

School's Out!

By Jean MacLeod

Sliding into Summer...

Sounds easy, doesn't it? Most of us look forward to the lazy days of summer vacation, and the unstructured time with our kids. For some of our children, however, the end of the school year presents a difficult hurdle, and a carefree day without a regular classroom routine throws some kids into high anxiety.

We can help remove some of the summer transition hurdles by understanding our children's deep-seated reactions. For an internationally adopted child, change often equates to momentous loss. An adopted child understands the terror of vulnerability; she knows that change can represent a scary event, and on a base level, may fear that it could signal losing her present parents, friends and home. *It has happened before.*

Change forces anxieties to the surface, and anxiety and difficulty with transitions often go hand in hand. There is 'safety' in an unchanging routine. The end of the school year is doubly hard to deal with, as children say good-bye to a familiar teacher and friends, while switching to unstructured days filled with new and varied activities. While transitioning seems like a natural skill, it is really an outgrowth of temperament and a child's trusting belief in a safe, secure world. Parents might not be able to alter a child's pre-adoption life experience or how a child feels about change, but parents CAN empower a child to *face* change.

Five School-to-Summer Transitional Strategies

Go to the Core Issue. TALK to your child about her anxiety as the school year ends, and teach your child why it might be rooted in loss. Discuss anxiety in child-terms, and help her to understand why she feels and reacts the way she does. This is the first step to empowering a child—knowledge allows kids to consciously make over-ride choices about their behaviors and physiological stress reactions.

Build in Good-by Rituals. Send your child to the end-of-school party or field day with a disposable digital camera and an inexpensive autograph book to capture classmate memories. Ask your child to help you choose a thoughtful gift for a favorite teacher, and co-create a meaningful note to accompany it. Celebrate end of school 'graduation' with a special family dinner and cake; talk about the highs and lows of the past year, and what the upcoming school year highs (and fears) may be.

Create a Summer Activity Routine. Regular activity regulates the brain. A non-competitive, but self-calming practice like yoga, or bike-riding, or swimming can modify anxious behaviors. These life-time sports can involve the entire family!

Consider, and Re-Consider, Camp. Calculate sleep-away summer camp readiness in a child by starting small with local sleepovers or day camps, and by observing the child's resulting behaviors. Can your child sleep well away from home? Is your child attending camp with an understanding friend? Are you confident that an extended stay at camp will be a happy, positive experience, or is the child 'willing but unable' to take the separation and change in stride? Some kids need many small trial steps before taking on the big step of sleep-away camp.

Celebrate Small Stuff. Sometimes a child's fear-based, negative reaction to a carefully planned family vacation or getaway can push parents into their own negative reactions! Often, when a child declares they don't want to go to the beach or a family barbecue or even Disneyworld, it is the child's anxiety talking. Sit down with your child and jointly list ways to alleviate vacation stress. Brainstorm coping mechanisms and build these into your vacation days. Reward your child when she deals well with a new situation, and avoid showing your irritation if / when your child takes a step backward. Developing coping skills, confidence and resilience is an ongoing, often asynchronous, process.

Sliding into summer-time can become an annual, recognized transition ritual. Front-loading school vacations with success strategies makes sense. We carefully prepare for many duties, requirements and responsibilities in our lives—why not prepare to teach our adopted kids how to relax, try on flexibility, and have some fun?

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**Note to Parents:** In some adopted children, anxiety can be debilitating. If you have concerns over the intensity and duration of your child's anxiety, or if stress / worry are negatively impacting your child's daily life or social relationships, please seek professional care.

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## RESOURCES

### **The Six Core Strengths**

by Bruce Duncan Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

*Attachment, Self-Regulation, Affiliation, Awareness, Tolerance, Respect*

**For Parents** <http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/index.htm>

**For Classroom Teachers** [www.lfcc.on.ca/Perry\\_Six\\_Core\\_Strengths.pdf](http://www.lfcc.on.ca/Perry_Six_Core_Strengths.pdf)

## **New Transitional Tools from Child Trauma**

(<http://www.childtrauma.org/>):

Help Your Children Adjust to New Settings

Order a special kit to help a child face:

- [My New School](#)
- [My New Home](#)
- [My Trip](#)

To purchase products, proceed to the Child Trauma online store at:

<http://store.ctaproducts.org/index.html>

## **Healing Resources**

(Children's stress, anxiety / Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)

**Articles:** [http://www.healingresources.info/children\\_articles.htm](http://www.healingresources.info/children_articles.htm)

**Online Video:** [http://www.healingresources.info/emotional\\_trauma\\_online\\_video.htm](http://www.healingresources.info/emotional_trauma_online_video.htm)

## **Understanding Complex Trauma**

[www.nctsnet.org](http://www.nctsnet.org)

### **Books**

*Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-By-Step Guide for Parents*  
by Ronald M. Rapee (ed)

*Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias*  
by Tamar Chansky

*Helping Children Cope with Loss and Separation*  
by Claudia Jewett Jarratt

*What To Do When You're Scared and Worried: A Guide for Kids*  
by James J. Crist, Ph.D., (for kids, grades 5-8)