

Beat the Back-to-School Blues

Ease the tears, fears, & anxiety

by AMY ROTHERMEL

BACK TO SCHOOL: FOR SOME IT'S AN ADVENTURE, BUT FOR MANY CHILDREN and teens, the start of a new school year is fraught with worry and anxiety. Leaving home or saying goodbye to parents can be stressful. Fear over what may happen at school—or what might happen to loved ones at home or work during the day—can be paralyzing. Dread over fitting into new social circles, whether on the playground or in P.E. class, can be agonizing.



o-School Blues

by with homeopathic treatment

ERG, ND, DHANP

I recommend children who experience school anxiety be treated with homeopathy. This can help reduce a child's overall anxiety level, making mornings easier and leading to more success, both academically and socially.

First, do your homework!

In a child with mild school anxiety, it is fine to go ahead and seek homeopathic care without a psychiatric workup. Children who are severely anxious or who have slipped into school refusal, however, should first have a complete diagnostic workup with a mental health counselor or psychiatrist who has experience working with children and the assessment of anxi-

ety. As caregivers, parents, or doctors, we need to understand what drives a child's behavior as the first step to being able to help. Some children do not want to go to school because there *is* something bad happening at school, whether bullying from other children or a very stressful environment in the classroom. There are times when a particular school setting is not ideal for the child and an alternate placement should be sought if at all possible. In any event, understanding the dynamics of your child's school, classroom, or unique social circle will go a long way toward understanding what they are experiencing and toward providing relief from back-to-school stress.

A trio of homeopathic helpers

There are many remedies that could be helpful for a child who suffers from school anxiety. The ones that I most frequently prescribe in my office are *Baryta carbonica*, *Silica*, and *Pulsatilla*. In this article, I'm focusing on these remedies as they relate to school anxiety (keeping in mind that there is much more to say about each of these remedies as they relate to other complaints).

Baryta carbonica: Young for their age

The child who needs *Baryta carbonica* seems younger than their age. These children do not have a strong sense of who



they are, so it can be difficult for them to know how to act in a group. They may find it challenging to make basic decisions such as what to wear, what kind of notebooks to buy, or what to write about for an essay. They have a desperate need to fit in, so they may well *act* like others and follow along, but deep down, big classroom settings are a nightmare for this child, and the anxiety can mount.

Times of transition can be especially anxiety-ridden for the young person who needs *Baryta carbonica*. Moving from preschool to kindergarten, for example, or from middle to high school can make them feel overwhelmed, worried, and anxious, even reaching the point of school refusal. The child who needs *Baryta carbonica* may start to talk about the coming school year early in the summer; they may even develop physical symptoms as a response to the stress and anticipation of the coming school year. Sore throats with swollen glands and tummy aches with constipation are common complaints in these children.

It's no wonder that school is a difficult place for the young-for-their-age *Baryta carbonica* child. If you think about it, school is all about being part of various groups, making choices, and putting forward who you are. It is not that *Baryta carbonica* is unintelligent—these children are often quite bright—but their understanding of the world around them tends to be small and focused on the little things, and may result in obsessing on minutiae like how they pack their backpack, how they do their hair, how they set food on a plate, and so on. No matter the topic under discussion, the homework assignment, or whatever the experience, the child needing *Baryta carbonica* will naturally want to keep the focus small and

narrow, making things more manageable. Rather than being wide-eyed and curious about their environment, *Baryta carbonica* children are very concrete in their thinking and want to know everything ahead of time. In addition to whatever therapy a parent might choose for the *Baryta carbonica* child, taking pains to explain things fully, visiting the new school ahead of time, and parsing it out for the child will help. It is not so much that the parent is micromanaging every detail (though someone needing this remedy would love that), rather, the parent or other caring adult is helping to acclimate the child or teenager to a new setting.

The tendency for the *Baryta carbonica* child to be more concrete can lead to a kind of rigidity in their thinking and actions. For example, once they've settled on a particular school outfit, these children may wear that same outfit every day and be quite upset if forced to make a change. Walking the same route between classes or getting the same school lunch every day for years is easier for these children—they don't have to think about it and don't have to make any decisions. This rigidity also manifests as excessive concern with "the rules," as these provide a feeling of safety for the *Baryta carbonica* individual, who can become overstressed when others choose to treat rules as optional.

Young people who need *Baryta carbonica* are not our "big picture" thinkers. Rather, they are only able to digest the bigger task, idea, book—or even the complications of friendship—in smaller parts, one piece at a time. This is another reason that school causes anxiety for *Baryta carbonica* children and teens. For example, during the high school years, much of what is required of teens relates to their

Starting school can make them feel as if the parents are trying to get rid of them.

ability to infer, both in the academic and, most certainly, in the social realm—and this not a great strength of our *Baryta carbonica* youngster.

Growth = change for the whole family

For the child or teenager who needs it, *Baryta carbonica* confers a kind of strength: more confidence, more opinions, more clear likes and dislikes. The anxiety lessens, the physical complaints (such as frequent upper respiratory infections or low muscle tone) should improve, but most notably, the person him- or herself comes to the forefront, "growing up" in a very real sense. In some families this can present different kinds of challenges. Parents who are accustomed to an obedient, almost docile child may suddenly find themselves with a youngster who is more challenging, with more overt needs and opinions. On occasion, I have had to remind parents that this growth is a healthy sign, something we should applaud and not resist. Of course, when parents get the help they need to navigate this evolution, it helps the child, and indeed the entire family, to grow.

With homeopathic treatment, the *Baryta carbonica* child or teen retains his basic nature and tendencies but is much less impacted by external stressors, and reduced school anxiety results. The healthier and more balanced children become, the less the external world impacts them negatively (and this applies to children who need other remedies as well). With our *Baryta carbonica* child, for example, we wouldn't expect homeopathic treatment to result in a loud, outgoing, group leader. They will still hold back, still tend to think more narrowly, still conserve some energy, but much less so. After treatment, such a child might well find one thing to grasp onto and really pursue, making healthy strides in understanding, ability, performance, and the like.

Silica: Weak and oversensitive

It can be difficult to distinguish the child who needs *Silica* from one who will do well on *Baryta carbonica*. There are, how-

ever, clear differences and unique presentations in children needing each remedy. For the *Silica* child, the underlying issue is weakness, whereas immaturity is the hallmark of the *Baryta carbonica* child. The weakness of the *Silica* child can be seen on the physical level, certainly, but also in the cognitive sphere. Owing to this inherent weakness, the child who needs *Silica*, when stressed, can become quite oversensitive, both to other people and to the surrounding environment. It's easy to see how the entire school experience can be an affront to the sensitive *Silica* child. The noise, light, and general chaos that is typical of most school settings, simply does not work for a kid who needs *Silica*.

Their school anxiety manifests as needing to control everything they can (which may be confusing with *Baryta carbonica*). These are the children who can easily get into "what if" mode, where the imagination runs wild and they cannot stop thinking of every bad thing that might happen. The child who needs *Silica* will seek protection from parents or perhaps a teacher, not wanting to leave mom or dad or be left alone at school. This is the child who sticks to the teacher's side in the younger grades, who may become the "goody-goody," so as to stay in the teacher's good graces and within the teacher's sphere of protection.

Naturally, children and teens who need *Silica* can develop physical ailments in response to their anxiety, and true to their *Silica* nature, worrying about the ailments themselves can make these youngsters even more anxious! They may have headaches, sinus troubles, chronic earaches, or upper respiratory tract infections, often with swollen glands and lots of perspiration. They may be small in stature and have difficulty gaining weight. Low stamina and a general sense of weakness underlie much of their pathology.

In healthier states, where the stressors in their lives are not as severe or constant,

or their physical symptoms are not as pervasive, these *Silica*-type children may do fine in school. Rather than exerting themselves on a different sporting team each season or joining many clubs, these young people will instead find a small group of good friends and stick to doing one thing that they love. They will not socialize widely and may be known as shy. With homeopathic treatment, as their anxiety lessens, they will be able to shine in whatever they have chosen. They will even seem quite confident, while knowing their limits, and consistent with their natural, underlying weakness and fragility, they will be careful not to over-do.

Pulsatilla: Clingy and afraid of abandonment

Children who need *Pulsatilla* have an underlying fear of being abandoned, which can trigger school anxiety. This fear of being forsaken can relate to parents, teachers, friends, or siblings—it does not really matter. The core feeling is that someone the child loves and needs will not be there for them. So, starting school can make them feel as if the parents are trying to get rid of them. The child who will benefit from *Pulsatilla* cannot understand why

they have to go to school when their younger-than-school-age siblings get to stay home.

The neediness of the *Pulsatilla*-type child is well known. When younger, they may cling to the parent's leg or skirt, refusing to let go. They can cry pitifully and carry on as if they are being physically tortured. Even the older child will offer big emotional displays when they have to leave the parent or separate from the person they are with at the moment. These are the children who seek consolation, affirmation, and reassurance at every turn.

If the child's teacher is able to address this need for attention and be a surrogate who loves and adores the child, everything at school can work out fine. But in the younger grades, if the child has a teacher who is not "warm and fuzzy," things will probably not go well, making the drop-off-at-school time difficult. The child will wrap themselves up in the parent, ask for one more story, or insist on one more trip around the classroom to show the parent "just one more" picture they drew or notebook they wrote in—they are using up time, all the while keeping the parent close at hand. There will typically be lots of crying, perhaps even tantrums. This behavior



**Over the past 28 years of practice,
I have witnessed so many kids and teens
whose fear, anxiety, and apprehension around
school have improved greatly, thanks to homeopathy.**



With homeopathic treatment, as their anxiety lessens, they will be able to shine in whatever they have chosen.

may be confusing to parents, as the child is absolutely fine at home. That's because at home, the child's system is not being stressed! We all respond to stress in predictable and patterned ways, according to things like genetics and our environment—and also in accordance with our constitutional homeopathic remedy type. So, if you make the stress big enough, the *Pulsatilla*-type child will react with an overt emotional display, with much weeping and carrying on.

What this child or teenager needs when they are under stress (in this case, from the school situation) is consolation, support, and encouragement. They need to be reinforced and cajoled, reminded of how much they are loved. This is not the child who needs "tough love." When we know the constitutional type of our children and what kinds of things make them better or worse, it can guide the way we parent and the way we support a child in need.*

Children who need *Pulsatilla* can sometimes seem to have no opinions of their own. Their strong need to please others, to feel loved and not abandoned, may make them just "go with the flow" on everything. (The child who needs *Baryta carbonica* can seem that way too, but that's because they actually *lack* opinions. The *Silica*-type child can manifest this way as well, but that is because it just takes too much energy and effort for them to express and carry out an opinion. Rest assured, however, that the *Silica* child has a strong opinion, even if it's not overtly expressed.)

Even though the *Pulsatilla* youngster wants and seeks lots of attention, affection, hugs, and so on, if they get too much of that, sometimes they get overwhelmed, feeling suffocated in a sense. They can get irritable and have outbursts. Parents may

say, "There is no pleasing this child," and at some moments, that seems especially true. As the remedy *Pulsatilla* begins to take action, however, we can see the child or teenager become more self-reliant, less clingy, and less dependent on the parent. At the same time, we will see an easing of the typical *Pulsatilla* physical symptoms, such as upper respiratory infections, asthma, or skin issues.

Consider the whole child—physical & emotional

Under times of stress, a person can manifest symptoms of most any kind, affecting any bodily system, so it is always important to recall the physical general symptoms for each of the remedies you are considering. General tendencies that apply to the whole person like body temperature, appetite, or thirst, for example, can help us distinguish these three remedies. A child needing *Pulsatilla* is nearly always very warm, whereas kids needing *Silica* or *Baryta carbonica* are more commonly chilly. Someone needing *Pulsatilla* prefers open and moving air while a *Silica*-type kid prefers to be indoors, wrapped up nice and cozy. A child needing *Pulsatilla* tends to have little thirst while one needing *Silica* tends to be more thirsty. In other words, while the physical particular symptoms (like swollen glands, an earache, or a stuffy nose) are important, remember to pay attention to the physical general symptoms—while also seeking to understand what drives the child in the more emotional realms. When we understand what underlies the child's behavior, what drives their fears and anxieties, that will help us find the best possible remedy with the widest sphere of influence.

School, with the academic, social, and

other stressors it holds, is a major instigator of anxiety for many kids. Homeopathy offers a wide-reaching, effective approach for this population—without the unwanted side effects of psychotropic drugs. Over the past 28 years of practice, I have witnessed so many kids and teens whose fear, anxiety, and apprehension around school have improved greatly, thanks to homeopathy. With appropriate constitutional homeopathic care, school anxiety can be reduced, enhancing learning, growth, curiosity and the ability to integrate new information and knowledge. The child's distracting or recurring physical issues are addressed simultaneously, revealing the beauty of homeopathy: we treat the whole person, regardless of complaint, and improvements occur on many levels.

Thank you to Paul Herscu, ND, DHANP, my perceptive, prolific (and wonderful!) husband for his ongoing ability to articulate nuanced differences among closely related remedies and his ongoing commitment to sharing that information. Much of the above *materia medica* of these three remedies is drawn from his teachings. If you'd like to read more, see his first book, *The Homeopathic Treatment of Children*, or subscribe to the *Herscu Letter*, his online lecture series that includes philosophy, cases, and extended *materia medica* (www.nesh.com/the-herscu-letter/). My own understanding and prescribing for patients is always improved by my ongoing work with and learning from Paul.

*See my article on constitutional types and parenting: "Some Thoughts on Homeopathic Family Practice: Does Parenting Impact Constitutional Types? Should Constitutional Types in Children Impact Parenting?" *The New England Journal of Homeopathy*, Spring/Summer 1997, Vol.6 No.2/3, <http://preview.tinyurl.com/lu4nr9m>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP, practices in Enfield, CT (www.nhcmed.com) and teaches through the New England School of Homeopathy (www.nesh.com). A Two Year

Course on the East Coast will begin in 2014. She is currently the president of the Massachusetts Society of Naturopathic Doctors working on legislation to license naturopathic doctors in that state. You can follow her blog at www.huffingtonpost.com/amy-rothenberg-nd/. Her book, *The A Cappella Singer Who Lost Her Voice & Other Stories from Natural Medicine* can be found on Amazon or at www.amyrothenberg.com.