

Coping with Last Day of School Sadness

The last day of school is almost universally seen as a day of celebration and joy—for the students, at least. But believe it or not, underlying the jubilation there can be loneliness and a sense of anxiety about the summer ahead. “The last days of school can be a bittersweet time,” says Nora Findlay, Principal of the former Stewart Russell Elementary School in Saskatchewan, Canada. “For many it’s a day of sadness, a day of memories and a day of saying goodbye.”

Younger children may express these thoughts, or may act out. Some may even experience teacher separation anxiety and worry that next year’s teacher won’t be as nice. For many children, school was safe and secure: summer may sound boring or filled with new challenges like camp, which they’re not certain they’re going to like. Older children may experience feelings of nostalgia and anxiety. They look forward to summer but are concerned because they won’t have easy access to their friends. Some children have delayed reactions to the end of school. They merrily participate in all activities. They can’t wait for summer. Reality sets in after school’s out. This is when they may exhibit signs of mild depression.

School psychologist Rebecca Branstetter, who writes the [“Notes from the School Psychologist”](#) blog, says that these termination issues are quite common. “Children and adolescents alike can experience anxiety or discomfort around the end of a school year as they anticipate a change from the routine. Sensitive students and those with special needs are particularly vulnerable,” she says.

Branstetter recommends normalizing the process for students. “Termination of the school year is a wonderful opportunity for a teachable moment about transitions. In life, we all have to experience change and learn how to deal with the discomfort of leaving a comfortable situation or saying goodbye. It goes a long way to tell students that this process is normal.”

So what can parents do to help?

- Listen closely to what your kids are saying. Eavesdrop on conversations with their peers. Watch for any signs of sadness. Always be available to talk.
- Don’t try to make your child feel better by insisting camp be a continuity of school. This could be compared to losing a beloved pet one day and getting a new one the next. Camp is not a replacement of school.
- For nine months your children followed an established routine with every minute structured. Once school is over allow your child a bit of down time with few scheduled activities and playdates. Learning to be content alone is a life skill.
- Suggest that your child send a note, a picture or post card from vacation to his former teacher, either through snail mail or email. This will help emphasize that your child’s teacher will not just disappear after he leaves her class. When school starts encourage your child to visit her “old” teacher.
- Wait until it’s time to turn the calendar page from July to August before talking about next year. The phrase, “Now that you’re going into _____ grade,” will make your child begin to look forward rather than behind.

