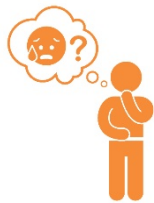


School 'Refusal' or School-based anxiety – some tips

What is school refusal, emotionally-based school avoidance or school-based anxiety?



School is often a source of support, learning and belonging for children and young people. Everyone has worries about school from time to time too. Sometimes though, school can become challenging or distressing over a longer period and children may begin to avoid school altogether. This is often referred to as 'school refusal', but many young people find this term unhelpful since it implies a choice. School-based anxiety might be a better term. Most school-anxious children WANT to attend school, however their anxiety is overwhelming. They care about their education, but they need understanding and support at school for their needs. Sometimes school avoidance has other influencing factors such as being worried about leaving parents (parental mental health, parental suicidal behaviour, domestic violence etc.) and we can call this emotionally-based school avoidance. Children who are experiencing school anxiety may demonstrate a number of different symptoms and behaviours, including:

- Refusal to go to school in the morning, leaving or running away from school during the school day
- Tantrums and outbursts, especially in the morning
- Threats to harm themselves if they're made to go to school
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches or sleep disturbances
- Extreme clinginess - not wanting to be alone in a room

As these behaviours are mainly home-based, school may not be aware of any difficulties and so it is a good idea to communicate your concerns to a trusted member of staff.

Why does it happen?



School-based anxiety may be due to unmet Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (including physical or mental illness) bullying, academic pressure, or even the school environment. Autistic Spectrum Conditions are noted in a high proportion of children with school-based anxiety. It affects around one per cent of children, is more common in boys, and tends to peak between ages 5 and 6, and 11 and 12 (which are important transition times). Following the impact of COVID-19 and the national lockdowns there may be additional issues, for instance, worries about safety in school, bereavement, concern about vulnerable adults at home and difficulties transitioning back to school. Some pupils may have found the quieter learning environment at home better for their mental health.

What can you do?



It is important to work with the school, keep them informed and discuss possible strategies together. A positive approach would be for the school to work in partnership with you, give you information and support, and ensure that you and your child participate as fully as possible in decisions. The views, wishes and feelings of you and your child should always be central to any decision making.

Be kind to yourself



School-based anxiety can be really difficult for parents and carers who sometimes feel they are 'failing'. The whole family can be affected both on a practical or emotional level. It can have a major impact on parents who are working and on brothers and sisters. It can also be very upsetting to see your child so distressed. Remember you are not alone and try to draw on your support networks for emotional support.

Responding early is a key to making successful changes. Good communication is vital, and it might be helpful to meet with everyone involved at school, for instance, the form teacher, SENDCO, TA, senior leader, or trusted staff member, to identify the difficulties. You may all decide to assess your child for particular educational needs.

Talk to the young person



Actively listen to your child as soon as problems arise. Acknowledge what they are feeling and tell them that feelings of anxiety or concern are normal. After validating their feelings, try to make a plan to help them deal with anxious feelings about school. Together you can try to identify the focus of their concern and the triggers for their anxiety. See if you can think of strategies at home or at school that can support them when they face these triggers. At the same time try to avoid allowing them to stay at home, which will reinforce the power of their fears. Once they have stopped going into school it will be harder. You can also help your child to use self-soothing strategies such as breathing or counting, which they can use when their anxiety begins to overwhelm them. At home and school, you can use positive praise and reward, be sure to validate the effort they are making – try to notice the small steps where you can. Work with the school and your child to identify a member of staff to be available to check-in, chat or clearly hold them in mind. This does not need to be a teacher; admin or premises staff might volunteer for the role – whoever the young person feels comfortable with. The school should also work with the child to respond to any concerns about bullies or friendships. Ensure children know who is supporting them and where to go if they need help.

Flexibility and management of effective detail



Flexibility in routines, breaks or start and finish times can help a child stay in school. It's also important to manage the details of plans that are put in place. Break tasks at home or school into small steps to increase a child's confidence and decrease how much support they have at each stage. After some time, they should feel comfortable with that part of the process. Then you can look at working towards the next goal. Attending a new nurture group or counselling can be daunting, so ask the school to explain exactly what will happen and where, and possibly allow a friend to take them. Ask the school to make it clear when they can meet their trusted adult – they may need to be met as they arrive in school. If they are anxious about people at home, discuss strategies with the school to manage these concerns such as setting out ways that a child can contact home during the school day or systems for relaying messages from home.

Anticipating Difficulties



Work with everyone to anticipate difficulties. This might be at transitions such as changing teacher, changing school or even when there is a cover teacher. There may also be issues around exams or school trips. Your child can be prepared and equipped for what to do if they begin to feel anxious in school.

Communication



Good communication between home and school is really important. You may need to provide some clear information about your young person and ask for this to be circulated among all staff who work with them. This will enable staff to make adjustments based on what might trigger your young person's anxiety. Sometimes, for instance, a child manages to arrive in school only to be chastised for missing equipment or a uniform issue rather than receiving a warm welcome. Ask if school staff are trained to recognise panic attacks or anxiety, especially with quiet children who rarely claim attention. If the school don't know the full story, they won't be able to offer fully informed support.

Safe spaces



Work with the school and your child to arrange a space for them to sit away from the hustle of school life where they are not witnessed by peers in a state of anxiety. This could be sitting next to the receptionist or with a school nurse for ten minutes.

