

Managing School Anxiety Triggered by COVID 19

Advice for Parents and Carers



This information sheet was originally developed by a working group comprising:

Educational Psychology

CAMHS

University of Edinburgh

Barnardo's Scotland

Educational Welfare

Family Solutions

Additional Support for Learning

This leaflet is part of a collection including:

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 IF YOU NOTICE YOUR CHILD IS RELUCTANT TO RETURN TO SCHOOL

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. Try to re-establish your previous morning routine for school in advance or returning.
4. **CLEAR MESSAGES ABOUT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE** – Everyone will have different feelings about the timing of the return to school. The key message is that school is not optional and attending is in every child's best interests.
5. **FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN ALL DO** – It can be easy to get drawn into a debate about why your child doesn't want to return to school. Stick to your own clear message and agreed plan, focus on what you are all doing to stay safe.
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 confidence. 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. For the first few days it may help if you break down the morning into small steps with regular prompts.
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. **SUPPORT PROBLEM SOLVING** – Help your child to create and think through solutions and plan together what they need to do to feel confident. Helping your child solve their own problems shows confidence in them and helps them develop their own problem-solving skills.
11. **ENCOURAGE PERSISTENCE** – Every day your child goes to school their anxiety will gradually decrease. Your child will see that they coped and nothing happened that they couldn't manage. If they go to school but leave when their anxiety is high it is likely to reinforce their worries. Speak to your school to plan how to help your child stay even if they feel some anxiety.

For all of us the recent restrictions and upsetting news around COVID 19 is likely to have increased anxiety and every family will have had their own unique challenges and concerns at this time.

Some children may be anxious about the return to school following the period of school closures however the earlier you act the easier it will be 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.



Most children will be keen to return to school and will look forward to seeing their friends and teachers, however some children may feel very anxious about the return. This leaflet is written to help you to act quickly and appropriately if you notice your child is reluctant to attend school.

Understanding anxiety and not wanting to go to school

Anxiety and stress are normal responses to challenging situations and, at times, can be helpful aspects of life. Feeling some level of anxiety or stress before trying something new or difficult has actually been shown to improve performance in certain situations.

We all need to develop ways of coping with these feelings. 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 concerns that are barriers for them. Common barriers include;

- Problems with friendships or bullying
- A recent loss
- Difficulties with school work



In addition to the barriers above the news and events related to COVID 19 will have caused many children and young people additional worries. We hope most children and young people will be looking forward to returning to school but for some their worries might make them feel reluctant.

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 complaining of regular health complaints, such as having a sore tummy or head, it is important you have a conversation with them about how they are feeling. Make sure to specifically ask them if there is anything that is worrying them. If there is something that is worrying them about returning to school it is important to discuss this with someone in the school.

It is essential that if your child is regularly complaining about being unwell that you also discuss this with their GP.

Reassuring your child

If a child is worried or anxious it is important that the adults around them listen to them and reassure them.

- Explain COVID 19 at a level they can understand

- Try to make sure they don't see or hear too much news especially if they are unlikely to understand it all.
- Find out what school will be like following the school closures and prepare your child for what they can expect.
- Calmly and confidently support your child about what they can do – wash hands, socially distance.
- Reassure them that it is normal to feel worried but getting back to routines will help us gain confidence.
- Remind them that adults are around to support them and keep them safe.
- Focus on any positives that your child may experience from being back in school such as seeing friends or partaking in enjoyable activities.

If your child is still very reluctant to go back to school 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 to begin attending school an hour a day and build up to more time than to not attend at all. Small successful steps will 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
"We will support you to get back to school."	➡	Parents/carers working together
"We can't all stay at home, it's important we go out and see others, learn / work."	➡	We are in this together
"I know this is hard but we all have to get back to our routines. We know what to do to stay safe."	➡	Strong confident message
"Today after school, you can choose something for dinner and we'll cook it together."	➡	Expectation of compliance / something to look forward to
"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 struggle 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. Children will often be very aware of the anxiety of adults around them even if they haven't spoken to them about it.

All of us are likely to have felt more anxious during COVID 19. For most of us periods of anxiety pass and we can focus on other things, however, for some it may feel like anxiety has become overwhelming. It is important if this is the case that adults access their own supports. Here are some tips for managing anxiety at this time;

- Limit the amount of news you watch.
- Make sure you have a supportive adult to share your own concerns with.
- Focus on what you can do – wash hands, socially distance, help neighbours
- Try to maintain good routines including routines for sleep and eating as healthily as you can.
- Plan activities you enjoy and can focus on.
- Try to have positive internal self-talk for example ‘this isn’t forever’, ‘we are doing the right things’.

Online Resources to support adults speaking to children about COVID 19

Young Children https://www.lchcnet.org/sites/default/files/publications/coronavirus_educational_for_kids.pdf

Older Children <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf>

Social Stories for Additional Support Needs <https://www.staplefordprimaryschool.org/social-stories-for-coronavirus/>

Additional resources

More information on managing anxiety can be found at:

<https://services.nhsllothian.scot/camhs/Resources/Pages/Online-Resources.aspx>

<https://young.scot/>

www.parentclub.scot