



Definite Article

Those tales of woe

Alice Phillips offers some advice to help your child deal with a 'total disaster' day.

THE 'lazy, hazy, crazy days of Summer' are sadly now a distant memory as Autumn sets in. Despite all our attempts to pretend otherwise, the mornings are crisper, the dew heavy, and the shops full of school stationery with all that implies. With luck, you will have had some time for a proper family holiday, whatever your work patterns: time spent with your child in idle chatter over family meals, doing new things, visiting places, reading books or playing games. You will have filtered a lot of general chat. You may have picked up some absolute gems. I hope you have even been reassured that the education you have invested in is bearing fruit, too.

... 'Take some deep breaths... Home is a safe place for a good old moan which is *actually* how he is coping with growing up and new challenges. Reassure him that the day has not been a 'wipe-out'...'

As the academic term starts, order is restored, uniforms are donned, bags packed, and that daily contact – even if it was only evenings for most of the summer for working parents – is suddenly savagely reduced. The parents of younger children, especially, can feel a surge of regret or even jealousy that they are no longer the focus of their child's daytime hours. 'Out of sight', though not 'out of mind', can cause a lot of worries for parents, particularly at the start of a new academic year.

A new year and a new class teacher – or even just different subject teachers – can bring some interesting messages home. Your filters need to be re-set to cope with things that you can't corroborate. Remember that most children hate change. They are young. They are in predictable home settings year on year for the most part, even in separated families. Schools however have this nasty habit of lobbing in a new timetable and a raft of new teachers. How tedious when we were enjoying the status quo and becoming far too comfortable with it.

You can be reassured however, knowing your own child as well as you do, that you will realise if any changes are likely to present a big problem. Younger children tend to express their feelings quite well and if you begin to suspect they are upset, they will quickly tell you. The older child – the mid teen, say – will be likely to clam up completely about what happens at school and both literally and metaphorically leave you for dead at the school gate. 'Don't kiss me goodbye!' can hit the solar plexus with a thudding blow, for example. Gently insist that you will indeed kiss her goodbye as that is what we do in our family and proper friends will not think less of her for it.

The return home can be accompanied by the thudding of a large bag of school books on the floor, followed by a lot of noisy groaning about a 'dreadful' or 'total disaster' day. Take some deep breaths and tune in completely to both tone and message. The danger here is that you swing into the mode of complete sympathy and agreement before working through other possibilities. Home is a safe place for a good old moan which is *actually* how he is coping with growing up and new challenges. Reassure him that the day has not been a 'wipe-out'; there may have been one element that was a bit tricky and that has coloured an otherwise good day in which things were learned and activities enjoyed. Ask her an open ended question about the disaster – 'Tell me about it' – and try to keep quiet while the drama unfolds. And watch her body language closely.

Is the tale of woe gushing out in angry and frustrated tones between hearty bites of the teatime snack and a lot of physical movement that actually suggests exasperation and irritation?

In this case, it is highly likely that some pesky teacher actually made your son think hard in a lesson and he didn't get it all right (horrors!). Or the teacher made your daughter do something that got right in the way of her playing with her friends and still being in holiday mode. Or, are you facing a slumped little person at the kitchen table who is exhausted by the day, perhaps to the point of tears or even sobs?

In the latter case, parental instinct is rightly to comfort but perhaps also distract. Get some sugar into her quickly and some liquid. It could be as simple as that. Physical resilience has been sapped and mental resilience doesn't stand a chance. Whatever you do, don't be tempted into the 'best friend' mode. Where once, at home with her all the time, you probably could 'kiss it all better', now you probably can't and she needs coaching gently into a sense of perspective. Avoid offering to go into battle on her behalf, too; it will only cause her to stop managing life's challenges and hand responsibility right over to you. Be empathetic about the sadness, but don't necessarily agree completely with the reaction until you have some clarity – which you can't possibly have late at night when everyone is tired.

Sometimes the problem is significant enough that you do need to step in. You must always remember the reasons why you chose your son or daughter's school in the first place – you liked it and trusted its ethos and people. After bedtime has been achieved, write down the bullet points of the issue which has so upset your child. At breakfast the following day, ask your child how he feels and see if a good night's sleep has given some perspective. Still not right? Raise it with the school at drop-off (but out of his earshot) and see if the class teacher can investigate. Ask if someone could give you a call later? Avoid emails as they often carry an unhelpful tone. Many situations are resolved instantly, and your child will remain confident and able to face the next challenge with greater resilience.

Alice Phillips is the Headmistress of St Catherine's, Bramley.