

# Helping your child feel okay about school

A guide for parents whose children are worried about school



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Some children find going to school difficult. They may be worried and anxious about things that happen at school or they may be worried about things at home or find it difficult to separate from their parents. This information is to support parents and carers at the early signs of any difficulties.

Each child is different and it is important to listen to them and try to make sense of their reasons for not wanting to go to school.

## How might your child be feeling?

- **Anxious and worried:** Your child may be too anxious to go in to school at all. Even the thought of it is overwhelming and too difficult. This can sometimes prevent them from attending other groups such as clubs or sports teams.
- **Isolated or alone:** Your child may be having difficulties with making and keeping friends. If they have missed school they may be finding it difficult to integrate back in to their friendship group.
- **Angry or upset:** Your child may be feeling angry or upset, or both, about something happening at home, at school or with themselves for not being able to manage the situation.
- **Depressed:** Your child may be experiencing low mood and have a sense of hopelessness about the situation they are in.
- **Confused:** Your child may be feeling uncomfortable and at odds with how they normally feel about school. Feeling confused will further add to the feelings of anxiety.

## What might you see?

- Your child may complain of headaches, tummy aches, fatigue, dizziness, general aches and pains in the morning, feeling sick or crying before school. The symptoms may appear to settle fairly quickly after getting into school.
- Your child may have difficulty in settling to sleep. These symptoms may be worse the night before starting a new school week, after school holidays, and less obvious during weekends and holidays.
- Your child may be reluctant to get dressed in the morning, leave the house or enter the school premises.

## Why might this be happening?

- Your child may be having difficulties with the academic work; either feeling overwhelmed or not stretched enough
- Your child may feel bullied
- Your child may be having difficulties following a change at school; moving schools, moving classes or a change in staff
- Your child may be having difficulties following a distressing family event or situation
- Your child may be experiencing anxiety about a range of different things; noises, animals, going out, social anxiety, sleeping alone, and may need exploring further.

## How do parents feel?

- Parents can find this anxiety in their child extremely difficult to deal with as it can have a serious impact on their child's education and friendships. This in turn can cause parents to feel anxious.
- Some parents find their child's distress at going to school so hard to bear they keep them at home, to avoid daily upsets. It may seem like a solution but doing this will confirm your child's fears about school and can make the problems much worse. It is really important to address these issues with the school as early as possible and work together.

## Useful things to think about

In trying to understand why your child may not want to go to school ask yourself the following:

- Could this be a specific fear or anxiety around a particular subject or activity that they feel they are failing in or likely to become embarrassed by, for example reading, maths, physical education? This is probably the easiest cause to tackle, but more often than not there are other anxieties involved.
- Can you notice a pattern to refusals such as always on a Thursday or on a Monday? There may be a lesson that is particularly difficult or teacher that your child finds difficult to work with.
- If your child is an adolescent, are they worried about not keeping up with their peers? Or are they worried about being teased, embarrassed or do they lack confidence?
- Do they appear to be scared about leaving home or separating from the family? Do you have time to talk to your child and spend time with them at home?
- Are they struggling academically in one or more of their subjects?
- Are they confident and socially integrated with strong friendships?
- Is your child different from the majority of other young people, for example from a different ethnic or religious group?
- Does your child have an obvious or hidden disability?
- Is your child or young person suffering from a physical illness?
- Could the child be a victim of bullying, teasing or another form of abuse? This could be during the school day or on the way to school.
- Have been any significant life changes or stresses affecting your child, for example has there been significant loss or bereavement such as parental separation, the death of a close family member or friend, a change of school or move of house?
- How did you find school when you were young? Did you find it hard and difficult to manage? Talking to a friend or family member may help to resolve any personal issues that you may have had in the past. School may still be a worrying place for you and your child may have sensed this.

## It is interesting to consider

There are direct links between experiencing a situation, what we think, what we feel and then what we do.



**Situation:** New school

**Thoughts:** No one knows me, they don't like me

**Feelings:** Anxious and worried (possible physical symptoms)

**Action:** Avoid going to school

**As a parent you may like to talk to your child about the situations that may lead to the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, this can help to make small suggestions and next steps to make the situation easier to manage next time.**

## Useful things to do

- Talk to your child's school: class teacher, form tutor or pastoral staff. Find out if there is a member of staff with a particular responsibility for pupils not attending school and if so arrange to speak to that person. Take someone to support you if it makes it easier.
- Talking to school as soon as possible when you first notice your child becoming anxious about school is vital in order to try and 'nip it in the bud'
- Ask the school to provide work or suggest activities for your child while a plan is being devised which will minimise the learning they miss
- Ask the school what external support they may be able to get to understand and support your child back to school, e.g. counselling services, Educational Psychologist, Headstart practitioner, Education Welfare Officer.

- Talk to your child about why they are anxious about school and try to understand the reasons why they may not want to go to school.
  - This may give you lots of clues as to what is going on at school. If your child finds it hard to 'open up' about their feelings try an informal approach. It may be easier to talk when washing up together or when driving in the car (Young Minds has lots of ideas about how to start conversations – see link below). Try and remain calm during these conversations and not show your worry or irritation. Your child may not be able to tell you straight away about why they are finding school difficult.
- What has helped your child go to school in the past?
  - Can you think of any ways you can encourage your child to go to school? Consider what may motivate them.
  - Try and focus on the positive things about school and talk to your child about times when they have enjoyed things at school.
- Let your child know that attendance is important and that it's not right for them to miss school
  - Giving your child firm messages about the importance of attending school shows that you take their education seriously and expect them to attend school. It also shows that you are supportive of their education and believe that it is vital to their future welfare and success even though it may be hard at times.
- Stick to a routine at home; getting up at the usual time, sticking to meal times, have a time for working, time for playing, leisure activities.
- Consider the language you are using in regards to what is happening with your child; most children are not deliberately refusing to go to school and therefore they may feel judged and misunderstood if words such as 'refusal' or 'being naughty' are used.

When you have considered these things it may be enough to help you find some clear solutions to help.

At all times it is vital that you keep talking to school about what is happening. The best way to help your child feel less anxious about school is to have a partnership and a shared plan of action between home and school. If your child needs further support then the school will be able to support you in accessing that help.

## Other sources of help

### Websites

**Kooth:** an online service to support children and young people with any worries they may have.

[www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)

**Young Minds:** an organisation that has advice and information for children, young people and parents about a wide range of topics related to emotional well-being.

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

**Relax Kids:** a website that has a whole range of resources for supporting children and young people who are anxious.

[www.relaxkids.com](http://www.relaxkids.com)

**Moodcafe:** a website developed in Fife. 'We have produced and collated information and resources relevant to various common psychological problems. If the mood takes you, why not check out our resources, browse the self help guides and visit recommended websites.'

[www.moodcafe.co.uk/for-children-and-young-people/relaxation-for-children.aspx](http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/for-children-and-young-people/relaxation-for-children.aspx)

**School Refusal Support Service:** a web-based community for help with a wide range of issues related to children who are refusing to go to school. [www.schoolrefusal.co.uk/](http://www.schoolrefusal.co.uk/)

**National Autistic Society:** this information is for parents with children who have autism and are refusing to go to school .

[www.autism.org.uk/about/in-education/exclusion/school-refusal-strategies.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/about/in-education/exclusion/school-refusal-strategies.aspx)

### Books

Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: [John Gottman](#)

The Whole Brain Child: [Daniel Siegel](#) and [Tina Payne Bryson](#)



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