Tuesday, October 10:
“Conquering Limits”
Learn, Achieve, Succeed!

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Commit, Conquer, & Celebrate!
by Lyn Balistreri, Director, Fund Development

Autumn is a time of transition, not just seasonal, but for educators and students returning to school to face a whole new year of possibilities. At Morrissey-Compton, it is also a time to transition our focus toward the future: specifically, the future of those individuals with learning differences who will walk through our doors next year very much in need of our services, but without the financial means to pay full price. We are proud and grateful to be able to offer these individuals financial aid, thanks to our wonderful donors.

Morrissey-Compton’s winning formula for serving those who learn differently—take a talented staff, mix in a large dose of commitment, add programs where needed, and deliver to as many individuals as possible—have helped scores of students do better in school, and in life. But our agency does not operate in a vacuum; other key ingredients to the formula include the efforts of the individuals, their family, and additional sources of support in their lives, such as teachers and other educational professionals.

Unsung Heroes
Teaching is not known as a lucrative profession. Its appeal can be highly personal, as are its rewards. And though many educators go the extra mile to help individual students, often fostering a love of learning that lasts a lifetime, their efforts frequently go unrecognized.

And so, at Morrissey-Compton, each autumn we hold a special event with a twofold purpose: to celebrate our community’s outstanding educators, and to raise money to fund scholarships for the following year. This year’s event is a dinner that will take place on Tuesday, October 10 and honor Outstanding Educators Karen Grites, M.S., founder of LearningWisely; and Gayle Rosenberg, M.A., BCET, director of Junipero Serra High School’s Academic Resource Center and an educational therapist at Sacred Heart Prep. You are invited to celebrate with us the efforts of Karen, Gayle, and other gifted educators who have made a difference in your own life!

continued on page 4
Dear Friends,

It is hard to believe that fall has arrived, and that we’re approaching another holiday season already. Our next newsletter will come out towards the end of December, but I wanted to call your attention to an article I wrote for last winter’s newsletter, “Managing Family Relationships During the Holidays.” The newsletter arrived in mailboxes just after the holidays, so I’m hoping that this year, you can take advantage of the advice the article offered and plan for a less-stressful season with your relatives. You can find that newsletter, as well as others, on our website (morrissey-compton.org).

Speaking of late arrivals, we apologize that although this issue features our Fall Scholarship Event that will take place on October 10, you will likely not receive your copy until the week of October 2. That doesn’t allow a lot of time for some of you to RSVP, but unfortunately, that is sometimes the nature of print publications. If you have not already done so, I urge you to sign up for our email distribution list so that you can receive notifications of future events in as timely a manner as possible. And please, if you can, join us in celebrating our exceptional colleagues, Karen Grites and Gayle Rosenberg, plus the other outstanding educators in your life, at this special dinner event.

In addition to our social and fundraising events, there are always innovative offerings at Morrissey-Compton including free Parent Education Classes and our upcoming Executive Function (EF) Conference for Professionals. On pages 14-15, you can learn more about the latter. If you are the parent of a child with EF difficulties, we have included ways to support professionals in the field who can use the valuable information that will be offered at the conference to more effectively help their students learn.

I’d also like to mention that this issue includes an article one of our vigilant staff members found on the PBS website titled “How To Counter Back-To-School Anxiety” (page 12). The article was originally shared on our Facebook page, and of course, kids have been back to school for several weeks now. However, since the article contains suggestions that can benefit parents who are dealing with anxious children throughout the year, we thought it was worthwhile to share it with you here as well. Again, “liking” Morrissey-Compton on Facebook is another way to get great information from our agency sooner rather than later. You can link directly to our Facebook page from our home page.

Returning to fundraising matters, I’m very pleased to share with you that we recently received confirmation of an extremely generous gift in the amount of $100,000 that will soon arrive from the estate of Maria Carter, a dear friend of our founders. Half of this gift will go towards Morrissey-Compton’s endowment, and the rest will fund other agency needs. Such gifts are a wonderful legacy to the clients we serve, and we thank Maria from the bottom of our hearts for remembering us. We will most certainly remember her in the coming years, and make certain that her name is known to those who walk through our doors in the future.

We’ve said it before: Donors are the heart of a nonprofit. It’s difficult to express how much we appreciate those of you who care enough to direct some of your hard-earned dollars towards supporting our cause. If you can afford to give, in any amount, please know that we will continue to honor your generosity to the best of our abilities by putting your gifts to the very best use we can—as described in the “Donor Bill of Rights” on the facing page.

With Warmest Wishes,

John T. Brentar, Ph.D.

To Our Donors, Clients, and Agency Friends:

The end of the year is a time for two important fundraisers here at Morrissey-Compton: our Scholarship Event, detailed in this issue, and our Fall Appeal. Please look for the latter to arrive in your mailbox in mid-November.

We understand that the amount of disposable income that most of us have to give is limited, and that there are many worthy causes to support (especially these days, with disaster relief on all of our minds). Please know that we are grateful for any and all gifts to our agency, and that we are honored when you choose to include us in your philanthropy at any level. Your gift shows that you believe in what we do enough to make a personal investment—and that, in itself, is wonderful motivation for us to do even better in the future.

Giving is a two-way street, and our acceptance of your gifts also comes with certain responsibilities. Some of you are likely familiar with “A Donor Bill of Rights,” but in case you are not, I’m sharing it with you here. My hope is that it will encourage you to contact us if you should have any questions or concerns about giving to Morrissey-Compton. If you do, please do not hesitate to contact me at (408) 396-8953 or lyn.balistreri@morrcomp.org.

We can never say it enough: Thank you so very, very much for your gracious support.

—Lyn Balistreri, Director, Fund Development

A Donor Bill of Rights

Philanthropy is based on voluntary action for the common good. It is a tradition of giving and sharing that is primary to the quality of life. To assure that philanthropy merits the respect and trust of the general public, and that donors and prospective donors can have full confidence in the not-for-profit organizations and causes they are asked to support, we declare that all donors have these rights:

To be informed of the organization’s mission, of the way the organization intends to use donated resources, and of its capacity to use donations effectively for their intended purposes.

To be informed of the identity of those serving on the organization’s governing board, and to expect the board to exercise prudent judgment in its stewardship responsibilities.

To have access to the organization’s most recent financial statements.

To be assured their gifts will be used for the purposes for which they were given.

To receive appropriate acknowledgment and recognition.

To be assured that information about their donations is handled with respect and with confidentiality to the extent provided by law.

To expect that all relationships with individuals representing organizations of interest to the donor will be professional in nature.

To be informed whether those seeking donations are volunteers, employees of the organization, or hired solicitors.

To have the opportunity for their names to be deleted from mailing lists that an organization may intend to share.

To feel free to ask questions when making a donation and to receive prompt, truthful, and forthright answers.

The text of this statement in its entirety was developed by the American Association of Fund-Raising Counsel (AAFRC), Association for Healthcare Philanthropy (AHP), Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), and the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP), and adopted in November 1993.

A Letter from the Director

Fund Development Notes
Cover Story Continued:

Pat Morrissey and Carolyn Compton founded an agency 35 years ago to provide individuals on the Peninsula with tools to help them conquer these limits. However, they soon discovered that many families faced further limits in accessing these tools.

Karen Grites’ inspiration to become an educational therapist came from her childhood experiences in Illinois with a family friend who had cerebral palsy. “I experienced a growing awareness that while cerebral palsy robbed this child of the freedom of movement and speech, her mind was bright and she laughed at my questions and jokes,” Karen recalls. “I also became aware that the other kids stared and were reluctant to interact with her. It was then that I knew I wanted to make a difference for children like her as their teacher.”

Karen has indeed made a difference for many over the course of her 35-year career. She worked with preschoolers while earning her Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees at Illinois State University; taught at elementary, middle, and high school levels; and has been an instructor for special education classes at San Jose State and Santa Clara University. A California mentor teacher who taught special education for 18 years, Karen also spent 25 years at Children’s Health Council (CHC) as a clinical diagnostican and head of Education Services. She and her oldest daughter, Kristin, now run LearningWisely, a local agency that offers educational services to students, parents, and teachers.

During her time as a teacher and at CHC, Karen noticed that many struggling learners in the public school system did not qualify for special education such as special education or specialized placement that could help them learn more effectively and efficiently. However, she came to realize that this shortfall need not get in the way of a student’s success.

“The field of learning disabilities appealed to me because so many of these students were misunderstood due to the nature of their learning problems, coupled with masking their learning strengths,” Karen says. “At every level of a child’s education, students need to understand and be understood about how to leverage their strengths to mitigate weaknesses.” Karen has used this approach to facilitate success in her students, helping them develop courage, confidence, and strategies to support learning challenges and guide choices about academic and career planning.

Karen has assessed over 1,000 students and trained more than 4,000 teachers from the National Faculty member of the All Kinds of Minds Institute, a leader in brain research and learning, and regularly presents around the Bay Area on parent education topics related to learning. She has helped establish a chapter of the National Resource Program, which serves about 170 boys a year.

After earning a teaching credential, I felt that I could work with students with learning challenges and guide them to use their strengths to support their learning success,” says Karen. “It seemed like the perfect blend of psychology and working with children. As I started my Master’s program, I was excited to learn about the methods that had been developed since the early 1970s when I was operating in the dark. Thankfully, by that time the term ‘educationally handicapped’ had disappeared and the limits of living within modest financial means.

Deceptive Geography

The Bay Area’s economic exclusivity is relatively new. Before the tech boom, many working-class families had already established residence in neighborhoods that are now very high-income. Word of the availability of Morrissey-Compton’s services spread quickly in the Palo Alto community and in surrounding areas. And though a lot of the families who walked through the agency’s door could afford to pay full price for services, it quickly became apparent that others could not.

Scholarships to the Rescue!

Pat and Carolyn’s vision for their agency did not include turning away any family for economic reasons. They, as well as their staff psychologist John Brentar, started to provide services to some families out of their own pockets—a practice that would not be able to continue indefinitely if they the term ‘learning disabilities’ emerged. While better than the first, it still carried the stigma of a disability. Today, we use the words ‘learning differences,’ which is much better than the first two but still in need of improvement.”

After earning her degrees, Gayle worked at Bay Center in Berkeley, a clinic for students with learning challenges. In 1997, she started a program for students with learning challenges at Junipero Serra High School. Gayle just entered her 20th year at the school as the director of the Academic Resource Program, which serves about 170 boys a year.

Several years after joining the staff at Junipero Serra, Gayle was asked to assist in revamping the program for students with learning challenges at Sacred Heart Prep High School. There, she currently serves as an educational therapy consultant on the team that manages the Center for Student Success.

Gayle is a Board Certified Educational Therapist and a member of the Association of Educational Therapists. In addition to her faculty positions, Gayle has an educational therapy private practice for many years, and has consulted for schools in the Bay Area.

Gayle is married to Art Rosenberg and they have two children, Christian and Steven. The family has grown to include two young grandchildren, Violet and Dylan. Gayle’s mother, Valesa, now 101 years old, still lives in San Francisco. The need to educate remains strong in the Rosenberg family; Gayle’s daughter is an educational therapist, and her daughter-in-law, Melissa, is an educator.

Pat Morrissey and Carolyn Compton

Gayle Rosenberg did not know that she wanted to become an educator until she was an undergraduate at San Francisco State University. “Although my mother was an English teacher, I did not think of becoming a teacher; rather, I was drawn to psychology,” says Gayle. “My major was psychology and I intended to become a psychologist.” However, the call of teaching led Gayle to earn her teaching credential, and her first job out of college was as an ‘educationally handicapped’ teacher in Mill Valley.

“The field of special education had not yet been truly established, and since I had a psychology degree and a teaching credential, I felt that I could work with students who were not achieving in school,” Gayle recalls. “Looking back, there were no established methods developed for how to reach these children and very little guidance, so we invented ways to try and help them learn.”

A fourth generation San Franciscan, Gayle returned to school after her children reached an age to allow it. She was also the first student in the joint Special Education Master’s and Educational Therapy Program at San Francisco State University.

“I was still exploring the area of psychology but had heard about this new field, educational therapy,” Gayle continued. “I found the perfect blend of psychology and working with children. As I started my Master’s program, I was excited to learn about the methods that had been developed since the early 1970s when we operating in the dark. Thankfully, by that time the term ‘educationally handicapped’ had disappeared and the limits of living within modest financial means.

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Pat and Carolyn’s vision for their agency did not include turning away any family for economic reasons. They, as well as their staff psychologist John Brentar, started to provide services to some families out of their own pockets—a practice that would not be able to continue indefinitely if they wished to continue to operate. Eventually their friends and clients started to include this local nonprofit in their personal philanthropy. A few years ago, a local woman who generates gifts from her firm, Morrissey-Compton’s Scholarship Fund was born.

Since then, thousands of individuals have been able to access services that enabled them to learn, achieve, and ultimately, succeed.

Our Scholarship Fund continues to help dozens of families; at any given time, between 15-20% of our clients receive financial aid for our complete suite of services including diagnosis, educational and psychological therapy, tutoring, Challenge School, social skills groups, and more. Please join us on October 10 in honoring the dedicated educational professionals in our community who work together to help students succeed—and if you can, please consider making a gift to enable our Scholarship Fund to continue!
California’s New Dyslexia Guidelines: 
Top Ten Takeaways
by Adria Flores, M.A., Educational Specialist

Estimates of the prevalence of dyslexia in the U.S. population range from 5 to 20 percent, which equals roughly 300,000 to 1.2 million California public education students.

Despite the predominance of dyslexia, prior to the 2017 release of California’s new dyslexia guidelines, parents and teachers had little information or guidance on how to assess or provide instruction for students with dyslexia. In fact, only approximately 220,000 of California’s K-12 students receive special education services under the category of Specific Learning Disability in Reading.

In response to the passage of the 2015 Assembly Bill 1369, Tom Torlakson, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, along with the members of the Dyslexia Guidelines Work Group, have created a 132-page document which aims to assist teachers and parents in identifying, assessing, and supporting students with dyslexia. “Don’t have time to read all 132 pages? Not to worry, here are the top ten takeaways of California’s new dyslexia guidelines:

1. The California Dyslexia Guidelines were written in response to the 2015 Assembly Bill 1369, which was authored by Assemblyman Jim Frazier, D-Oakley, and signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown in October, 2015. Along with requiring the development of the Dyslexia Guidelines, the law requires schools to update the criteria for assessing struggling readers specifically for dyslexia by adding “phonological processing” to the identification process for special education eligibility.

2. California’s Dyslexia Guidelines are just that: guidelines, or suggestions, for schools and educators. They are not mandatory or legally binding, but rather, provide practical resources for educators and parents to assist in identifying and educating students who struggle academically due to reading difficulties.

3. The California Dyslexia Guidelines acknowledge that students with dyslexia can present with different profiles depending on strengths, weaknesses, and age, but they also offer a description of a typical dyslexic profile. They explain this profile as a student who shows a deficit, primarily in single-word decoding, which is based in challenges with the phonological aspect of language and, secondarily, impacts reading comprehension and spelling. The Guidelines further identify common characteristics that can be indicative of dyslexia such as an inability to sound out new words, limited sight-word vocabulary, listening comprehension which exceeds reading comprehension, and inadequate response to effective instruction and intervention.

4. The Guidelines emphasize the critical need for educators to be informed by accurate, current, and reliable research about evidence-based instructional strategies to assist students with dyslexia. The International Dyslexia Association’s (IDA) Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading are highlighted as a way for educators to be prepared to implement best practices in regard to teaching literacy.

5. In 2015, 41 percent of fourth-grade students in California were reading below basic achievement levels, as compared with 32 percent nationally. One of the main contributing factors to this discrepancy is identified as the lack of early and accurate identification of students with dyslexia. The California Guidelines recommend a number of ways to address this discrepancy including universal dyslexia screenings beginning in kindergarten, the use of a Multi-tiered System of Support and Response to Intervention and Instruction, and comprehensive language and literacy assessment of students with dyslexia.

6. Students with dyslexia do not necessarily qualify for special educational instruction if their needs can be met within the regular educational program. Students who are identified with a specific learning disability (LD) by an individualized education program (IEP) team are, as required by law, eligible to receive special education which may include services such as a resource specialist, pull-out program, and special education program, along with other options. In order for a student to qualify for a specific LD, they must meet certain criteria including a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement, inadequate achievement for his/her age, and a pattern of strengths or weaknesses in performance and/or achievement that is relevant to the identification of a specific LD.

7. The use of the terms dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia are allowed in evaluation, eligibility determinations, and IEP documents under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as clarified by the Federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in a letter colleagues published in October, 2015. The Guidelines also explain that students, including some students with dyslexia, may receive a 504 plan under which they can qualify for teaching strategy accommodations, such as individual or small-group instruction, written materials read to the student by the teacher, and the provision of outlines, study guides, or organizers. Students may also receive accommodations like use of audio recorded books, text-to-speech technology, and recording of lectures.

8. All students who have dyslexia are entitled to receive structured literacy instruction, meaning an evidence-based, multisensory, direct, explicit, structured, and sequential approach to literacy instruction, whether in general education classrooms or in a special education setting, under California Education Code Section 56335(a). A structured literacy program should include instruction of phonology, orthography, phonics, syllables, morphology, syntax, grammar, and comprehension.

9. Training on assistive technologies, such as audiobooks, text-to-speech, smart pens, and spell checkers, is an important part of supporting students with dyslexia to eliminate barriers to learning. Under IDEA, the school district is responsible for the purchase and training in the use of assistive technologies that are deemed necessary for a student to access general curriculum. Students with a 504 plan may also qualify for the accommodation of assistive technology.

10. While a dyslexia diagnosis may feel overwhelming at first, it is important for parents and students to remember that children with dyslexia can go on to be successful in school and beyond. In an extensive study of adults with dyslexia, participants revealed that support in exploring and developing their strengths; in understanding the extra time required for academic tasks; in helping others to understand dyslexia as a challenge that does not solely define them; in developing strategies for organization and time management; and in using alternative methods to access information were all critical to their success. The California Guidelines include age-appropriate steps, home-based activities, and online sources to help parents and guardians support their children with dyslexia.

References: California Department of Education’s 2017 Dyslexia Guidelines

Adria Flores has worked as an educational specialist at Morrissey-Compton since 2015. She has a teaching credential and worked as a classroom teacher for nine years. During that time, Adria also pursued a Master’s in Literacy and Language Education and a Reading Specialist Credential from San Francisco State University. After many years as a private tutor, Adria was trained in the Slingerland® method and began working at Morrissey-Compton. Along with her Slingerland training, she has been trained in Step Up to Writing®, 6 + 1 Trait® Writing, and Guided Reading and Writing. Adria particularly enjoys working with K-8 students to unlock a love of literacy.
Birthday Celebration

On Saturday, July 15, more than 130 past and former clients, staff members, Challenge students and parents, and other agency friends gathered to celebrate Morrissey-Compton’s 35th birthday. Held at Holbrook-Palmer Park in Atherton, the event featured Challenge Summer School and included a delicious barbecue lunch, games, prizes, giveaways, snow cones, and activities for all ages, including a “Build Your Own Invention” tent to showcase this year’s Challenge theme (some of the day’s creations are shown at left) and one of Challenge School’s famous relay races (right) created by former staff member Donna Dagenais, who just retired after being instrumental to the success of Challenge from the very beginning. Thanks to all who participated, including the team of volunteers who were instrumental to the event’s success. Enjoy these snaps showing just a few of the many smiling faces seen that day!

A Beautiful Day in the Park

Challenge Summer School may be finished for this year, but for the close to 60 students grades K-6 who attended, the memories of fun and friendship, as well as a newly discovered sense of self-esteem and academic confidence, will last a lifetime. The program combines goals that have existed from its inception, such as fostering self-confidence by providing ample opportunities to succeed and helping to maintain academic skills over the summer, with a modern curriculum that cultivates executive function and social skills and includes alternative, research-based strategies taught by trained special educators to support reading, writing, and mathematics achievement.

Challenge School 2018 will start accepting applications in January, 2018. We expect that as usual, the program will include many students returning from previous years—by their own choice.

Another Successful Summer of Magic!

The yellow shirt is worn each day by a different student who exemplifies the Challenge School values of teamwork, persistence, and determination.

The green hat drawing rewards students for participation and effort.

Visit morrissey-compton.org for updates, or contact Ashley Koedel at (650) 322-5910 for information.

Students who learn differently sometimes have difficulties connecting with their peers at school, but at Challenge, they benefit from being with students who face similar issues—a great recipe for friendship!

The Challenge program includes something for everyone! There are sports competitions for those students who are inclined to participate, and many other opportunities to shine.

Visit morrissey-compton.org for updates, or contact Ashley Koedel at (650) 322-5910 for information.
**New Faces**

We warmly welcome the latest members of the Morrissey-Compton team!

**Kim Donellan, M.B.A., ET/P, CAS**

Educational Therapist Kim Donellan has always been very involved in and dedicated to helping children maximize their full potential. Her inspiration to help people with learning differences came from her two sisters, both born with different disabilities.

Kim began her career in education over 10 years ago working at Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes. From there, she began her private practice and helped start a school for children with ASD. She is trained in all of the Lindamood-Bell programs (Visualizing and Verbalizing®, Seeing Stars®, TouchMath®, Handwriting Without Tears®, and On Cloud Nine®: Math), Orton-Gillingham, Making Math Real®, Making Math Real: Social & Emotional Learning, and TEACCH® Autism Program through the University of North Carolina.

Kim is a Certified Autism Specialist and has her Autism Certificate. She is certified in Pivotal Response Training® through The Koegel Autism Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Kim earned her Bachelor of Science from the University of California, Davis. She earned her Master of Business Administration from the University of California, Riverside Extension Program.

Kimochis®, Social & Emotional Learning, and TEACCH® Autism Program through the University of North Carolina.

More About Making Math Real

by Ashley K. Koedel, M.A., Director of Educational Services

Making Math Real™, often referred to as MMR, is a structured, multisensory method of teaching math in which all processing modalities are used at the same time. In other words, whenever concepts and skills are taught, the student is simultaneously using their visual, auditory, and motor processes.

In the words of its creator, David Berg, “Making Math Real is incrementally developmental, in which each new development follows directly from the content that precedes it." At each level in the learning structure, connections are made to the next level, and the next level only adds one new element.

It is important to understand that MMR is not a curriculum. Instead, it is a powerful method of teaching math, all levels, from number sense to calculus.

**Niko Whitmire, M.A.**

Niko Whitmire uses a developmental neuropsychological perspective, alongside socio-culturally informed analytic understanding, to provide comprehensive neuropsychological and psycho-educational assessments as well as therapeutic treatments for children, adolescents, adults, and families.

Niko earned his B.A. in Psychology from U.C. Davis and went on to work with adolescents in both inpatient and residential settings in the Seattle Area. He also provided behavioral management services in a middle school special education classroom for adolescents with and worked with young adults struggling with psychoses. Niko completed an M.F.A. in creative writing at Naropa University in Boulder, CO, taught English to refugees, and worked in the nonprofit education and social services sector before returning to psychology.

Niko is working on his Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the Wright Institute. During his studies, he trained in community mental health and school-based settings before his internship at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. Niko specializes in providing assessments and therapy for children, families, adults, and couples, and has helped individuals from all ages who struggle with the symptoms of autism, depression, anxiety, psychosis, and ADHD.

Niko is particularly interested in the intersection of psychoanalysis and neuroscience and how art, creativity, culture, and belief systems may support a child’s development, as well as their ability to persevere and build resilience in the face of adversity. His doctoral research focused upon a neuropsychological examination of how art and travel can induce intense, transitory psychological distress and how the cascading interactions of different neural networks may be interrupted in order to resume normative functioning.

Outside of his clinical work, Niko’s interests include backpacking, biking, and learning about those computer games that kids enjoy.

**Methodologies**

For more information about Making Math Real, visit makingmathreal.org. Morrissey-Compton has clinicians on staff who are well versed in MMR, as well as other methodologies to facilitate learning. To set up an appointment, call Suzy Music at (650) 322-5910.

More About Making Math Real through school, fluency is essential in all areas of math. In order to be successful and enjoy math, mental math fluency is necessary to master long division; fractions; all pre-algebra concepts, such as ratios and percents; algebra; trigonometry; and calculus.

Educational specialists and educational therapists using MMR methods as part of their intervention work participate in intensive training through the Making Math Real Institute. We are thrilled to have Kim Donellan on staff at Morrissey-Compton’s Redwood City office to provide this type of intervention. Additionally, we have partnerships with a handful of wonderful private practitioners in the area that we can connect you with. Please contact our office to learn more!
How To Counter Back-To-School Anxiety
by Elissa Nadworny, Editor, NPR Ed

The start of the school year can be rough on some kids. It’s a big shift from summer’s freedom and lack of structure to the measured routines of school. And sometimes that can build up into tears, losing sleep, outbursts, and other classic signs of anxiety.

“Going back to school is a transition for everyone,” says Lynn Bufka, a practicing psychologist who also works at the American Psychological Association. “No matter the age of the child, or if they’ve been to school before.”

In the vast majority of cases, this is pretty standard stuff. It doesn’t mean it’s not painful—for you and your kids. Just watch this viral video:

(The video referenced, “TV Reporter Makes Little Boy Cry on His First Day Of School With One Question” can be found on YouTube. Screen shots from the video (right) show a reporter asking Andrew if he is excited for pre-kindergarten, and he says “yes.” She then asks whether he’s going to miss his mom. He says “no,” but then crumples into tears a few seconds later. (Andrew is now in first grade and doing fine.))

“If you see that in your kids, don’t panic,” says John Kelly, a school psychologist in Long Island, N.Y. “For most kids, there’s gonna be some level of anxiety.”

And, if you think back on it, you can probably remember feeling that way, too.

We talked to some experts about what parents can do to ease the transition—plus, what to watch out for if there’s a more serious problem.

Here’s their list of tips:

Listen To Your Kid
Be available, says Bufka. If children have questions about school, or, once school starts, something exciting happens during the day, parents should make time to listen. Sharing the excitement can help ease concerns.

Tune in to what your kids are talking about. "Emotionally, parents are the safe place for children to experience emotions and to help them develop the language around expressing emotions," says Bufka.

Be Specific
Beyond listening in general, drill down to the specifics. It’s important for parents to explore with their kids what they’re feeling anxious about,” says Bufka.

If parents know what, exactly, is making students nervous—friends, classes, a new teacher—they can help problem-solve.

Let Kids Be the Experts
Eleanor Mackey, a psychologist with Children’s National Health System in Washington, D.C., suggests asking kids what might make them feel better.

“Let them generate solutions,” she says. “Ask them what helps them feel better in other scary situations.”

If they need help coming up with ideas, parents can help them role-play tough situations or come up with strategies they can use in situations that make them worried.

Positive Messaging
Create a positive expectation. Talk about things your kids can look forward to in school, past experiences they’ve enjoyed. Friends or field trips are good examples.

Talk Through Previous Triumphs
Many kids have fears or anxious before, so reminding them of their own successes with similar situations can help.

Try: “Remember last year, when you were feeling this way? You got through it.”

Reassuring kids that they have the tools to get through the challenge ahead, because they’ve overcome their fears in the past, can go a long way, says Bufka.

Mackey says parents may be unsure what to say in situations like this. She offers a template: “I understand you are scared—that’s just fine. I also know that you can manage this. Remember last year when you were so nervous but you did it and made it through and...made a great new friend, did well in Spanish, etc...”

Reach Out to the Teacher
“I’m surprised at how reluctant parents are to talk to the teacher,” says Mackey. “They don’t want to be that parent, or they don’t want to label their child with issues.”

And yet, she says, teachers have consistently told her they like hearing from parents.

Educators spend a lot of time trying to figure each kid out, she explains, so if you can save them the time, why not share? Parents are, after all, the experts on their kids.

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Create a positive expectation. Talk about things your kids can look forward to in school, past experiences they’ve enjoyed. Friends or field trips are good examples.

Talk Through Previous Triumphs
Many kids have fears or anxious before, so reminding them of their own successes with similar situations can help.

Try: “Remember last year, when you were feeling this way? You got through it.”

Reassuring kids that they have the tools to get through the challenge ahead, because they’ve overcome their fears in the past, can go a long way, says Bufka.

Mackey says parents may be unsure what to say in situations like this. She offers a template: “I understand you are scared—that’s just fine. I also know that you can manage this. Remember last year when you were so nervous but you did it and made it through and...made a great new friend, did well in Spanish, etc...”

Reach Out to the Teacher
“I’m surprised at how reluctant parents are to talk to the teacher,” says Mackey. “They don’t want to be that parent, or they don’t want to label their child with issues.”

And yet, she says, teachers have consistently told her they like hearing from parents.

Educators spend a lot of time trying to figure each kid out, she explains, so if you can save them the time, why not share? Parents are, after all, the experts on their kids.

Maybe your child is scared to answer questions in front of class, or has anxiety about being put on the spot—let the teacher know. She (or he) can use that information to help design the class, or maybe there can be more small-group work instead.

Parents can also tell their kids they’ve talked to the teacher, which can lower anxiety and send the message that the adults are on their side.

Start the Routine Early
“It’s always helpful to practice your routines before things start,” says Bufka.

Find (and clean!) backpacks, lunch boxes, folders, and other supplies. Plan ahead and get children involved in the planning process—have them get their belongings ready, etc.

“That gives the child a sense of mastery over the situation,” Bufka explains. “Getting your child engaged about the new thing will help them feel like it’s more under their control.”

Often, families try to squeeze in a last fun adventure right at the end, but that can make things worse. Don’t wait for the night before, says John Kelly, who is also the president of the National Association of School Psychologists. “You really need to start that adjustment early.”

That means getting up earlier—and going to bed earlier, too.

It’s kind of a no-brainer that sleep is essential, Mackey points out, but patterns can’t be adjusted (literally) overnight.

“Kids really get out of rhythm in the summer,” she says, and this has a bigger impact than adults realize.

“When we’re tired, we’re moody, and little things can feel really big,” Mackey explains. “Anxiety is much worse if sleep is bad. Make sure you have a good quiet routine and early enough bedtime that your child can get sufficient sleep.”

Oh, and turn off that tablet or smartphone before bed, too.

Do a Dry Run
If it’s a new school or a new neighborhood, introduce students to that situation before the big day. Visiting the school, or walking to and from the bus stop, can go a long way, says Mackey. You may have to do this more than once to make it seem familiar, she says. “Just once may lead to more anxiety.”

A dry run can help even if it’s not a new school. Kelly calls it: Say Hello To The School Again.

Visit a great way to remind anxious kids they’ve been here before. Many schools are open the week before Day 1, often teachers are around, too. If the school has an orientation, don’t miss it.

Social Connections
When kids can make social connections before they start school, that’s a really helpful step, says Kelly. Many kids have anxiety around friends, “Who’s going to be in my class? Who can I sit with at lunch? Ride the bus with?”

Especially for older students, comparing schedules with friends can help.

Don’t Ignore Clothing Anxiety
Parents may not think that what you wear on the first day matters, but for kids it can be huge. Especially, John Kelly says, in the middle and high school years.
Read Some Books
Kelly recommends School’s First Day of School, by Adam Rex. It’s about how nervous the school itself is. First Day Jitters by Julie Danneberg is helpful for kids starting new schools. And, Kelly says, for really young kids try Nancy Carlson’s Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come. Carlson’s book also has a Spanish version: Preparate, kinderjent! Alla voy!

Chill Out After School
Give kids a break after school, says Mackey. They don’t need a lot of time, 5 to 10 minutes is just fine. Kids, she explains, need this after a hectic day when their brains are in overdrive. Try doing it with them. A few minutes of quiet or light conversation can be great for the whole family—and it’s another opportunity to connect with your kids.

Remember: Easing Anxiety Can Take Time
Not everyone is going to adjust to a new situation on the first day. Be patient. Each day can bring new challenge. This is especially true for older students, who are navigating new classes, different teachers, and changing schedules. It’s very normal for kids to have trouble for a week or two weeks into the school year. “It’s all new,” says Kelly. “They’re restarting routines, or starting routines for the first time, and that can take a while.”

Parents have Anxiety, Too
“It’s important for parents to realize that schools are filled with professionals who work with children all the time,” says Bufka. Remember, Kelly adds, kids are going to pick up cues from parents, so making sure you’re comfortable too is an important piece.

Signs that It’s Not Normal
There are some warning signs that your child may need some extra help. Kelly ticks off a few: If you really see your child struggling, having a really difficult time just getting to school, or feeling increasingly anxious at nighttime.

Bufka says as a parent, you’re in the best position to observe changes in their behavior.

“If the child is refusing to do things that they’ve normally done, or that they’ve not had difficulty doing before,” she says, “that’s a sign that something isn’t going right.”

Maybe it’s a bully, or your child is really overwhelmed and needs some extra work with a psychologist.

Bufka says that in some cases anxiety around school can develop into school refusal, where kids flat out refuse to go. And that’s definitely the time to contact a professional.

Questions? Email 2017efconference@gmail.com.

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