

EVERY DAY COUNTS

ANXIETY ABOUT GOING TO SCHOOL

Going to school is usually an exciting and enjoyable event for children and adolescents.

However, most children are occasionally reluctant to go to school or have some anxiety about activities like school camp; it is also normal that at some stage in life most of us will feel anxious when faced with a difficult situation.

Anxiety becomes a problem when it is persistent and prevents a person from enjoying normal life experiences for a long period of time.

You can help your child to cope with anxiety in effective ways and, in doing so, help them develop self-confidence and resilience.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CHILD HAS ANXIETY?

Signs of anxiety include:

- Having lots of worries and a strong need for reassurance
- Psychosomatic symptoms which occur before school (e.g. nausea, stomach aches, headaches or shortness of breath). These symptoms will reduce when the threat (fear of going to school) is removed
- Crying, being clingy or fidgeting when nervous
- Sleep problems such as difficulty falling asleep, nightmares or trouble sleeping alone
- Fear and avoidance of a range of different issues and situations.

WHY ARE SOME CHILDREN ANXIOUS ABOUT GOING TO SCHOOL?

Anxiety may affect children at any age. The causes of anxiety may be different for young children than for teenagers:

- Separation anxiety (being afraid to be away from parents)
- Problems at school such as:
- Being bullied and/or cyberbullied
- Learning difficulties
- Social isolation, not fitting in, friendship conflicts
- Feeling lost at school
- Fear of getting into trouble
- Not getting along with a teacher
- New situations like the first day in a new class or the first day in a new school
- Failure – worry their schoolwork will be too hard, they won't be able to keep up, or they won't know the correct answer when called on in class
- Fear of losing a parent. They may think something bad will happen to a parent due to:
- A parent being ill
- Family problems and fighting
- Parents separating
- Knowing another child who has lost a parent or whose family has broken up

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

It is important not to dismiss your child's anxiety but to help them see that the situations they are worried about may not be as bad as they think.

- **Remain calm:** you will be better placed to make them feel more confident. Try not to let your child see that you are worried or frustrated
- **Listen to your child:** encourage him/her to share their feelings and fears
- **Don't dismiss your child's feelings:** everyone feels afraid sometimes and your child might perceive this as you not understanding or not caring about their concerns
- **Talk it through:** discuss various scenarios, possible outcomes and ways to handle situations to help your child develop problem solving strategies

- **Let them have a go:** avoid taking over or giving your child the impression you will fight their battles for them. Some children with anxiety are happy for others to do things for them and if you take over, it might stop them learning how to cope for themselves. It also reinforces a perception that they are helpless and that someone will rescue them
- **Remind your child:** everyone makes mistakes and that this is where the best learning comes from
- **Be punctual:** Avoid being late when picking up or dropping off your child up from school
- **Problem solve:** with your child about what is causing the anxiety. For instance, if your child has problems walking through the front gate, arrange for them to meet a friend or use another entrance. If they find socialising in the yard before school starts a source of anxiety, arrange for them to arrive just before the bell.
- **Encourage & reassure:** even if they will be late encourage your child to go to school; reassure them that you will contact the school to explain
- **See the GP:** arrange for a visit to the GP if your child reports persistent physical complaints
- **Be consistent:** have a clear agreement between parents (even if separated) that school attendance is not optional and communicate this in a clear and calm manner to your child
- **Reward:** provide rewards for appropriate behaviour and avoid unintentionally rewarding school avoidance
- **Be clear:** be clear with instructions and requests and consistent with consequences
- **Be involved:** if possible, be active in your child's school through things like the school council or the canteen
- **Support:** model skills for becoming more independent and how to manage appointments, multiple homework tasks and competing demands
- **Seek assistance:** there is assistance and support available. The sooner you talk to your child's school about concerns, the better.
- **Get support:** for yourself if things are feeling overwhelming and distressing

SCHOOL REFUSAL

School refusing children experience significant emotional distress not only when going to school but also at the thought of going to school; they may be absent from school for weeks or even months at a time. School refusal differs from truancy as children generally stay home with the knowledge of the parents and despite their best efforts to encourage their child to go to school.

School refusal can be very distressing for parents who can find it very difficult to manage and address; it can cause conflict in the home and disrupt routines. Identifying the cause of school refusal can be difficult and there may be a number of factors that contribute to it. Early intervention is essential as prolonged absences from school can greatly impact a child's social and emotional development, academic achievement and vocational opportunities.

FURTHER ASSISTANCE

Sometimes you may need assistance from professionals who can help anxious children. Discuss your concerns with relevant teachers or wellbeing staff at your child's school. They can help address any school-based issues, refer your child to school counselling services and make recommendations about professional support.

Alternatively, you could seek support from your GP who can assist with a referral to mental health professional such as a psychologist, psychiatrist or therapist. They can help your child overcome their anxiety using mindfulness, improving self-confidence and self-esteem and helping children change the way they think about difficult situations.

TOP ATTENDANCE TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Schools want to work in partnership with parents – act early if you have any concerns by contacting your child's school and asking for advice and support
- Remember that every day counts
- There is no safe number of days for missing school – each day a student misses puts them behind, and can affect their educational outcomes and their social connectedness
- Talk positively about school and the importance of attending every day

- Open and prompt communication with your child's school about all absences is a good idea
- Avoid making routine medical and dental appointments during the school day or planning family holidays during the term
- Seek help from your school if you are concerned about your child's attendance and wellbeing. Schools want to work in partnership with parents to support student attendance and wellbeing.

USEFUL WEBSITES/CONTACTS

Kids Matter - www.kidsmatter.edu.au

Youth Beyond Blue - www.youthbeyondblue.com.au

Headspace - www.headspace.org.au

Reach Out – www.reachout.com

Raising Children Network - www.raisingchildren.net.au

Kids helpline - 1800 55 1800 24 hours a day, 7 days a week or [web counselling](#)

Parentline – 1300 30 1300 (8am to 10pm seven days a week) & [web counselling](#) Tuesdays and Thursdays between 11am and 2pm