

family

Classroom angst

After a long break filled with familiar fun, children can quickly stress out with a severe case of back-to-school blues. But parents can help ease the symptoms, writes Patricia Carswell

It's 2am and a small boy in pyjamas appears by Sarah's bedside.

"I don't feel well, Mummy," he says, snuggling in next to her.

Sarah knows exactly what's wrong. It's nearly the end of the school holidays and her six-year-old son, Johnny, has got the back-to-school blues. It's been the same for several nights since they got home after spending the summer holidays in the UK.

"It's a heady combination of jet lag, the kids getting their heads around leaving a blissful six weeks of sunshine in the UK, and facing a new school year," says Sarah.

Back in the UK, Emily Rymer's middle son, 10-year-old William, is suffering from a similar uneasiness about the beginning of term.

"He hates change of all kinds and gets particularly anxious about going into the next class at the end of the summer holidays," she says. "He's growing out of it now, but some years we've had bedtime tears for weeks leading up to the return to school and sleepless nights immediately beforehand."

Sarah and Emily's boys aren't alone in dreading the start of term; it's a common complaint. As the academic year approaches, many children will be starting to show signs of distress. It manifests itself in a variety of forms: whingeing, grumpiness, tummy aches, night-time waking, tearfulness or anxiety. It can be hard to associate the care-free child at the beginning of the holidays with the wretched one as the vacation comes to an end.

Sarah maintains that it's all the harder for expatriate children, who have often spent the summer with grandparents, cousins and old friends in their countries of origin, and may have started to regard it as home once again.

"I think being expat kids, it's a bit of a double whammy," she says. "They are having to leave their extended family and their UK friends once more as well as starting school."

Add to that the fact that many expat children enjoy longer holidays than most, and it's hardly surprising if the start of term looms large in their young minds.

Liat Joshi, the author of *Raising Children: The Primary Years*, recommends spending some time trying to isolate whether there's anything in particular about school that is troubling your child. For many youngsters, a new school year is daunting because it involves so many new elements, and it can be hard to predict what it is they'll be worried about.

"It could be anything from whether their teacher will be stricter than last year's or as much fun," says

Liat, "to where the toilets are in junior school if they're moving up from the infants."

She suggests talking about your own school days; your experiences of overcoming your fears could lay your children's doubts to rest. Hearing that the dragon lady who taught you in Year 3 turned out to be the nicest teacher of all might be reassuring, especially if you can lighten the mood by producing some amusing photos of yourself in knee socks and pigtails.

Liat acknowledges that unearthing what is troubling your child isn't always easy.

"Children won't necessarily say why they're worried or be able to articulate what it is they feel, so you might have to do some digging. Try and chat to them when they're likely to be at their most relaxed and aren't tired."

If you turn it into too much of an interrogation you could do more harm than good, though. "Keep your questions light," says Liat. "Too much questioning and children often clam up."

Many parents find that a bit of retail therapy can do wonders in cheering up a reluctant child. Even if the official list only specifies a boring old ruler and protractor, it's worth splashing out on a bit of fun stuff as well. A shiny new pencil case or sparkly gel pens can do wonders for morale, and even boys seem to go mad for stationery.

Others find that making the last days of the holiday less exciting encourages their kids to yearn for the fun of the playground. Cutting back on playdates can make home seem dull and lonely; with no one but their siblings to fall back on, they'll soon be missing their friends.

Some parents go further, laying on a series of boring tasks for their children to do, to make lessons seem more attractive. "Next year I'm going to launch a hardcore regime of household chores two days before kick-off so starting school again will be strangely appealing," laughs Sarah.

The good news is that most parents agree the problem vanishes like magic as soon as the children start back at school again. Within moments of walking through the gates, they are laughing and chattering with their friends as though they haven't a care in the world, and all of their fears are forgotten.

"The minute they see their friends and find their way to their new classroom, a whole weight seems to lift from their shoulders," says Sarah.

As with most parental issues, it's not a perfect solution, but it's something to hold on to at two in the morning.



Back-to-school blues can be especially hard on expatriate children, who travel to see relatives on break and often reattach to their home countries. OJO Images / Rex Features

Liat Joshi's tips to avoid the back-to-school blues

- Start getting them back into a routine a few days before the first day back. If they've spent every morning in their pyjamas until lunchtime or been up late in the evenings, start adjusting back or they'll struggle with the change on the first day.
- Do a few minutes' school-type work most days to get their hand

back in with whatever they've been working on; it'll help them feel more confident on the first day back. Keep it fun for younger ones – primary age children might like to keep a scrapbook of what they've done each day.

- Remind them that they can talk to you about anything they're unsure about before or after the school year

starts and that you will help however you can.

- Don't leave it too late to get organised: buy those new school shoes a couple of weeks before term starts to avoid the huge children's shoe shop queues.
- Involve them in back-to-school purchases – maybe choosing a new pencil case or school bag.

teen life

From little mermaid to old salt in one stormy night

We had booked a cabin in a cruise ship to deliver us from our holiday destination of Copenhagen to our next stop, Oslo, instead of taking a flight. My parents were all for going about discovering new islands and being part of making history, as people older than 20 tend to be. I was secretly hoping we would run into, if not swashbuckling, iron-hooked, parrot-carrying pirates, at least someone who looked remotely like Captain Jack Sparrow.

With still some time to spare, we decided to make a quick detour to the famous *Little Mermaid*, which we hadn't managed to see yet. After a 45-minute walk, we stumbled upon a little board that said "The *Little Mermaid* has gone to China". The pint-sized stone sculpture had, in anticipation of our arrival, I'm sure, chosen that very moment to go off on an exchange tour. In its place, there was a video/artwork made by a Chinese artist, which, the board regretfully informed us, wasn't working. Poof went hopes

of waving goodbye to *Den Lille Havfrue*, or even its substitute, from the stern of a ship. That's when we suddenly realised that it was four o'clock and after missing two buses and getting stuck in a traffic jam, we rushed to MS Pearl of Scandinavia. The whole experience is so much more fun when your liner has a pretty name.

I bet Mum 50 Danish kroner that somewhere along the journey, we would end up in a watery grave, but she dismissed me as absurdly pessimistic. I will never tire of the joys of embarrassing people in public, so I sang haunting *Titanic* songs to her until passengers started giving me strange glances.

The ship was to start its voyage sometime in the evening and reach Oslo the next morning. We found our cabin on the ninth deck, and entered it to find four crisp, white bunks and a gigantic window behind whose glass lay miles of sparkling blue sea. When I shot-gunned a top bunk, Mum sadly told me not

to wake her if I fell off it in the middle of the night, and she began to unpack. And I'm the pessimistic one.

After a late lunch of biscuits, we were feeling very much the sailors and set out in search of an open deck. We did find an open deck, along with an outdoor pool, but it turned out that we weren't the only ones who had had the idea. Every square inch of the open deck, as well as all the other decks on the other floors, was crammed full of happy sunbathers and children in swimsuits running about, leaving puddles behind.

Finally having perched ourselves precariously on tables for the lack of chairs, we got talking to a newlywed couple trying to fix their camera to take a photo of themselves. The determined-looking husband sat fiddling with the camera's innards for about half an hour, while his wife stood by the rail with a smile plastered on her face. It was all very entertaining to watch. Finally, he angled the camera on our table,

rushed up to her, slipped, and slid with a resounding crash into the bar. I cheered. Mum glared. We let them recover and fiddle with their camera for another half an hour before someone came up, spoilt the fun and offered to take the picture of them. Some people.

I was certain I had spotted a shark's fin circling the ship, and was jumping about trying to tell everyone in the vicinity, but was being paid little attention. I fetched my binoculars – which, by the way, had cost me a pretty penny – and tried to get a closer look. Jinxed as I am, the binoculars tumbled down to the yawning expanse of ocean below. One can't say I didn't do my best to retrieve them; only an alarmed old lady waddled up and firmly pulled me down by my feet. Life's harsh.

When we curled up in our bunks that night, I made a feeble stab at making the trip memorable as I tried to convince Mum that I had seen a cockroach in her bunk, but either she has been living with me

for too long or she's made of sterner stuff than I imagined.

I was unceremoniously woken up at five the next morning, but happily enough we finally got the sense of adventure we'd been craving. As we tentatively ventured out to the empty decks, we were blown off our feet. Almost literally. Although it was already light, there was not a soul in sight. This would be because it was not only absolutely freezing, but the howling gale was so strong it made us stagger several feet backwards as soon as we emerged from the indoors. It was impossible to hear each other, and we had to keep a firm grip on the railing just to inch forward. At last, we were in the middle of the sort of storm you read about only in books, ready to dock at Oslo in a few hours. Perfect.

★ Lavanya Malhotra

● The writer is a 15-year-old student in Dubai.

dad matters

Left hand may be just right for a daughter

Astrid is developing sinistral tendencies. She picks up her spoon to eat with her left hand. She takes hold of a pen to draw with her left hand. She kicks a ball with her left foot. Of course, it doesn't happen every time she performs one of these actions, but she does it often enough for me to notice a predilection at this early stage in her life.

If she does go on to become left-handed, she will be part of a minority. Left-handedness is much less common than right-handedness. Approximately eight per cent of people are left-handed. This distinction emerges in the meanings and associations of left and right in many different cultures and religions throughout history.

Right means correct in various European languages and is often associated with justice and authority.

Left has had less positive connotations for a long time. Christians have traditionally associated the devil with the left hand. The word "sinister", which has come to mean evil, ominous or unlucky, is derived from the Latin *sinister*, which means left. Islam teaches the distinct functions of different hands, with the right to be used, among other things, for eating and drinking and the left for removing dirt.

The reasons why asymmetry developed in humans are only starting to be unravelled. In his book, *Right Hand, Left Hand*, Chris McManus, professor of educational psychology at University College London, explores how we came to favour the right hand over the left. He notes that in chimpanzees, our closest relatives, there is no proven preference for a particular hand with the inclination apparently determined by chance. He goes on to explore how and why the right hand became dominant in the majority of humans.

Different hemispheres of the brain control different sides of the body. The left side of the brain controls the right side of the body, while the right side of the brain controls the left side of the body.

McManus posits that our preference for the right hand is linked to the development of language, which takes place in the left side of the brain. As language developed, so the right side became more dextrous (itself from *dexter*, the Latin word for right), and a gene for right-handedness came to dominate.

Indeed, stone tools dated from around two million years ago are exclusively for the right hand. Somewhere between that date and 5,000 years ago, left-handed people re-emerged with a frequency that still occurs today.

In 2007, five years after McManus published his book, researchers at Oxford University found a gene for left-handedness called LRRTM1, which seems to change the way the brain develops asymmetry. This discovery confirms what has long been suspected about left-handedness running in the family.

One of the most famous examples of this inheritance is that families with the surname Kerr or Carr seemed to be much more likely to be left-handed. This belief dates back to the 14th century and a poem about a clan of left-handed swordsmen.

Ferniehirst Castle, home of the Kerr clan, is one of only two castles in the UK to have an anti-clockwise spiral staircase, a defensive structure that favoured left-handed swordsmen coming down the stairs.

While a study in 1974 found that Kerrs and Carrs were more likely to be left-handed, a subsequent study in 1993 found these results to be statistically flawed.

My family has a history of left-handedness. Although I am right-handed, my aunt is left-handed, as was my grandfather. We will have to wait and see if Astrid has inherited the LRRTM1 gene and become part of this distinctive club.

★ Robert Carroll