

YOU'VE BEEN MISSED

ANXIETY & YOUNG CHILDREN

A useful guide for parents.



What is anxiety?

A feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about something with an uncertain outcome.

It's common.

Anxiety is a common difficulty and is a perfectly normal response to events and changes. It tends to be forward-thinking, compared to worry that looks back on an event.

It's a useful feeling at times.

Anxiety can help protect us from danger and alerts us when things just don't feel right'. In moderation, it can encourage us to practice skills and to do well in things that are important to us (like a test for example). In excess though, it is unhelpful and feels horrible.

It's just a feeling.

Anxiety, in itself, can't hurt your child/young person and learning to manage these feelings is very positive for their health and well-being. Sometimes these feelings of anxiety can lead to a child/young person struggling to get into school or missing a lot of school. In education this is known as EBSA - Emotionally Based School Avoidance.

Autism and anxiety.

We know that if your child/young person has autism they may be more likely to need specialist support to manage their anxiety. However, there are still things that school and you can do to help. It is important to remember that strategies are more effective if all the adults in the child/young person's life are aware of these. All adults working with your child/young person should use their name when speaking to them so they know the communication is for them. If instructions need repeating they should use exactly the same language but give children and young people 10 seconds of quiet first so they can process what is said. Concise explicit language should be used. Increasing the certainty of both school and family life helps. You can find out about more ways to help at www.autism.org.uk

It is important that you talk to the school SENCO or other school staff as soon as you become worried about your child/young person as they can help you to plan a way forward and help your child/young person to stay in school. They will be able to have a consultation with another service, such as The Educational Psychology Service, the CAT (Children's Autism Team) or FTB (Forward Thinking Birmingham) and be able to discuss whether some extra support is needed as well as the most appropriate service to help.

*** Metaphors can be used to help you talk to your child/young person and help them to understand anxiety and getting help. Here's a useful example...**

Anxiety is like a fire alarm. A fire alarm is a way of telling you that there is danger and helps keep you safe. However, if it keeps going off, like when you burn the toast, it's annoying and can stop you having fun and learning.

Anxiety is your body's way of telling you there is danger - don't cross the busy road - there is a car coming! However when your anxiety alarm goes off when you are not in danger it can get in the way of doing things you want and/or need to do (like attending school). It gets annoying, just like the fire alarm.

What you may notice; first signs of anxiety and school avoidance.

- ✦ Not taking part in activities they had previously enjoyed
- ✦ Saying they don't want to go to school
- ✦ Changes to their sleep pattern
- ✦ Repeatedly asking questions and seeking reassurance about seemingly routine events
- ✦ Not seeming as happy as perhaps they used to when leaving school
- ✦ Not wanting to play with friends or attend clubs
- ✦ Becoming clingy with you or other family members or teachers

Other signs to look for.



What happens to your child/young person's brain during anxiety?

When your child/young person is experiencing anxiety one side of the brain stops talking to the other. So, the left side that deals with logic and reasoning goes 'off line'. Therefore they can't hear and respond to your logic, for example, if you say to them 'there's nothing to worry about'.

The right side of the brain that deals with emotions, impulses and senses gets over stimulated during anxiety. This is great in times of danger - it's the more primitive side of the brain doing what it should; protecting them from danger, but it's not helpful if the mechanism has become over-sensitive and alerts them to danger when there is none.

What can help?

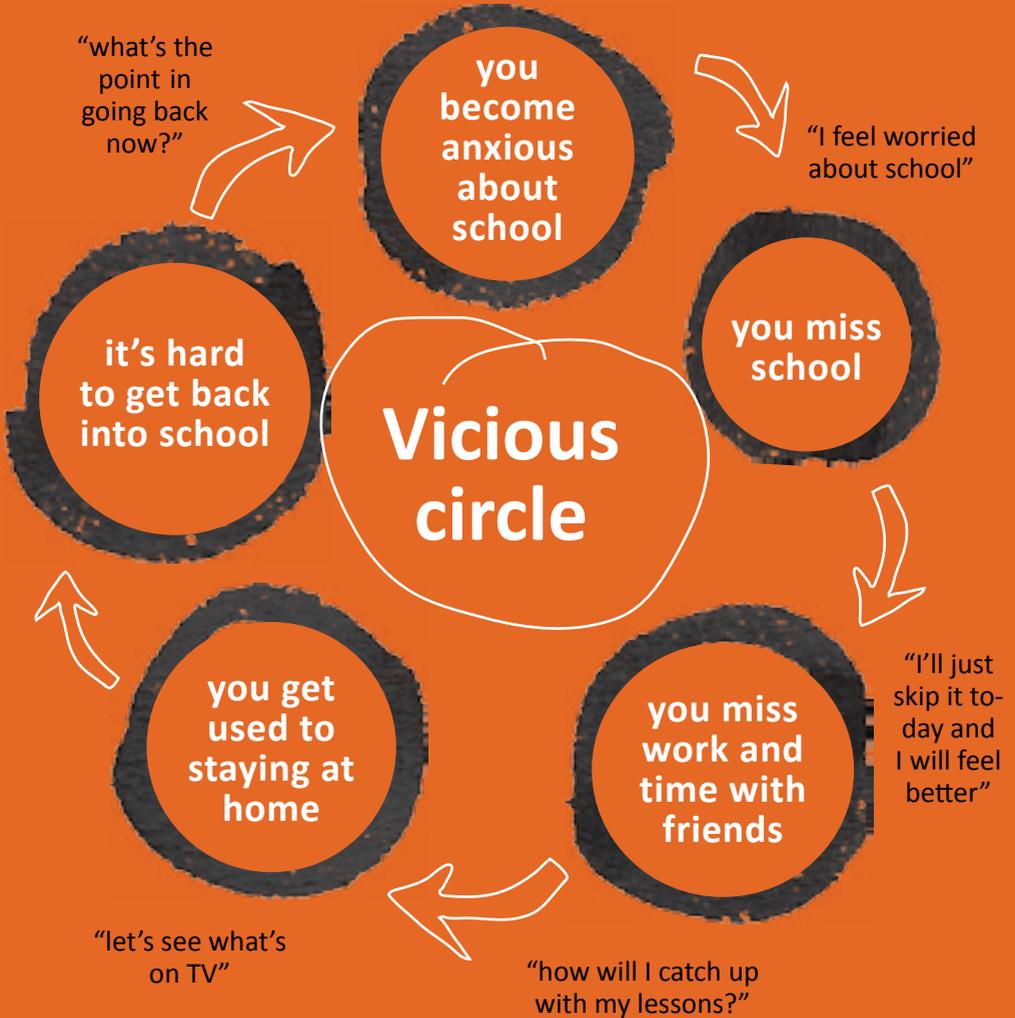
It helps to strengthen the connections within the brain - helping them to calm down (ground, orient and move) if the signs are obvious. Engaging them in conversations about how they feel when they are not in a state of heightened anxiety or emotion.

Children's brains adapt and change when exposed to stimulation so doing our best to encourage children to work with you to problem solve can be helpful. What can we do about this? Get creative with this idea and talk about '*In a perfect world...*' what could happen, or have them imagine what they would really like to happen? You may want to share with them times that you have felt similar and what you did - using language that is appropriate for their age.

Building relationships is important. Make some time with them - perhaps choose a TV programme that you both enjoy and can watch routinely together, a creative activity that you both like to do, or reading together. You can use characters in programmes and books to think together about how they feel or what your child might think or do if they were in their shoes.

Validating their feelings, even if you don't know the cause of the anxiety, is important - this is real for them and children need our help to make sense of their feelings. They may not be able to answer questions about what it is themselves (don't push them to find a reason), they really may not know. Think about ways to help rather than focus on the 'why's'.

Why your child needs to carry on attending school



Questions you can ask about your child's anxiety.

Some anxiety has a root which can be explored, for example bullying or changes in your family such as moving house, a bereavement, separation or divorce and conflict. Sometimes there is no obvious reason for the anxiety. Separate the child/young person from the anxiety so they can start to see it as separate from them and not actually them. You can help to do this by calling it **THE** anxiety not **YOUR** anxiety.

- When did the feelings of anxiety start?
- Are there times when it isn't noticeable at all? What is happening at this time?
- When do you think the feeling is at its worst?
- Who is best at supporting you when you are feeling anxious? What do they do?
- What helps to reduce your anxiety?
- What plan shall we make to help you manage the feeling?
- How would you help a friend who was feeling this way?

Reassure your child/young person that anxiety is a normal feeling and that there are ways to manage it.

Managing your own feelings.

It can be hard and frustrating caring for an anxious child/young person. Being with someone who is anxious can make you anxious too. Try to look after yourself and stay as calm as you can, as your child/young person will pick up on your anxieties. When you can, spend time looking after your own well-being - seeing a friend or treating yourself. Talk to the school and other adults.

Myths about anxiety.

There are some myths about anxiety, for example that you need a specialist mental health professional to help. Sometimes, when feelings of anxiety start to really interfere with everything then thinking about getting more help is a good thing. This could include: help in school, finding out about other activities in your local area, exercise or trying some of the apps at the end of this guide

Another myth is that '*something must be wrong*' - children and young people get anxious sometimes and you won't always know why. Remember that growing up is a tough job and children are learning every day about who they are and how relationships work. Sometimes things resolve with time as a child naturally develops.

Helping your child/young person to be in school.

When it comes to getting your child/young person back in to school, or if they are still in school but at risk of EBSA, have a think together about who may be the first person you approach - is there someone at school they have a particularly good relationship with? It is important that this happens even if your child/young person is reluctant.

Hints and tips.

- Talk to a member of staff as soon as you notice changes or you become concerned that they don't want to attend school
- If possible, prepare uniform and lunches the night before so you have extra time to spend with your child/young person before school
- Talk about feelings with your child/young person - use books or TV characters and explore how they are feeling
- Stay calm (see *Managing Your Own Feelings*)
- Maintain a normal routine as much as you can
- Prepare your child/young person for changes to the school day where possible, but not too far in advance..
- Notice when you get anxious yourself and think about the way you express it and resolve it
- Tell your child/young person what you will be doing during the day: "I'll be at work until 2.30 then I will collect the dog and walk him to meet you from school"
- Listen to what they say and acknowledge that it feels hard - for example: *"I imagine that feels really horrible"*
- Keep them in the present: *"right, now let's choose what is for breakfast"*
- If they're anxious, reassure them that the feeling will pass and explain what you will do - for example, give them reassurance you'll stay with them until school starts and then let the teacher know
- Spend time individually with them if you can
- Use self-help resources and work through them together
- Seek help - talk to school; they will be able to advise you about what you may need to do and who you should contact if you need further help. If your child/young person has autism, school support is essential at the earliest opportunity (before they even start school or enter a new class or year, if possible)
- Taking a small object from home in their pocket may help - check with school that this is ok. You could decorate a pebble together and they touch it each time they feel their anxiety is rising
- If you are angry, or need to talk to another adult about something difficult, do it out of ear shot of your child/young person
- Write some calming statements on a note for them to take with them to school
- Encourage your child/young person to get physical, for example: stamp your feet, clap your hands or throw a ball back and forth. All repetitive activity helps to calm the brain
- Exercise and activity can be helpful when your child/young person is calm. All physical activities help control stress and anxiety
- Try mindfulness and meditation - even if you have never tried it before
- Keep family life and school life as predictable as possible to help reduce anxiety about uncertainty

* Here's an example 'script' of a conversation. You might want to think about how you could use this kind of way of talking with your child.

Child:

I'M NOT WELL SO I CAN'T GO TO SCHOOL

(they probably do have some pain or discomfort - physical pain is a symptom)

Carer:

I IMAGINE THAT FEELS REALLY HORRIBLE *(acknowledge their feelings).*

I'M SORRY YOU ARE FEELING LIKE THAT *(divert/distract if possible).*

SHALL WE SEE WHAT YOU WOULD LIKE FOR BREAKFAST? *(bring back to here and now).*

Child:

I CAN'T EAT. I FEEL SICK.

Carer:

OKAY. HOW ABOUT WE MAKE SOMETHING AND YOU CAN EAT IT ON YOUR WAY

TO SCHOOL *(exploring whether it is something you may be able to help with).*

WHAT KIND OF DAY DO YOU HAVE TODAY? LET'S GO AND GET DRESSED.

(bring back to here and now).

Child:

I'M NOT GOING *(remember they may feel unwell with anxiety but avoiding a situation is not helpful).*

Carer: I'M HEARING THAT IT IS VERY HARD FOR YOU TO GO, BUT NOT GOING WILL MAKE IT WORSE. I WONDER IF YOU ARE WORRIED OR FEELING ANXIOUS ABOUT SOMETHING BECAUSE I KNOW THAT CAN UPSET YOUR TUMMY. LET'S TALK TO YOUR TEACHER ABOUT IT AND THINK ABOUT WAYS WE CAN ALL HELP. LET'S GO TO SCHOOL AND LOOK FOR YELLOW CARS ON THE WAY

(bring back to here and now).

You might also find it useful to look at:

VISIT

- ↳ bwc.nhs.uk/youve-been-missed
- ↳ forwardthinkingbirmingham.org.uk/services/13-pause
- ↳ localoffer.birmingham.gov.uk
- ↳ headspace.com
- ↳ anxietyuk.org.uk
- ↳ thetappingsolution.com
- ↳ calm.com
- ↳ childline.org.uk/toolbox/for-me
- ↳ youngminds.org
- ↳ autism.org.uk
- ↳ stem4.org.uk
- ↳ camhs-resources.co.uk

READ

- ↳ Huge bag of worries by Virginia Ironside
- ↳ Hey Warrior by Karen Young

APPS

- ↳ Stop, Breathe, think Kids
- ↳ Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame
- ↳ Positive Penguins
- ↳ Breathing Bubbles