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The Pediatrician Is In

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First Day Worries

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I was reading the other day about dread. Dread is a particularly unpleasant emotion, brought on by awareness of unavoidable harm. Something bad is going to happen to you soon, and there's nothing you can do about it. For many children, dread hangs in the late August air like a dark cloud. The cause, of course, is the impending start of school.

That's how it was for many years at my house. My daughter, Grace, would begin to worry a week or two in advance. What if her teacher didn't like her? What if the work was too hard? What if she couldn't find her locker? My wife and I would try to reassure her, but to no avail. The worries would continue until Grace walked through the school door. But by the end of the first week she would be feeling much less concerned. By the end of the second, she'd climb onto the school bus with confidence, although not always with glee.

This is how it was at the beginning of first grade, second grade, and third grade. When the familiar worries showed up again before fourth grade, I realized that there was a pattern. "You always worry first," I pointed out, "then after a few days, you feel better. It's the same every year. You'll be fine." And she was.

The next year, with fifth grade staring her in the face, Grace still worried. But she knew what was going on, and so felt more in control. "You know, dad," she explained, "I always worry first, but once school starts, I'm fine."

I often think about Grace's anticipatory worries and how we handled them together. Children who have the ability to imagine the challenges ahead often worry before a change, whether it's the start of school, the first day of sleep-over camp, or a move to a new neighborhood. Simple reassurances often don't work well. The children understand that the future is unknowable.

What does help is self knowledge. When children can look at themselves from a distance, they are able to recognize their worries as a form of coping. The worries may never go away altogether, but rational thoughts can dull the edge of anxiety. Abstract thinking - the ability to imagine a possible future - is often the cause of children's worries. And many times another kind of abstract thinking - the ability to analyze one's own feelings and to recognize repeated patterns of

