

Behavioral Resources and Institute for Neuropsychological Services

# the BRAINS Express

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**When Going Back to School is Not Exciting...**

**Mary S. Rozendal, Ph.D. with  
Danté Blackburn**

*Danté:* “When I think about going back to school, it makes me feel kind of sad. I don’t want to go.”

*Mary:* “Why do you feel sad about going back to school?”

*Danté:* “Because I just don’t want to be at school. I’d rather play.”

In the weeks leading up to the start of school each year, I have had a version of this conversation with many of my students. Some children cannot wait to start the new school year – with new clothes, school supplies and the promise of success. But the start of school is not an exciting time for many students. Many children dread the start of a new school year. There are many causes of students’ anxiety over going back to school. Older students may be able to tell you their concerns and how they

are feeling. For the younger students, you may need to observe and watch their reactions as you discuss different aspects of school and engage them in telling stories about school. This may help you pinpoint where the concerns are. There are a variety of reasons why students worry, but individual concerns may surprise you. As the new school year begins, Danté and I want to share some suggestions for addressing student concerns. We will focus on three areas that cause concern for many students: socialization, organization and academics. While these are certainly not the only areas that may cause anxiety for students, they are key areas to address at the beginning of the school year to give students the tools to make school a more positive experience.



**Socialization:** Navigating social relationships at school can be a major source of anxiety for students. As I conversed with Danté for this article, I asked him about difficulties he has with school expectations and if he was worried about

what the teachers would be asking him

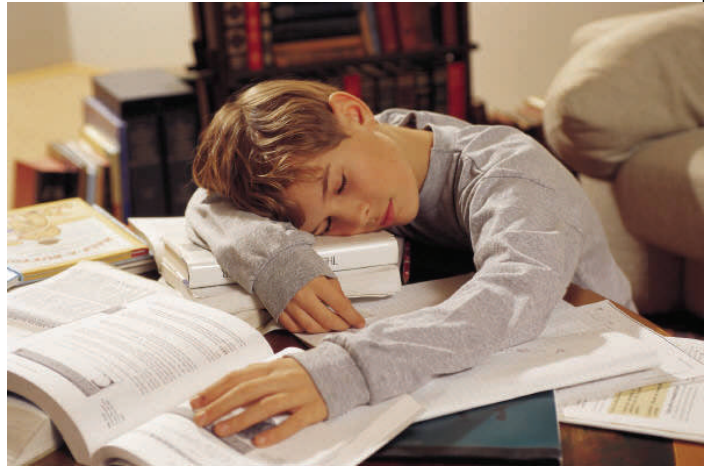


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to do in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. To my surprise, he shared that doing his schoolwork was not the reason he was worried about going back to school. He didn't particularly enjoy doing the schoolwork and acknowledged struggling with it, but he wasn't really worried about it. Instead, he was concerned about being with his classmates again and how they had changed over the summer. He was worried about talking to his peers, how they would be different, and how to interact with them. Navigating social relationships overshadowed his concerns about doing schoolwork.

Friendships and good relationships with classmates give children support and something to look forward to when going back to school. There are several practical things you can do to help bridge this transition. Meeting the teachers and some of the classmates at open houses is a good first step to help ease the social anxiety of the new year. Open houses also help students become familiar with the new classroom setting. As school begins, you may want to make an extra effort to invite a classmate over to help ease the socialization of the new school year. Make sure you have an activity that allows for building common experiences and that could form the foundation for new friendships. Students who have limited school friends may not have maintained those friendships over the summer. Finally, it may be helpful to talk through different so-

cial situations with your student and model very specific things to say (or not to say) to classmates. Role-playing different scenarios that happen in schools (when someone says something mean, when someone ignores you, what to say when you see other students you haven't talked to all summer) gives students a chance to learn what to say when those situations come up. Many students who struggle with socialization do not read the "hidden curriculum" of the classroom, or catch on to the playground/social norms of their peer group. The "hidden curriculum" is the unspoken expectations in the school setting – the way you join a group playing together on the playground or the expectations for coming into school from recess that may not be explicitly discussed. Most students successfully "read" the social context of school, however for many students a lot of mental energy may be spent figuring out social norms during school. This could cause other areas to become problems. We next share some ideas for staying organized and easing the difficulties of managing the school context.



**Organization:** As Danté and I talked about the new school year, we talked about what he needed to put in place to help him remember his homework, keep track of assignments and expectations, and stay organized. Danté had several suggestions for being organized. He talked about getting his folders ready and labeled for each class. He suggested that the class schedule with times and locations be copied and put on the front of his planner rather than inside. He also suggested that it would help if a supply list were put on the front of his planner listing everything he needed for each class (pencil, notebook, homework folder, textbook, calculator, etc.). This would help him by giving him a checklist to refer to so he didn't forget anything. For students like Danté this is not only an academic concern, but forgetting something often draws negative attention to themselves in the classroom setting.

If your child's classroom or school has a planning system, review that system

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in light of your child's individual needs. Danté's suggestion for adding a supply checklist so he can quickly review what is needed for classes is an example of personalizing the school's organization plan to address individual student needs. Other students may need to have a personal list of behavior expectations or class rules with them as reminders. Working with individual students on the practical needs they have for being organized may ease some of the new school worries. A simple organization plan that gives structure to the daily expectations also supports students' academic needs.



**Academics:** School anxiety often comes from students who struggle with the learning expectations. Learning struggles have many causes and often require diligence on the part of parents to identify and monitor. Students who have struggled with aspects of learning may be struggling with a learning disability, may not learn best in the way teachers are teaching, or may simply have some holes in their understandings. Make sure you use the tools in place to monitor early grades and perform-

ance. Many schools have online resources available to parents to track grades and performance. Don't wait until the first marking period has gone by to find out how your student is doing in school. If you feel there are concerns based on your child's reluctance to go to school, behavior problems that are starting or continuing, or emotional outbursts when your student arrives home after school, initiate contact with the teacher and school to address any academic needs early in the year. Sometimes students who struggle may need outside instruction that is personalized and perhaps approaches learning in a manner more in line with the student's strengths and learning style.

Parents are the best advocates for their children, and communication with school is critical to be able to reduce anxiety. I am sympathetic with parents who are exhausted by only hearing negative feedback about their child – that happens far too often. But for the sake of your student, you need to continue to engage his or her teachers. Use the resources of social workers, other education specialists, psychologists and other professionals who know your child when necessary.

So as the new school year gets underway, look for ways to ease your student's anxiety about different aspects of the school experience. Social relationships are a key source of anxiety that may be ad-

ressed by being proactive about meeting teachers, developing peer relationships early in the year, and discussing or role-playing possible "hidden curriculum" situations. Figure out with your student the best ways to be organized, and identify any particular needs such as having a supply list or checklists of key things to remember in a



very visible place. Finally, while parents and students may hope that a student who struggled with the academics of the previous year may make a dramatic turn around in the new year, it is important to be diligent and monitor whether or not this is the case. Initiate contact with teachers and if necessary develop a means of communication that showcases any concerns when they first occur. Look for ways to reward efforts and build positive experiences in school. Students who struggle with school may not develop the excitement that their peers experience, but reducing anxiety about going to school will certainly promote learning and success. Danté and I wish all students, parents, and teachers a wonderful start to the new school year.

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*Dr. Mary Rozendal, founder and director of the EnCourage Institute for Teaching and Learning (locations in Grandville, MI and at BRAINS) is an educator with 24 years of experience in early childhood, elementary, secondary, special education and university settings. She has a BA degree from Calvin College and MA and PhD degrees from Michigan State University. She is certified in K-8 General Education, K-12 Special Education, and K-12 Music Education in both Michigan and New York. As a university professor for 11 years Dr. Rozendal engaged in teaching and research focused on teacher development and literacy instruction for children. In private practice Dr. Rozendal's work continues to address learning needs for students of all ages through specially designed education interventions. Dr. Rozendal serves students with learning, cognitive and/or behavioral disorders, and is a home consultant for The PLAY Project, an early intervention program for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. EnCourage Institute's website: [encourageinstitute.com](http://encourageinstitute.com) and Dr. Rozendal can be contacted at 616-530-2224 or [mary@encourageinstitute.com](mailto:mary@encourageinstitute.com).*

*Danté Blackburn is 11 years old and beginning the 6<sup>th</sup> grade this fall. His interests in school are Art, Gym and Recess and he was pleased to be able to share his personal experiences to help other students, parents and teachers.*



## **Soldiers and Their Families: Receiving Support Through a Collaborative Treatment Center**

### **Branden Lyon, ACSW**

For many West Michigan soldiers and their families, the homecoming from a deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan is a joyous, but also potentially stressful time. During my more than five years as a Clinical Social Worker with the Department of Veterans Affairs here in Grand Rapids, I have helped many military families build on their strengths and successfully navigate the transitions they face.

As a new member of BRAINS clinical staff, I am excited to continue my work with military veterans and their families as well as other individuals and families who are confronting challenges in their lives. Whether I am working with

individuals, couples or groups, I have seen Cognitive Behavioral Therapy empower people to lead more fulfilling lives. In my practice, I use “CBT” techniques to treat many familiar mental health issues including depression, anxiety, grief, and relationship problems.

In addition to my experience in these areas, I specialize in the treatment of psychological trauma. Trauma can come in many different forms and each individual's experience is unique. Yet, as a clinician, I frequently see some common reactions to traumatic events. These reactions form a starting point for treatment and give survivors hope that they are not alone.

Combat related trauma is just one factor which can make a homecoming from active military duty stressful. The list below is by no means a complete, but since so many soldiers have come home or are returning to our area soon, I would like to share some observations about the challenges military families face from my own practice:

- It sounds obvious, but a combat deployment affects EVERYONE in the family
- Each family member (including children) may have different expectations for what the reunion will be like
- The family member/spouse who stayed behind has been managing most or all aspects of life at home (finances, childcare, etc.) and it will take time to renegotiate the



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- roles each partner will take
- Children may show anxiety over even short periods of separation from the veteran
- Very young children may not remember a parent who has been gone for a year or more and children of all ages will have grown and changed
- Teens may rebel against the authority of a returning parent
- Life may initially seem ideal, but after a few weeks or months when everyday life resumes, problems may arise

What are some things that can help?

- It is extremely important to communicate about the roles and responsibilities each family member will take on now that the veteran is home
- It is helpful if the returning veteran can gradually resume important roles (ex. disciplining children) over weeks, not days
- Arrange time for one-on-one time between the veteran and each family member
- Once life gets back into a routine, reassure younger children that their parent will return soon (eg. "at 5pm today")
- It is ok to ask about the war, but be respectful and do not push if the veteran does not want to talk about it

These and many other reactions are normal and many families get "back on track" relatively quickly. However, if there continue to be problems which reduce the quality of life for

the family, getting help could be a good option. In addition to counseling and consultation available at a practice such as BRAINS, there are many resources available for returning soldiers through the VA and other organizations.



## Pre-Concussion Screenings: What's the Big Deal by

### Brad Bridges, MSW

The Facts [Center for Disease Control]:

- ◆ Over 3.8 million concussions occur in the U.S. each year.
- ◆ 13% occur in high school football
- ◆ Males are twice as likely as females to experience a traumatic brain injury
- ◆ The highest risk groups are children 0 to 4 years and adolescents aged 15 to 19 years.

Most common injury sports for children/adolescents are:

- Football, Basketball, Baseball, Softball, Soccer, Gymnastics

A pre-concussive screening is completed prior to an athlete experiencing a blow to the head or acquired brain injury of some kind.

The injury does not need to be athletically related, but could occur from playing around, a motor vehicle accident, falling, etc. Without some baseline data, it is sometimes nearly impossible to figure out what has been the result of the injury or how to proceed in making recommendations for participation or to monitor recovery following the injury.

I certainly hope that your child/ adolescent does not become injured, but for the cost of \$15.00, there can be some peace of mind that professionals and myself cannot only better understand the injury, but that I can help consult better on post-injury recovery. Please contact me for a screening. Team appointments can also be arranged. I am also available for a variety of other counseling, consultation, or speaker services: Brad Bridges, MSW, 616-365-8920.



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**GROWING OUR BRAINS POTENTIAL**  
*Raising support for the BRAINS Foundation\**



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**Who:** BRAINS Foundation and Gymco; along with you and your family

**What:** An interactive fundraising event filled with plenty of food, raffle prizes, and “open gym” activities.

**When:** Saturday, October 10, 2009, 4:30–6:30 p.m.

**Where:** Gymco Sports (2306 Camelot Ridge Ct., SE, just off East Paris)

**Why:** Raising awareness *and* support for the BRAINS Foundation, all while promoting a healthier community.

**Cost:** \$10 per person

**Reserve Your Spot TODAY:** Sign up now by 616-365-8920, or emailing [marketing@brainspotential.com](mailto:marketing@brainspotential.com). All ages are invited, but space is limited. [foundation.brainspotential.com](http://foundation.brainspotential.com)

The BRAINS Foundation is actively seeking relationships to establish funding for these programs. If you are able to make a donation, please send funds to:

**BRAINS Foundation**  
 3351 Eagle Run Dr. NE,  
 Grand Rapids, MI 49525.

Recognition of your donation with a tax deductible receipt will be sent to you confirming the donation.

If interested in assisting the Foundation in a more formal manner, The BRAINS Foundation would appreciate the chance to develop this relationship. Please call: 616-365-8920 and ask for Drs. Manor or Wolff.

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