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When a new semester looms, kids feel the stress - As Miami-Dade school children prepare to start the new school year, doctors say that anxiety is not uncommon, even in children as young as 5. Child psychologists offer tips on easing the stress for children.

Miami Herald, The (FL) - Friday, August 17, 2012

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Mark, a 10-year-old who will be in fifth grade at Winston Park K-8 Center, has a rolling book bag ready for the new school year.

"I'm buying all the supplies I need for fifth grade ahead of time, so I'm prepared," Mark said after his weekly therapy session with his psychologist at Miami Children's Hospital.

Mark suffers from fibromyalgia, a condition that causes pain in his muscles and joints and can cause him to miss school. The gifted student who wants to become an anesthesiologist hates to miss school and when he does, he gets stressed.

Dr. Sara Rivera-Conil, a licensed psychologist at Miami Children's Hospital, sees Mark each week to teach him relaxation techniques to calm his nerves and help him succeed in school.

"She's taught me that I don't have to be perfect and I can still be successful," said Mark, who took his FCAT in fourth grade while heavily medicated and still did exceptionally well.

His mother, Mercy Coiras, a schoolteacher at her son's school, said Mark is a perfectionist, which compounds the anxiety.

Conil said that anxiety in schoolchildren in the wake of a new semester is not uncommon. Before professional help is considered, Rivera-Conil said there are many things a parent can do to alleviate anxiety and ensure a smooth transition to the busy fall semester.

"Some sort of anxiety is normal, so the first thing a parent wants to do is normalize that feeling," Rivera-Conil said.

She said a good way to alleviate anxiety is for parents to share some of their stories of going back to school and get them excited for the new grade.

Dr. Daniel Bober, medical director of pediatric psychiatry at Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital at Memorial in Hollywood, said parents can diffuse the stress by keeping calm.

"The parent has to look if they're anxious themselves," Bober said. "An anxious parent will mean an anxious child."

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There are many symptoms a parent can watch for to know if their child is feeling overwhelmed. If the child is older, they may start lying, making excuses about missing school, become aggressive or standoffish. Younger children may have physical complaints such as nausea, headaches, stomachaches and vomiting.

Bober said the biggest cause of stress for younger children is separation anxiety; older children may become stressed about a new curriculum, test-taking or bullies.

Dr. Susan Chalfin, director of training for psychology on the child and adolescent inpatient psychiatry unit at Jackson Mental Health Hospital, said communication and preparation are top priorities parents should focus on when their child is stressed.

"The most important thing for them to be talking about is their fear," Chalfin said. "It's better to ask very specific questions, such as, 'What did you play at recess?' or 'What did you learn in math class today?'"

Setting up a designated time and place to talk, such as an after-school snack time, is helpful in parent-child communication.

Preparing the child and familiarizing them with the school and their classroom is also key, Rivero-Conil said.

"Talk to them about the school they're going to. Take them to the school, play on the playground, have a snack outside and make it a pleasant experience so they will feel in control of their day," Rivero-Conil said.

Chalfin said preparing academically is crucial to overwhelmed middle and high school students. Getting a tutor or going over summer reading lists is helpful in getting them ready for their new grade.

Getting into a routine a couple of weeks before school starts is necessary for children of all ages. Getting to sleep on time and waking up gradually at the time school starts will help them adjust their sleep patterns and be well-rested for learning. Eating a healthy diet and staying away from junk food also is critical.

"Make preparation fun, take them school shopping and get their backpack ready together, it's helpful to give a positive spin to school," Rivero-Conil said.

The back-to-school stress usually wears off after a couple of weeks when the child starts to get into a routine. If the anxiety persists, parents may need to seek professional help.

"When anxiety persists, you may see appetite change, increased irritability, difficulty concentrating or changes in sleep," Rivero-Conil said.

Bober said if the child does need to see a professional, a complete evaluation would be made to see if there is a family history of anxiety. Bullying often is a top cause of anxiety.

"One type of therapy we use is exposure-based therapy," Bober said. "For this, we gradually expose the child to the situation that makes them anxious and lessen the anxiety to help them cope better."

Breathing techniques and play therapy are other methods to calming the child's stress. If psychotherapy doesn't work, and the child is diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, which is diagnosed in one in eight children in America, then medication may need to be prescribed. But, Bober said medication is prescribed very cautiously.

"Medication always comes with side effects so it should always be the last resort," Bober said.

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**Provided By:** The McClatchy Company

**Index Terms:** Jackson Mental Health Hospital

**Personal Name(s):** Sara Rivera-Conil; Mercy Coiras; Daniel Bober; Susan Chalfin

**Record Number:** 201208170500KNRIDDERFLMIAMIH\_4fb773791ed190869faa46cfc6dc27f3

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