HIDDEN SPARKS PARENT EDUCATION CENTER WEBINAR

Ready or Not:

Helping Kids Manage the Stress of Starting School

PRESENTER

Dr. Regine Galanti
Clinical Psychologist & Author

HOST & SPONSOR

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Monday, August 31 @ 8:30pm ET

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Hidden Sparks Parent Education Center

FREE for NYC Yeshiva Parents Residing in NYC / Long Island

Practical Tips & Strategies to:

- **Promote** positive connections
- **End** parent burnout
- **Manage** screen time
- **Improve** sibling relationships
- **Advocate** for academic support
- **Establish** flexible routines
- **Help** your child make friends, and more!

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About the Presenter



Dr. Regine Galanti is a clinical psychologist and founder of Long Island Behavioral Psychology, a private practice in Cedarhurst and Brooklyn, NY. She specializes in treating anxiety, OCD, and behavior problems, specifically using treatments that work such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. She offers tailored solutions and concrete strategies for children, teens, and adults. Dr. Galanti's published works include Parenting Anxious Kids, Anxiety Relief for Teens, and When Harley Has Anxiety. She is a sought after speaker who has been featured in publications such as The New York Times and The Washington Post. As past-president of the Society for Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology (SCCAP). Dr. Galanti continues to bring focus and attention to evidence-based treatment for child mental health care.

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Ready or Not:
Helping kids manage the stress of starting school

Regine Galanti, Ph.D.
Long Island Behavioral Psychology

Tonight's Plan

1. **Why transitions are hard**
   And why this September is harder than most
2. **How feelings actually work**
3. **How to make a transition harder**
   The things loving parents do that backfire
4. **What to do instead**
   In the moment, and in between the moments
5. **When to reach out**
   What's worth a closer look

ONE THING FIRST

The goal isn't an easy September. It's a child who comes out of it more capable than they went in.

It's not about anxiety, it's about resilience.

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Every new grade is a transition

- Starting school is always hard.
- **Kids are naturally resilient.**
  - Ann Masten calls this "ordinary magic"
  - Resilience gets built through skills and relationships.
- Our job isn't to hand kids an easy September.
  - We need to help create the scaffolding to support them all year, and into the future.

BEFORE WE START

Think of one transition your child is facing this month.

Resilience isn't handed to kids. It gets built in the middle of hard things — with us standing next to them.

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A transition is a process, not a day

We treat back-to-school like a single event, but it isn't.

Where they're coming from

Eight weeks of late bedtimes, loose meals, screens on demand, no homework, no morning deadline.

Where we ask them to land

Up at 6:45. Out the door on time. No screens on school nights. Homework done before dinner.

That's not a routine, that's a cliff.

Ramp in: shift bedtime and wake-up a week or two out, reintroduce structure in pieces, and practice the morning routine before the morning it counts.

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This year, the ramp keeps getting interrupted

The holidays Yamim Tovim run straight through the first month of school

Don't minimize this. "It's only a few days off" underestimates how much of a child's sense of safety comes from knowing what's next.

1. **Expect regression**
   The kid who was fine week one may fall apart week three. It might be the calendar's fault.
2. **Hold the anchors**
   Bedtime, wake-up, and the goodbye routine stay put — even through Yom Tov.
3. **Preview every re-entry**
   Kids need the Who / What / When / Where again.
4. **Build in a restart day**
   Treat each return as a reset, not as proof they failed to adjust.

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So what's normal, and what isn't?

Two stories I hear in my office often:

> *"We saw it early, but figured he'd grow out of it. It's five years later. Help us."*

> *"My kid doesn't know how easy she has it. When I was her age I had less, and I was fine."*

Both come from the same place: not knowing what's normal. We can't help with a problem we don't recognize — and we shouldn't treat a normal reaction like a problem.

Anxiety on the first day of school = a healthy kid.
Anxiety on the 100th day = worth a closer look.

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Transitions bring up feelings

Not just anxiety — all of them

Sadness	Anger	Worry	Embarrassment	Excitement
that summer is over	at the new schedule	about who to sit with	about a new class	that tips into overwhelm

- **Feelings are information, not decision makers.**
- If a child can't name what they're feeling , it comes out sideways.
  - A stomachache, meltdown over socks, a slammed door.
- Which means the behavior you're seeing is rarely the thing you're actually dealing with.

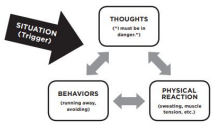
Before we talk about what to do, we have to understand what's actually happening.

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How feelings work: Think — Feel — Do

Emotions, broken down

TRIGGER	First day of school
THINK	"What if I don't have anyone to sit with at lunch?"
FEEL	Stomachache, racing heart, can't finish breakfast
DO	Asks to stay home



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Emotions aren't the problem.
Reactions to them are.

All emotions are valid. All behaviors are not.

Anxiety is a smoke alarm — useful, sometimes a false alarm, never the thing to eliminate.
Sadness after a loss is working correctly.
Anger at an unfair rule is working correctly.
The question is never "should my child feel this?" It's "what can they do with that emotion?"

Feelings look different at different ages

- **Little (and big) kids feel emotions in their bodies and behavior.**
  - Stomachaches, clinginess, tantrums, regression, meltdowns at the door.
- **Teens are more in touch with their thoughts.**
  - Rumination, worst-case scenarios, "everyone will notice."
- A 7-year-old with a stomachache every morning may be telling you exactly what a 15-year-old would say in words.

Feelings are like kids: you don't want them driving the car, but you don't want them shoved in the trunk either.

Symptoms of Anxiety (An Incomplete List)

THOUGHTS	PHYSICAL CUES	BEHAVIORS
Worries about danger	Stomachaches in the absence of medical causes	Avoidance of anxiety cues
Concern about bad things happening to self or others	Headaches	Escape from situations that cause anxiety
Perfectionism-related thoughts	Muscle tension	Tantrums, acting out when faced with triggers
Concerns about the future	Racing heart	Asking parents reassurance questions
Thoughts related to being judged by others	Quick, shallow breathing	Low frustration tolerance

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PART THREE

How to make a transition harder

The things loving, well-meaning parents do that make this worse.

The protective instinct

- Parents protect children from harm. Excellent instinct.
  - **It backfires when the thing we're protecting them from is a feeling.**
- A hard feeling is an experience your child needs to have, with you nearby.
- Uncomfortable feelings in a child pull parents in opposite directions:

Swoop in and fix it

Remove the hard thing so the distress stops. It works immediately, which is exactly the problem.

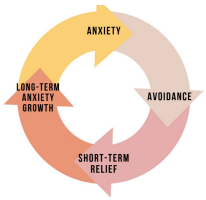
Wave it off

"You're fine." "It's not a big deal." The feeling doesn't go away , it just stops getting reported to you.

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Way #1: Remove the hard thing

- Drive instead of the bus.
- Email the teacher to change the seat.
- Skip the first day or pick up early.
- Let them stay home "just today."
- Answer the same worried question for the fourteenth time.



Every one of these works…. Until it doesn't.

The distress stops immediately. That's why we keep doing it — and why the relief now becomes a bigger feeling next time.

The lesson isn't "that was hard and I did it." It's "that was so hard I

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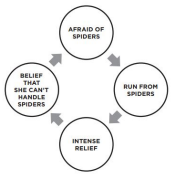
Way #2: Argue with the feeling

"There's nothing to be nervous about."

"You loved school last year."

"Your sister never had a problem with this."

- **Intended as reassurance. Received as: you're wrong to feel what you feel.**
- So the child escalates to prove it's real or stops telling you.
- **The flip side, same coin: over-reassuring.**
- Answering the same question fourteen times doesn't settle it. It teaches the child the question needs answering.



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What this looks like in real life

The elaborate morning sequence that must go in exact order or the whole day is lost

The two-hour bedtime routine that no parent in this room ever agreed to

The teenager who calls repeatedly during your date night for answers they already have

The parent acting as calendar, alarm clock, and taskmaster well past when it's appropriate

Two important questions

Is this getting in the way of my child's jobs — school, homework, relationships?

And: is my child only managing because the adults around them are working herculean-ly hard?

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Protect, or support?

PROTECT

Remove the feeling — or the situation that caused it.

Works right now.

Teaches: this was too big for me.

SUPPORT

Stay with your child while they have it — and tell them you believe they can get through it.

Harder right now.

Teaches: I can do hard things.

Only support helps your child build the resilience we want to see later

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PART FOUR

What to do instead

Give information: Who, What, When, Where

- Giving information takes the uncertainty off the table:
  - what time the bus comes,
  - who's picking up,
  - what lunch looks like,
  - what to do if they need the bathroom.
- **Drip it, don't dump it.**
  - "Remember that backpack with the foxes? We're packing it up Tuesday."
  - "The bus comes at 7:30. I'll walk you to the corner and wait with you every morning."

WHO

WHAT

WHEN

WHERE

Do this again before every re-entry after Yom Tov — not just once in September.

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Validate the feeling. Hold the expectation.

Notice and name it, then communicate confidence.
Both halves, in one breath.

"It's okay to feel worried, AND I know you've got this."

Not "but." "But" erases the first half.

Retire these

"You have nothing to worry about."

"You're fine."

"Your sister never had a problem with this."

Model it instead

"I remember being SO nervous the night before high school — I don't think I slept at all."

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Pay attention to what you want to see

- **Differential attention is an ACTIVE technique — not passive praise.**
- Use your attention to grow brave behavior, and let the whining and door-slamming go by.
- Be specific. Praise the doing, not the feeling going away.
- Make sure more of your attention lands on the goal than on the problem.

"You got on that bus even though your stomach hurt."

"I'm so proud you stayed here while I went for a walk."

Eyes on the goal, not the attitude.

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Set up anchors that don't move

Anxious kids, distractible kids, and dysregulated kids all do better knowing what comes next.

1. **Bedtime**
   What time? What is my routine?
2. **Wake-up**
   Protect the morning even on days off, so re-entry isn't a shock.
3. **The goodbye**
   Same words, same length, every single time. Short and confident.

- Consistency and follow-through matter more than which rule you picked.
- **Fuzzy boundaries don't reduce conflict — they maintain the problem.**

You will have to prioritize. Homework, showering, and bedtime cannot all be the hill you die on.

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What does my child actually need to do this year?

What skills do I need to teach my child? How developmentally appropriate is this skill?
Consider what they're doing now vs. what they need to be doing

SCHOOL
- Homework and classwork
- Packing their own bag
- Asking a teacher a question
- Handling a missed assignment

SOCIAL
- Making a plan with a friend
- Initiating, not just accepting
- Handling a conflict without you
- Staying at a playdate

HOME
- Following house rules
- Morning routine independence
- Getting to bed on their own
- Chores and follow-through

Earlier I asked for one transition your child is facing.
Do they have the skills to manage that transition effectively?

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Teach the skill — don't just expect it

We often expect kids to have a skill they were never taught — and then read the failure as attitude or anxiety.

Younger kids
Packing a bag · Asking for help · Using a locker · Ordering their own food · Telling a teacher they don't understand

Teens
Planning backward from a due date · Laundry · Making a school lunch · Emailing a teacher · Managing money

A kid avoiding something they don't know how to do isn't anxious, they're unequipped.

- Teach it explicitly. Practice when the stakes are low. Then hand it over.
- And ask yourself: am I doing the skills I'm asking my child to use?

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Build independence in small steps

- **Just because the school, your spouse, or your mother thinks a step should happen doesn't mean it's the next right step.**
- Ladder it.
- The bus stop, for example:

1. Wait at the bus stop together
2. Wait a few feet away
3. Wave from the front door
4. They go on their own

Small, repeated, steps with support, not doing it for them.

Where a specific fear is in the way, target it directly rather than routing around it.

FEAR: Petting or coming close to dogs

ACTIVITY	FEAR RANKING (0–10)
Visit a large dog-off-leash [illegible]	10
Pet [illegible]	[illegible]
Visit a small dog on a leash [illegible]	[illegible]
Walk past a dog park	8
Seeing dogs	[illegible]
Watch a video of small dogs	4
Watch a dog through the window	2

FEAR: Speaking in social situations

ACTIVITY	FEAR RANKING (0–10)
Give a presentation in class	9
Ask a question in class	7
Say hi to someone I don't know in the hall	[illegible]
Ask a peer I don't know to borrow a pencil	6
Ask an adult where the bathroom is	3

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Use rewards well

Rewards aren't bribery, they're how you make a hard step worth taking the first few times.

Small and frequent
Beats big and distant.
Points or stickers work when the real reward is far off.

Reward the behavior
Not the feeling.
They don't have to be calm about it — they have to do it.

Use what you already give
Needs are needs.
Wants are your best currency, don't hand them out for free.

Make it deliverable
An unsustainable reward system fails on day four and costs you credibility.

A reward is set up in advance for the behavior you want.

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When to reach out

- Any school avoidance or refusal
- Frequent stomachaches or headaches with no medical cause
- Sleep or appetite changes
- Pulling back from friends
- A drop in how they're doing academically
- A child who can't speak at school but talks freely at home

Selective Mutism
More than shyness: an anxiety disorder, and very treatable.
Don't wait it out.

Where to start
Your pediatrician is an excellent first call. CBT and exposure therapy are the treatments that work.

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Three things to take home

1. **Give information.**
   Who, what, when, where — before the first day, and before every restart.

2. **Validate the feeling. Hold the expectation.**
   "It's okay to feel worried, AND I know you've got this."

3. **Don't be complicit in avoidance.**
   Support your child through the hard thing instead of removing it.

Books and resources

To read with younger kids

- The Kissing Hand
- Wemberly Worried
- Ruby Finds a Worry
- Henrietta and Her Thistleberry Boots

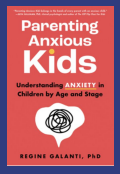
For parents

- abct.org — find a CBT provider
- effectivechildtherapy.org
- anxietycanada.com
- selectivemutism.org

Books help kids open up about their own feelings.
Read one together, then ask what the character was feeling — it's easier than asking about themselves.

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Thank you — questions?







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