



## News Release

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Communication, Modeling Can Help Children Deal With Anxiety of New School Year**

Now that the youngsters have settled in to new classes and schedules, Sarah Mallard Wakefield, M.D., chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of Medicine, said it's a great time for parents to check in with their students to see how they are handling the new routine.

"Every time there's a transition, that can definitely be a trigger for mental health distress, so it's a great time to ask questions like: How's school going? Is there any trouble in the hallways? How's your relationship with the kids in your class, or your teachers, or your new coach?" Wakefield said. "It's a natural time to have those conversations."

There are many common things that can cause stress for children when a school year gets underway — starting a new school or grade, unfamiliar class subjects or new teachers and classmates. Wakefield said changes in a child's behavior may indicate they are in distress. Perhaps they've started complaining more than usual about getting up in the morning, or maybe they are staying out later or isolating themselves and no longer participating in family conversations and outings.

"As a parent, you know your kids so well," Wakefield reasoned. "Now, all kids are changing all the time, so they could be developing and finding their new normal, but when you see a change, I think it's a time to ask about that."

Another reason to ask questions, Wakefield explained, is because early intervention is critically important to address a situation before it can spiral downward. In most cases, early intervention also reduces the amount of treatment that is necessary, which means less time spent away from school, less time spent in intervention and lower treatment costs.

"When we intervene early, we (generally) have to intervene less, and we make a much bigger change with that lesser intervention," Wakefield contended. "When we wait and ignore and let things fester, we create much more suffering and bigger problems, a bigger mountain to climb. Intervening early helps us decrease the stigma and say, 'You're suffering; we need to address this. You deserve that.'"

Anxiety and depression have become quite common in children, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some clinics report more than 50% of children they see are screening positive for either depression, anxiety or both. Because of this, Wakefield said the American Academy of Pediatrics currently recommends that all children be routinely screened for symptoms.

“The earlier we address it, the better we can address it and the smaller we can address it, and the less we have to do to really change that trajectory for a child,” Wakefield added.

Wakefield, who serves as co-chair for Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHATT), also touted the Campus Alliance for Telehealth Resources (CATR) program that collaborates with individual schools and school districts in addressing mental health care for children. CATR, which is supported by TCHATT, includes direct assessments and treatment services for students, and mental health education for students, school administrators, teachers and counselors.

The primary goal of the CATR program is to help fill in any gaps that may remain despite all of the many things schools and school districts already do to provide support to children. Wakefield said it’s difficult for schools to be all-encompassing because there are so many needs, and most teachers and educators are already doing so much to support children and families.

“What CATR does is try to partner with schools and come in and say, ‘How can we help you facilitate and support the mental health care of the students in your school?’” Wakefield said. “Through direct assessment and direct services for students, a school may (say), ‘Hey, I’m really worried about this kiddo.’ Then, with the parent or guardian consent, we can provide those services directly to the student and the family.”

To provide a positive mental outlook for their children, Wakefield said parents should talk about the importance of mental health and well-being in a positive way. She suggested asking questions such as, “What do you think would make you happy?” or “What do you think would help you feel better?” By opening those conversations, parents can make it easier for any issues causing distress for their child to be brought into the open and not simply dismissed as something they will eventually get over.

The way a parent handles stress or anxiety also can serve as a model for their children. If the child sees the parent deal with stress in healthy ways such as taking a walk to calm down or taking other steps to take care of themselves mentally, it gives them a positive example of how to deal with such situations.

“I think modeling is critically important,” Wakefield said. “If you don’t bring it up at all, kids may think, ‘Oh, this isn’t important’ or ‘I should not talk about it.’ So, bringing it up is important, but modeling it and teaching that well-being and taking care of yourself when you’re not feeling great is really important and can bring that message home to kids.”