

Helping Parents to Support Anxious Children to Return to School

The following guidance offers suggestions on how to support your child if they are anxious about going back to school, particularly following the Coronavirus Pandemic.

We have recently found ourselves in an unprecedented situation, filled with uncertainty and, in some cases, bereavement to cope with. For children who were already highly anxious or were refusing to attend school before the Pandemic, it is likely to be a huge challenge for both you as parents, and the staff in their school, to settle them back successfully after recent events.

The following information has been written to offer simple suggestions that might help you to support your child, alongside the school, so that there is a more holistic and child centred approach.

The steps to success might need to be extremely small and may take a long period of time, but it is important to persevere and celebrate any achievements no matter how small.



Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear. Anxiety can be mild or severe. Children who experience extremely high levels of anxiety can find it difficult to go to school.

When supporting children with anxiety, we can either re-enforce or break the cycle.

If children give an extreme reaction to the idea of going to school and are then not encouraged to go, they will feel as if they have had an escape and will repeat the same cycle the following day. The longer the cycle continues, the more entrenched the behaviour becomes. By avoiding what they are most anxious about, their anxiety levels will increase further.

As parents, it is important that instead of helping your child to avoid school, you try to scaffold the experience, breaking it down into small, manageable steps that will help them to feel positive or neutral about it, instead of frightened.

In collaboration with the school, consider what steps can be put in place to enable your child to have a positive experience instead of the negative experience that they are expecting.

An example might be that they are too anxious to walk to school. You could start by just walking to the end of the street and back for a few days. Then extend the distance to the bus stop and then the garage etc. until they are able to reach the school gate. Try not to feed into negative responses from your child, but instead, point out interesting things whilst you're walking, or talk to them about a subject that you know they enjoy. Autistic children might like having a list of things to spot on the way, which they can tick off as they go. This will add some structure to their journey.

Another approach is to flip the feeling so that, rather than talking about them being scared of an experience, talk about them being brave by confronting their fears.

Reflect back on how well they have done when they have managed to achieve a step in the right direction, even if it is a very small step. Also try asking them to consider what advice they would give a friend who was feeling anxious and see if they could follow their own advice.



Initial visit

After such a long period away from school, it might be daunting for children to return, particularly as they are unlikely to go back to their usual routine.

Ask the school if you can arrange to visit with your child, so that you can see their teacher and share some of the activities they have participated in during the lock-down. It is important that your child starts to establish or re-build a positive relationship with the teacher or a key member of staff. Talk about who will be supporting your child when they come back to school, but be mindful that staffing might be limited and that the school will do their best with the resources they have.

If your child's anxiety is more extreme, then perhaps the teacher could carry out a couple of video calls to them at home before you even attempt to get them into the actual building.

There might also be social stories available that you can read through with your child.

Most importantly, be positive about school. Your child will take on board your thoughts and feelings about their educational setting, so gently feed in nice comments about the staff, seeing friends and even the school dinners, over the period leading up to a return to school.

This might be difficult if you are unhappy with an aspect of the schooling that your child has received; however, it is important that you discuss any issues you have, with the school directly and maintain a positive outlook with your child so that you don't increase their anxiety further.



Routine

During the lock-down, it has been easy to fall out of a regular routine.

People have been getting up at different times, eating at different

times, staying in pyjamas all day and so on. To help your child get ready

for going back to school, begin to re-establish some of the routines you had before. Start putting them to bed at a slightly earlier time and setting the alarm to get them up at a reasonable hour (this doesn't have to be the same time as a normal school day). Try to eat meals at more of a set time, perhaps similar to the timings at school. Plan an activity that you want your child to comply with, even if it's helping you to bake a cake or build a Lego model, before they can have free time. This will help them to start preparing for having to do things that aren't always on their terms.

Your child might have been completing work set by the school. Try to structure it so that you start at the same time each day and have a regular break built in.

Think about evening routines that you had in place before, such as bath, teeth, story and bed. Start to re-establish these routines, even if they are at a slightly later time than normal. Perhaps add something positive about school when you are putting your child to bed, such as, "Won't it be lovely to see Mrs Smith again soon" or, "I wonder how Mr Brown is". This will help your child to start re-familiarising themselves with staff and will start to encourage them to think positively about school.



Transitional object

For some children, bringing an item from home and keeping it with them at school, can help to give them the comfort and confidence needed to make a successful transition back into an educational setting. Of course, following the Coronavirus Pandemic, items coming from home will need careful consideration, in order to avoid the virus being brought into school. Small items kept in pockets would be more acceptable, whereas larger items may need to be disinfected regularly and might not be considered appropriate at this time.

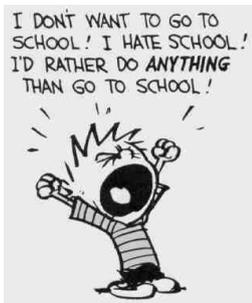
For a child who has separation anxiety, it can help for them to have a photo of their loved one in their pocket, so that they feel as if that person is with them, giving them the courage to get through their time in school. Another suggestion would be to draw a small heart on the child's hand and your hand, so that when you are walking to school and holding hands the hearts are touching and the child can then see or touch the heart, whilst they are in school, reminding them that there is a connection with you and they are loved.

The book, 'The Invisible String' is also good for children with separation anxiety.



Building in regular re-set times

It is important for children with high levels of anxiety, to develop some strategies to help them feel calm. The school should be able to support with this, but it is something that parents can work on too, as you know your child best. If they start experimenting with things that help them to feel calm at home, such as, listening to music, cuddling a favourite teddy, building with a construction toy or reading a favourite book, then they might be able to transfer these calming tools to the school environment and use them when they are feeling anxious. It is important to discuss the calming tools with the school, in order to see which strategies are manageable when they are there and which need to be saved for when they are at home.



Developing a Monday Morning Plan

For a child who is anxious about school, Monday mornings can be the most challenging. Think carefully about how to make the start of each week into a positive experience. Stick with the same routine you usually have, but consider whether there need to be any additions. Perhaps have a special breakfast on a Monday morning.

You might want to think about making some changes on a Sunday night. Talk to your child about what they are looking forward to most this week. Discuss what treat they would like to have on Friday, at the end of the week, so that there is an aim to look forward to. Perhaps introduce a Monday night activity, such as watching a family movie that they will enjoy. The most important thing, is to start breaking your child's negative thought cycle.



Communication

One of the most important elements of supporting your child to get back into school, is communication. It is vital that positive communication links are made between you and the school. It is important for everyone to feel involved in the decision making and to know that their voice has been heard. Schools should be as accommodating as possible, within reason. It is always important to consider that circumstances within schools can change on a daily basis and, whilst they will always do their best to accommodate your wishes, they might not be able to do so every day. If you have a grievance with the school, arrange to have a meeting with members of staff, but do try to keep being positive about school with your child, as you want to keep their anxiety levels as low as possible. Ideally, work with the school to put an individualised plan in place, so that your child knows what to expect and knows what is expected of them. Finally, remember to celebrate the positive steps that your child makes, so that they know you are proud of them.