — Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Short-term outpatient assessment and treatment for children and youth experiencing moderate to severe mental health concerns, including anxiety.

**One-Link: 905-338-4123 or 1-844-216-7411**

## Halton Region Public Health

For parenting and mental health information, contact **311** or [haltonparents@halton.ca](mailto:haltonparents@halton.ca). Free parenting programs, including Triple P Online, are available to all Halton families.

## Kids Help Phone

Free, confidential mental health support for young people across Canada, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Young people can call, text, or chat online at any time.

## 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline

Call or text **9-8-8** if someone is experiencing suicidal thoughts or a suicide-related crisis. If there is immediate danger, call **911** or go to the nearest emergency department.

# Quick Reference: Age-by-Age Strategy Guide

Every child is different, but age and developmental stage give us useful guideposts for understanding what a child needs and how to communicate with them effectively. Use this overview as a quick reference when you are not sure where to start.

| Age Group  | Common Anxiety Triggers                                           | How It Often Shows Up                                         | Top Strategy                                                |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ages 4–7   | New environment, separation from parent, unfamiliar adults        | Clinginess, stomach aches, sleep trouble, repeated questions  | Predictable routines and calm, brief goodbyes               |
| Ages 8–11  | Academic performance, friendships, fitting in, sports             | Internalizing worries, irritability, avoidance, stomachaches  | Open-ended questions and collaborative problem-solving      |
| Ages 12–18 | Grades, social pressure, appearance, bullying, future uncertainty | Withdrawal, sleep changes, mood shifts, resistance to talking | Low-pressure side-by-side conversation and active listening |

❏ These are guidelines, not rules. Trust your knowledge of your own child. You know them better than any chart or checklist can capture.

# Moving Forward Together

Back-to-school anxiety does not mean something is wrong with your child. It is often a signal that they need connection, reassurance, and practical support — and that you, as their caregiver, are paying close enough attention to notice. That awareness is already an act of love and protection.

With the right tools, consistent presence, and sometimes a little extra help from the community around you, children and teens can move through the back-to-school transition and build genuine confidence along the way. The skills they develop navigating this challenge will serve them long after September has passed.

"Children don't need perfect parents. They need present ones — adults who listen, who stay curious, and who keep showing up even when the conversations are hard."

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|  <b>Remember</b><br><br>Anxiety is not a flaw. It is information. Help your child understand it, not fear it. |  <b>Reach Out</b><br><br>You do not have to navigate this alone. Halton's mental health community is here to support your whole family. |  <b>Stay Connected</b><br><br>The single greatest protective factor for a child's mental health is a warm, consistent relationship with at least one caring adult. That's you. |
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*Prepared by Psychological Safety, Halton Healthcare.*