

# Managing School Anxiety

## Advice for Parents and Carers



---

This information sheet was originally developed in 2017 by a working group comprising:

Educational Psychology

CAMHS

University of Edinburgh

Barnardo's Scotland

Educational Welfare

Family Solutions

Additional Support for Learning

It has been updated in 2023 by Educational Psychology.

This leaflet is part of a collection including:

Managing School Anxiety: Advice for Teachers

Top Tips for Managing School Anxiety: Advice for Young People

Joint Pathways to Support Emotionally Based School Refusal: Information for Services

---

As a parent or carer it is upsetting to see your child become increasingly upset or worried about attending school. It can be difficult to know what to do.

The earlier you act the easier it is to address the issue. Avoiding anxiety provoking situations is likely to increase anxiety over time. So, it is important that you support your child to keep attending school.

This leaflet is written to help you to act quickly and appropriately if you notice your child is becoming reluctant to attend school.



### Understanding anxiety and not wanting to go to school

Anxiety and stress are normal and at times helpful aspects of life. We all need to develop ways of coping with these feelings. Feeling anxious or a certain level of stress before something new or difficult has been shown in some situations to improve performance.

Avoiding situations that cause stress and anxiety are likely to increase anxiety over time.

### Identify any issues that might be barriers to attending school

Sometimes a child is reluctant to attend school because they have genuine concerns that are barriers for them. Common barriers include;

- Problems with friendships
- Bullying
- A recent loss
- Difficulties with school work
- A fear that they are going to get in trouble – they haven't done homework, haven't gone to speak to a teacher when asked after class
- A fear of particular activity – a block of swimming in P.E., a class talk, being asked questions in class



Often a child will struggle to say they are feeling sad or worried but might instead talk about a sore tummy or sore head, both of which can be caused by anxiety.

If you notice your child is becoming reluctant to attend school or complaining of regular health complaints, such as having a sore tummy or head, it is important you have a conversation with them about how things are at school. Make sure to specifically ask them if there is anything that is worrying them. If there is something that is worrying them about school it is important to discuss this with someone in the school.

Many parents/carers and schools also find it helpful to start a diary to note when your child is reluctant to attend school or complaining of being unwell. You can work with the school to see if there are any patterns that might help you understand why your child is reluctant to attend.

---

*It is essential that if your child is regularly complaining about being unwell that you also take them to see their GP.*

---

If a child has missed lots of school then making a plan jointly with the school about which lessons or place in school would be easiest for them to attend can be helpful. It's better for

the child to begin attending school an hour a day and build up to more time than to set themselves the goal of going back to everything if that is not achievable. Small successful steps build up confidence.

### Promoting a coping approach

A starting point for supporting your child to manage their anxiety about school is to consider the language you use. It is important that alongside addressing concerns with the school, parents and carers give clear, consistent messages about the need to attend.



### Give Clear Messages

What you can say		What this means
"I've asked you already. It's time to get up for school."	➔	It's going to happen
"Dad and I will do whatever we have to in order to get you to school."	➔	Parents/carers working together
"We cannot allow you to remain at home."	➔	I will be consistent
"I know this is hard but it has to happen. You have to go to school."	➔	Strong message
"Today after school, we can go by the shops and you can choose something for dinner."	➔	Expectation of compliance
"You have five minutes to get dressed for school."	➔	Short manageable target, breaking down immediate tasks

### Getting Your Own Support

It is very common for adults to be struggling to manage their own stress or anxiety. If this is the case it can be very difficult to model a calm, confident approach to your children. It is really important adults access their own supports.

- Make sure you have a supportive adult to share your own concerns with.
- Consider support and approaches to manage your own stress or anxiety [Stress Control – NHS Lothian | Our Services](#)
- Access NHS lothian resources for anxiety including parent online workshops [Online Resources – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services \(nhslothian.scot\)](#)
- Some self-help book for children, young people and adults include:
  - Cartwright-Hatton, S., Laskey, B. Rust, S. & McNally, D. (2010). *From Timid to Tiger*
  - Stallard, P. (2003). *Think good-feel good: A cognitive behaviour therapy workbook for children and young people*. John Wiley & Sons.
  - Greenberger, D. & Padesky, C.A. (2015). *Mind over mood: Change how you feel by changing the way you think*. Guilford Publications.

## What can I do to help?

1. **Managing your feelings:** Seeing your child upset and anxious will undoubtedly have an effect on you. You may feel upset or anxious yourself. This is normal, but it is important your child sees that you are confident with the child's plan and carrying it out. Identify other adults who can support you and avoid discussing worries with your child.
2. **Regular communication with school:** Have a key point of contact in school, such as your child's Pupil Support Leader/Guidance Teacher/Senior Management. Work proactively with school to put in place strategies that will help your child reintegrate with education.
3. **Everyone on the same page:** Ensure your child gets the same messages about expectations from all the adults supporting them.
4. **Recognise success:** Facing your fears will always cause some upset however this is an essential aspect of addressing anxiety. Celebrate small steps of success through praise and making sure your child has time to enjoy the things that give them a positive sense of wellbeing.
5. **Encourage 'giving it a go':** It's normal for children to want to avoid the things they find difficult and worrying. As a parent/carer, you can encourage them to try despite their worries.

## Small steps to school confidence

1. **Involve your child in problem-solving:** Help your child to create and think through solutions and plan together what they need to do. Helping your child solve their own problems shows confidence in them and helps them develop their own problem-solving skills.
2. **Keep routines at home:** Predictable routines can reduce anxiety and promote positive family interactions. Establish a morning routine that works for your family, e.g. everyone eats breakfast together. This can be supported through the use of visuals.
3. **Support the journey to school:** taking your child to school yourself or identifying another trusted adult to do so may be a helpful strategy to build a good habit of attendance. Even if your child is older, this can be reassuring and shows you support them to address their anxiety.
4. **Help them break down the task:** When anxiety has built up it is often helpful to break down the task that causes the anxiety into smaller steps. For example, you could use a 'motivational ladder' to visualise the steps needed to reach your child's education goals. This is a helpful guide:  
<https://www.anxietycanada.com/downloadables/facing-fears-exposure/>
5. **Stick with the plan:** It can be easy to get drawn into a debate about why your child doesn't want to go to school, or respond to behaviours that distract you and your child from getting to school. Stick to your own clear message and agreed plan, ignore attempts to get into a debate or distract you.