

Getting your child ready for a new school term

Now the holidays are coming to an end, children will soon be making the transition to a new school year. Some will be starting a new school at reception or transitioning to secondary school. This can be an exciting, yet anxious time for both parents and children. It brings a change to the daily routine which has established over the summer holidays. This transition can be especially challenging for families with children who have additional/ SEND needs.

While change can be difficult, the following tips may help prepare your child for their new school year and make the transition back to school a little easier.

How is your child feeling?

Talking about returning to school with your child can help understand how they feel.

- ✚ Even if your child doesn't seem too worried, it's important to ask how they feel about returning to school.
- ✚ If they are worried, ask them what they feel anxious about. It's easier for you to support them if they have a particular concern.
- ✚ Reassure them it's OK to have these worries and praise them for sharing them with you.

Key ways you can support your child

Speaking positively about school and learning can reduce feelings of anxiety in children. Worries, anxious thoughts or anxiety can happen if your child feels out of control. It helps to find things they can control and start from there.

Ask what they will miss from being at home. Are they worried they won't get to spend as much time with you? Reassure them and continue to make time for this once school goes back.

Talk to the teacher about any concerns so they're better prepared to support your child.

You could also try to help children feel prepared and develop strategies to cope with feelings of anxiety by:

- ✚ Familiarising them with their new school or classroom. Let them try on their uniform or choose what they will wear on their first day. Practice the route to school at the time you will usually need to leave, this will help them with a sense of "being ready" and walking or travelling is often the transition from home to school. Read stories about school and "play" school so they can practise things they'll need to learn, such as packing their bag.
- ✚ Helping them set goals. Encourage them to identify the things they can already do to get settled in their classroom, then set small goals for what they can do next. For example, "I can say goodbye without getting upset when my mum leaves. This term, instead of mum walking me into the classroom, I will wave through the window."
- ✚ Developing some "calming" supports. Ask what has helped them before when they had worries. They could practise relaxation breathing, have quiet bedtime activities, practise

“brave statements” such as “I might feel a little worried, but I know the teacher will be there if I need help,” or bring a special item from home.

- ✚ Ensuring they can unwind after school. Some of the emotions your child has held inside all day may spill over when they return home. Consider calming activities, spaces or supports your child may need to process their emotions and sensory overwhelm. Unpack their school bag with them, this signals the end of the school day and packing for the next day prepares them and you and, occasionally avoids any last minute surprises!
- ✚ Be positive when dropping off your child, even if you’re not feeling your best. If you can, hide any worries as your child will pick up on these.
- ✚ There are more tips below, if your child is feeling more nervous or anxious.
- ✚ All children are different, you know your children better than anyone, what works for one may not work for another, try to be flexible in your approach.
- ✚ Finally, this time of year is also a change of routine for you, you may be going back to work, you may have worked through the summer holidays, either way try to do some preparation that will help you feel ready too. Check the school website for any new information, check when the schools are planned to be shut for In-service days, are there any events already listed that you need to ask for time off from your employment, have you given yourself enough time in the morning to get ready. Doing as much as you can the night before helps but sometimes even the best laid plans don’t work! When this happens Be Kind to yourself, tomorrow is another day!

Back To School Anxiety

5 TIPS FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

1 Start with the BASICS

- ensure healthy eating habits
- begin practicing bedtime routines



2 Listen to your child

- empathize and normalize their feelings/fears
- ASK, "What worries you?"

3 Role-play AND Problem solve

- DON'T say "you'll be fine!" or "don't worry!"
- DO practice scenarios and model appropriate responses



4 FOCUS ON THE POSITIVES

- ask what THREE things they're looking forward to
- go back to school shopping with them and let them choose their supplies!
- Buy their FAV snacks



5 MODEL confidence AND comfort

- say goodbye JUST ONCE to them
- be cheerful but FIRM!



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Other sources of support

You can also read [advice on separation anxiety](#) from Parents for Action organisation UK that may be helpful.

Barnardos web site has lots of information and support related to anxiety children may have on returning to school [Back to school: Strategies for coping with feelings](#)

The Childrens commissioner web site has a dedicated section of resources to support parents with return to school which you can access [here](#)

Make a plan

Make sure your child is getting enough sleep. The sleep foundation has some useful advice on [Back to School Sleep Tips](#)

Plan for your new morning routine together, and try this in the run up to school starting.

- Make sure there's time for breakfast, getting dressed and getting out the door. Can you make the school routine more enjoyable? For example, try making a morning playlist.
- Pack school bags in advance. It's one less thing to think about on the day.
- Plan your journey. You can practise this with your child before the first day. Children who have to get to school by themselves might be particularly nervous.

Other considerations

Think ahead about what could cause issues to your child on their first day of school and speak to the school about these in advance, to make sure the first day goes as smoothly as possible.

- ✚ Do they have specific dietary requirements?
- ✚ Will they need more time to get to their classroom, if they're navigating a new school?
- ✚ Will it be helpful to have a buddy in the classroom to support them for the first few days?
- ✚ Use social stories to tell your child what a typical school day looks like and agree with school a nominated teacher they can go to, should they need help.
- ✚ After a long holiday, when children have been relaxed and out of a school routine, it's important to remind your child about the detailed expectations of school. This is especially important when transitioning to secondary school, when rules can change and there are more requirements in terms of behaviour, uniform, and specific stationery.
- ✚ Go through the do's and don'ts of the school's behaviour policy in a way that it doesn't make the child nervous to go to school.

Help your child look forward to school

Your child will also have things to look forward to. These might include:

- Seeing their friends again or making new friends
- Having renewed independence (taking themselves to and from school).
- Getting back into a routine
- Discuss fun memories you have of their teachers and little stories you have of them and their friends. This will ignite nice memories, help your child to get enthusiastic about going back and ease their back to school anxiety.

If your children have not have seen their friends during the break, it can help to arrange a meet up beforehand.

If your child doesn't want to go to school

If your child is refusing to go to school, it can be upsetting and frustrating for both of you.

What are the common causes of school refusal?

While the reasons children and young people don't want to go to school are many and varied, it's often because they feel worried or anxious about something happening at home or school.

Common reasons children don't want to go to school include:

- Separation anxiety – reception-aged children in particular may struggle being away from you for long periods of time, especially if they're used to being at home with you during the day.
- Friendship problems – falling out with friends or having arguments can be incredibly upsetting for children.
- Bullying – can severely affect a child's mental health and enjoyment of school.
- Starting a new school or changing schools – not knowing where to go for lunch or to the toilet, what the rules are, and having to make new friends can cause anxiety for many kids.
- Avoiding something – such as a certain lesson, getting changed in PE, a test or exam.
- Problems with teachers – there may be a particular teacher that your child is scared of or doesn't like.
- Academic issues – struggling with learning – or particular subjects such as maths or reading – can cause kids to worry and feel anxious. They may also be worried about what they have to catch up on if they've had a period of time off after illness.
- Events at home – if something big is happening at home, such as a family member becoming ill, conflict between parents or siblings, or the death of a pet, this could affect a child's willingness to go to school.

If your child doesn't want to go to school, there are a number of steps you can take to help.

Understand why your child doesn't want to go to school

Talk to your child

It's important to try and get to the bottom of why your child doesn't want to go to school. Ask them if anything's worrying them, or what it is about school that makes them not want to go.

Talk to them calmly, try not to shout or get angry as this can make them feel more anxious about going.

Don't make light of any issues, even if they seem trivial to you (such as worries about using the toilet or eating lunch). Instead validate them by saying, 'I see why that's upsetting', listen to their worries and how they feel, and think about how you can come up with some solutions.

If your child doesn't want to talk about it

Talking about why they don't want to go to school can be upsetting for some children and young people, especially if it's something they feel embarrassed about (such as being picked on) or think they'll get in trouble about (getting bad results in a test).

If your child doesn't want to talk, try the following:

Choose your timing carefully – if your child's worked up and upset, or in the middle of enjoying a game, they're probably not going to feel much like chatting. A good time to approach it is when they're relaxed, but not distracted. Many young children open up more at bedtime, or in the car.

Ask them about each part of the day – lessons, break time, lunchtime – and get them to rate them. This could help you find out more about what's causing the problem. For younger children, try getting them to point at sad or happy faces instead of giving ratings.

Keep a diary of when they refuse to go to school – see if it's worse on particular days and try and work out why that could be.

Talk to your child's school – ask their teachers if they've noticed your child is more upset at certain times of the day, struggles in some subjects or has fallen out with friends, to help you work out what the problem is

Think if anything has changed at home – that could be upsetting your child. For example, if a pet's ill they may want to stay at home to spend time with them, or if you and your partner are arguing they might want to stay with you to protect you.

Help your child cope with their worries about school

Once you've discovered why your child is refusing to go to school, try to come up with solutions together to help resolve the issues.

Discuss any changes you could make at home or school to help them feel less worried – would they feel better if you dropped them off rather than going on the bus, for example? Do they need you to help more with their homework?

Talk to the school – explain the issues and see what they can suggest to help make things better.

Visit the GP – if your child constantly complains of feeling ill, take them to the GP to ensure their school refusal isn't down to an underlying medical issue. Headaches and feeling sick can also be caused by worry and anxiety so teach your child coping strategies, such as basic breathing techniques and mindfulness activities to help them feel calmer.

Have a good bedtime routine – getting plenty of sleep and having a regular bedtime will mean children are less tired and will feel less irritable or anxious in the morning. Being well-rested can help worries seem less of an issue.

Have a morning routine – following a routine in the morning will help them feel more settled and less stressed about running late or forgetting things for school. Praise them for each thing they do, such as getting dressed, brushing their teeth etc.

Have a worry journal or box – give kids a worry journal or box where they can write down any worries or anxious thoughts. You can set aside a certain time each day to go through them. Kids can often feel better just for writing them down.

Work with your child's school

Working with your child's school or teacher is one of the best ways to deal with school refusal. Your child may not want you to speak to the school but reassure them that no one else in their class needs to know.

Here's how the school can help:

Talk to the school early – this can help you nip things in the bud before your child develops a phobia or complete aversion to school.

Explain to the teacher what's happening – arrange a meeting to talk through your child's worries and ask the teacher for their opinions. They may have some ideas; there could be an undiagnosed learning or behavioural issue for example, or your child may benefit from extra homework, help in a certain subject, having a buddy system or someone specific they can talk to about any issues. You might find it helpful to take someone with you for support and to write down everything you want to mention before you go.

Write down any action points – after your meeting, write down how the school has said they'll support your child and any actions you can take at home. Email it to the school so you have a record and you can both stick to it.

Look at the school's anti-bullying policy – if your child is being bullied, ask to see the school's anti-bullying policy (it's often on their website) so you know how they'll support your child and what actions they should take.

Keep in regular contact – keep in regular contact with your child's teacher so you can discuss how things are working out. You might be able to write to each other in your child's homework diary, for example.

If it's been going on a long time – if your child has missed a lot of school or is really struggling, the school might also be able to suggest additional support groups, counselling or local services that can help and will develop an attendance action plan to support your child/young person to attend school more regularly. Every school has an attendance Lead who you can also speak to for support.

You can also get further advice from Swindon Attendance Team through the [link here](#)

If your child is still extremely anxious, there is further [advice for when your child is refusing to go to school](#) from parentaction.org.uk