

Managing School Anxiety

Advice for Parents and Carers



This information sheet has been developed by a working group based in Edinburgh comprising:

Educational Psychology

CAMHS, NHS Lothian

University of Edinburgh

Barnardo's Scotland

Educational Welfare

Family Solutions

Additional Support for Learning Service

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



TIPS

1. **COMMUNICATING WITH SCHOOL** – Maintain good communication and work with the school to put in place strategies that will help your child manage full attendance and address any concerns.
2. **UNITED, CONSISTENT APPROACH** – It is important all the adults supporting your child or young person give the same messages about expecting the child to attend school.
3. **SMOOTH MORNING ROUTINE** – Predictable routines can greatly reduce anxiety and the likelihood of family disputes. Establish good morning and evening routines and stick to them.
4. **CLEAR MESSAGES ABOUT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE** – Everyone has had a different experience of school themselves, some good and some bad. It is important that all those supporting think about the way they speak about school. The key message is that school is not optional and attending is in every child's best interests.
5. **PLANNED IGNORING** – 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.
6. **MODELLING CONFIDENCE** – 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 plan and carrying it out. Identify other adults who can support you but avoid discussing doubts and worries with your child.
7. **SUPPORT IN TO SCHOOL** – on a short-term basis taking your child to school yourself or identifying another trusted adult to do so can be a helpful strategy to build a good habit of daily attendance. Even if your child is older and largely independent in many ways, this can be reassuring and shows you support them to address their anxiety.
8. **HELP THEM BREAK DOWN THE TASK** – When anxiety has built up it is often helpful to break the task that causes the anxiety down into small steps. Small successful steps build up confidence.
9. **REWARDS FOR FACING FEARED SITUATIONS** – Facing your fears will always cause some upset however it is an essential aspect of addressing anxiety. Although rewards won't make the anxiety go away they help your child to have a positive focus and increase motivation.
10. **LET THEM TRY THEMSELVES** – Adults should avoid the temptation to step in and help their children avoid the things they find difficult and worrying. Encourage your child to try and show them you are confident they will be Ok.
11. **SUPPORT 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.
12. **ENCOURAGE PERSISTENCE** – When a task is set it is important it is followed through until anxiety begins to decrease. Your child will see that they coped and nothing happened that they couldn't manage. If they start the task but leave when their anxiety is high it is likely to reinforce their worries.

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.

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

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

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 attending free 16+ stress control classes www.nhs.uk/Lothian/Services/A-Z/StressControl
- Edinburgh libraries lend books through the Healthy Reading Scheme: <https://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/healthyreading>
- 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.