

Preventing Anxiety-Based School Refusal

A guide to early intervention



Guidance for parents/carers

Helping your child feel less worried about going to school

1. Empathise and encourage

It is important to let your child know that overcoming anxiety is hard work, and that you are proud of their efforts. Show that you understand their experience and are listening to what they have to say, but try not to reinforce their fears. The message you want to send is, *"I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here. I'm going to help you get through this."*



Help your child to understand that worry, fear and anxiety are all normal emotions and that they can learn to manage and cope with these normal responses to difficult or scary situations.

Make sure you recognise and celebrate their achievements in facing their fears. Reinforce these achievements and build on every small win. Don't avoid everything that causes anxiety – gradual exposure to challenging situations is really important because that is what builds resilience.

Introduce an 'exposure ladder'. This is a process where the child breaks down their anxiety into manageable steps, and gradually increases these steps to overcome their anxiety. This is something you can discuss at your PSP meeting – what the first small steps back to school will look like.

2. Don't ask leading questions

Whilst it is important to encourage your child to talk about their worries, asking leading questions should be avoided as this can reinforce anxiety. For example, try asking *“How are you feeling about the school trip?”* rather than *“Are you worried about the school trip?”*

3. Calm parent, calm child

Children copy their parents' behaviours, and so it is important to also consider how your own anxiety might be affecting your child. If you are anxious, your child will pick up on it and feel more worried. So when you want to reduce your child's anxiety, you must manage your own anxiety first.

You can do this by modelling how you successfully manage anxiety; let your child know when you are using a coping skill (e.g. *“I'm feeling a little bit nervous about that, I'm going to take a few deep breaths to calm myself down”*). If you model these skills and look for the positive in situations, so will your child.

Healthy Minds have created some short relaxation videos to help. Spending 5 minutes per day practicing relaxation and mindfulness alongside your child can provide them with more skills in reducing their anxiety, and possibly you too! They can be found in the “Tips on looking after yourself” [Relaxation section](#).

4. Reduce the amount of time your child has to think about the event

Often the hardest part for children who are anxious is the run up to the scary event. Therefore, you should try to keep this waiting period to a minimum.

5. Discuss with your child their reluctance and anxiety about going to school

Try to explore their concerns (often easier said than done) and try to establish if there are specific worries about aspects of school. If successful in finding the specific reasons for avoidance, use the PSP meeting to explore ways of minimising the worries so that the anxiety can be better managed.

Consider:

- Are there any friendship issues?
- Could there be any social media related issues or bullying?
- Are they under any extra stress at school? (examples, transition from primary, exams, staff or class changes)
- Could there be any other school related issues? (subject or teacher issues)

Also explore whether experiences outside of school are at the root of the problem:

- How and what does the child benefit from by not going to school? (what are they doing at home? xbox, tv, laptop etc - is the home environment too enticing?)
- Have there been any recent stressful or traumatic events?
- Is there a history of worry, anxiety or stress within the family?
- Bereavement or loss in family and/or friends
- Long term illness in family or friends
- Could the child be reluctant to leave the parent for fear of something happening to the parent whilst they are at school?

Sometimes children struggle to know what is triggering their anxiety, or they are reluctant to say anything for fear of the consequences. Just setting aside some time every day to allow your child to download can be helpful in gradually uncovering the issues. Space and silence can be great for encouraging children and young people to talk. Or perhaps they could start by colour coding the day , using their timetable or

a map of the school – which elements are green (safe, enjoyable, fun, calm) and which are red (difficult, upsetting, causing anxiety)?

6. Support your child in facing and confronting the fears (where possible)

It is through this that they will learn the coping skills that they will need throughout life. Ensure that you are consistent in encouraging your child to go to (and remain at) school. Avoiding worries and fears is less painful (in the short term) for the child than confronting them. Some children learn how to 'stay off' school and they can soon learn the 'buttons' to press with parents that will allow them to stay away from school (and avoid their anxieties). This can lead to the habit of avoidance that can be a very tricky habit to break later on. Confront rather than avoid.

7. Encourage your child to keep in touch with school friends outside of school clubs

This will strengthen friendship bonds and could improve your child's support network within school. This will reduce worries.

8. Preparation and routine

Make sure your child gets everything prepared for school the night before so that there is no added rush (or opportunities for excuses and delays) in the morning. Establish and maintain good routines (eating, sleep and exercise). Sleep patterns are particularly important. Poor sleep patterns feed anxiety and sleeping during the day will just make it a harder to break a cycle of avoidance.