

Back To School – Returning to the Unknown

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Students frequently share with me that, as much as it feels familiar to head back to school, whether it is college or high school, they often experience feelings of uncertainty. For college students there are often unfamiliar living situations with new people and possibly in a different geographic area, and for all students there are:

- different professors with whom to interact;
- unfamiliar class expectations to unravel;
- growing demands for greater academic or career focus;
- absent friends and new friendships to be made;
- evolving changes through the summer within family and one's self, and the anticipation about how they might unfold during the school year;
- new rules and policies to follow;
- unsettling memories of the things that didn't go so well last year.

Our children, even if we know them to be confident, will likely experience "Back to School" with varying degrees of stress, anxiety, confidence, excitement, anticipation, and sadness. We can also be certain that one or more of the feelings will be experienced with greater intensity when our children are entering totally new environments.

What is your typical parenting style during the back-to-school transition?

The natural parenting tendency is to smooth the way for our children, as it is often difficult to see them struggle with identity, independence, risk, fear, sadness, and anxiety. A parent in one of my workshops once asked me, as I shared a story about my stepson, "Through it all were you prepared to let him fail?" It was in that moment that I realized that I was, and that the teachable moment far outweighed whether I successfully pushed my stepson into action. It wasn't about how successful I would be if I got him to act on what I thought he should do; it was about my stepson either experiencing

satisfaction by taking initiative or him experiencing a sense of disappointment for not having followed through.

As my own family heads into the back-to-school mode, I occasionally wonder, in a humorous way, if a study has ever been conducted to compare the parenting style of adults who like roller coasters with the parenting style of adults who do not like roller coasters. The reason I mention this is because parenting during the back-to-school transition is very much like riding a fairly intense roller coaster. It may include sharp drops that make your stomach rise and fall, twists, turns, bumps, and moments of fear and exhilaration.

What do your answers to the following questions illuminate for you about how you desire to shape or continue your back-to-school parenting?

1. Do I genuinely want my son or daughter to explore new things?
2. Am I willing to allow my son or daughter opportunities to experience a range of back-to-school emotions?
3. Are my personal beliefs challenged by the choices and decisions my child makes?
4. Can I support my child even when his or her opinions, values, and choices are very different from my own?
5. Can I anticipate, from past experience, which feelings my child will experience during the back-to-school transition?
6. Do I react to my child out of my own feelings of stress and anxiety?
7. Do I intentionally or unintentionally add pressure to an already intense time of year?
8. Am I willing to let my child struggle a bit?

Our children experience many areas of personal growth when they successfully face and move through the unknown during the academic year.

On the other side of fear there is often a renewed sense of confidence, and on the other side of stress there are enhanced coping skills. This is also true for us as parents, because as we see our child effectively move through transitions, we experience less worry and can acknowledge our child's ability to cope. When we observe our children applying tools and strategies and gaining developmentally-rich life experiences, we are more likely to allow our children the freedom to struggle a bit. It is through stepping into the unknown that our children discover who they are.