

# What to Say When Students Struggle

## Staff scripts for students experiencing school anxiety

When a student is struggling with anxiety or school avoidance, finding the right words can feel impossible. You want to help, but worry about saying something that might make things worse. This resource gives you gentle, tested phrases that actually work.

These aren't rigid scripts to memorise - they're conversation starters that help you respond with warmth and confidence. Each phrase is designed to validate what the student is experiencing whilst opening the door to practical support. Choose the ones that feel natural to you and match what the student needs in that moment.

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## When a Student is Overwhelmed or Panicking

### Immediate Calming:

- "I can see this feels really big right now. Let's just focus on this moment."
- "You're safe here with me. We don't need to fix everything at once."
- "Your feelings make complete sense. Let's work out what would help most right now."

### Grounding Support:

- "Can you tell me three things you can see from where you're sitting?"
- "Let's just concentrate on your breathing for a minute. In for four, hold for four."
- "Would it help to step outside for a moment, or would you prefer to stay here?"

### Implementation tip:

Match your pace to theirs - speak slowly and keep your body language relaxed.

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## When a Student Can't Enter the Classroom

### Non-confrontational Approaches:

- "What's one thing that would need to change for you to feel okay about going in?"
- "Shall we have a quick chat about what's worrying you, then decide together?"
- "Would it help if I came in with you for the first few minutes?"

### Problem-solving Together:

- "What's worked before when you've felt like this?"
- "Would sitting near the door help, or would you prefer your usual spot?"
- "Should we let your teacher know you might need a break today?"

**Offering Alternatives:**

- "Would you like to try going to the library first, then joining your class after break?"
- "Shall we see if you can do some of this work in the learning support room instead?"

**Implementation tip:** Avoid time pressure. Use phrases like "when you're ready" rather than "you need to..."

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## When a Student is Tearful or Distressed

**Validating Emotions:**

- "Crying shows me how hard this is for you. That's completely understandable."
- "These feelings are really powerful, aren't they? Thank you for trusting me with them."
- "You don't need to apologise for being upset. This is exactly where you should bring these feelings."

**Gentle Inquiry:**

- "Can you help me understand what's feeling most difficult right now?"
- "Is this about something specific, or does everything just feel too much?"
- "Would it help to talk, or would you prefer to sit quietly for a bit?"

**Offering Comfort:**

- "You don't have to have all the answers. We can work this out together."
- "Would a drink of water help? Sometimes that makes things feel a bit more manageable."

**Implementation tip:** Resist the urge to immediately fix or minimise their distress. Stay present with their experience first.

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## When a Student Says "I Can't"

**Exploring the "Can't":**

- "Help me understand what 'can't' means for you right now."
- "Is it that it feels too scary, too hard, or something else entirely?"
- "What would need to be different for this to feel more possible?"

**Breaking Things Down:**

- "What if we just tried the first small bit and saw how that felt?"
- "Would it help if we changed how we're doing this rather than what we're doing?"
- "Shall we think of this as an experiment rather than something you have to get right?"

**Reframing Capability:**

- "Your brain is trying to protect you by saying 'can't'. What would help it feel safer?"
- "You've managed difficult things before, even when they felt impossible at first."

**Implementation tip:** Never respond with "yes you can" - this invalidates their experience and often escalates anxiety.

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## When a Student Wants to Go Home

**Understanding the Need:**

- "Tell me what going home would give you that you need right now."
- "What is it about being here that's feeling too difficult today?"
- "If you couldn't go home, what else might help you feel safer?"

**Negotiating Support:**

- "What if we found a way to make being here feel more like what you need?"
- "Should we ring home and let them know you're struggling, but see if we can help first?"
- "Would it help to have a plan for if things get too much later?"

**Offering Compromise:**

- "What if we tried staying until break time and then reviewed how you're feeling?"
- "Would spending some time in the quiet room help you reset?"

**Implementation tip:** Acknowledge that home represents safety, then help them identify what safety looks like at school.

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## When a Student is Angry or Defensive

**De-escalating Responses:**

- "I can hear how frustrated you are. That must feel awful."
- "You're absolutely right to stick up for yourself. Help me understand what's happened."
- "I'm not here to argue with you. I want to understand so I can help."

**Avoiding Power Struggles:**

- "This isn't about who's right or wrong. It's about what you need."
- "I hear that you disagree. Can you tell me more about your perspective?"
- "You clearly feel strongly about this, and that matters to me."

**Moving Forward:**

- "What would need to happen for today to feel better for you?"
- "Should we take a break from this conversation and come back to it?"

**Implementation tip:** Lower your voice when they raise theirs. Avoid defending school policies in the moment - focus on their experience first.

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## When a Student is Withdrawn or Silent

### Gentle Invitations:

- "I notice you're very quiet today. I'm here if you want to talk, or we can just sit together."
- "Sometimes words feel too hard. Would it help to write something down instead?"
- "I'm going to stay here with you. You don't need to say anything until you're ready."

### Reducing Pressure:

- "There's no rush. Take all the time you need."
- "Would it help if I talked about something else for a bit, or would you prefer quiet?"
- "Sometimes just knowing someone's nearby can help. I'm not going anywhere."

### Offering Alternatives:

- "Would drawing or doodling while we sit help you feel more comfortable?"
- "Should I check back with you in ten minutes, or would you prefer I stayed?"

**Implementation tip:** Comfortable silence is more valuable than filling the space with words. Let them lead when they're ready.

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### Supporting Notes

- Your tone matters more than perfect words - aim for calm and curious
- Give students processing time after speaking - don't rush their responses
- Match their emotional intensity rather than trying to jolly them out of distress
- Use their name occasionally to maintain connection

Remember: these scripts work best when they reflect your genuine care for the student. Adapt the language to match your natural speaking style whilst keeping the core message of validation and support.

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