

Anxiety and the Return to School

The return to school following the COVID-19 pandemic is going to elicit a multitude of emotions for both parents and young people. Whilst some young people will be excited to get back in the classroom and re-connect with teachers and friends, others may be nervous or worried about their return. Similarly, as parents and carers you too will likely be experiencing both positive and negative emotions about the re-starting of school and the implications that will have. The contents of this blog focuses on the very natural response of anxiety that some young people may experience when returning to the classroom.

What are the typical signs of anxiety in children and young people?

Many parents express that they don't know how to tell what their young person is feeling. This is common and it may be that the young person themselves does not know, or they could just be finding it hard to express their emotions, as these are skills young people are still learning.

One of the important things to notice, is a change in your child's behaviour. ***A change in behaviour*** may signal that something is going on for them, and when you notice this it presents an opportunity to explore what this may be. For example, a young person who is normally very sociable with their family suddenly spending all their time in their room. It is also quite common for young people to experience changes in their ***sleep***. Often worries and anxiety can prevent young people from getting to sleep or can result in waking up frequently throughout the night, causing them to be more tired in the day. Linked to this, many people can experience ***physiological changes*** in response to anxiety. These physiological changes may include; feeling nauseous, having stomach aches, getting hot and sweaty, shaking, muscle tension, breathing rapidly, experiencing a faster heartbeat. These changes are the result of our bodies going into 'fight or flight mode' when the brain detects potential danger. Even though this physical response is not needed, it is not harmful.

Commonly, people notice ***worries or negative thoughts*** when they are anxious. When young people have these worries, they may not always be obvious, but you may notice they are distracted or seem to be thinking a lot to themselves. If the young person can verbalise their worries, these will often take the form of 'what if' statements such as 'what if something bad happens?' or 'what if I can't keep up with the work'.

It is also very natural for people to ***avoid*** the things they are worried about. This makes sense when we think about physical threats. For example, if you are anxious about crossing a river because it is full of crocodiles, you may avoid this and find an alternative route; this serves to keep you safe. However, avoiding can be unhelpful when there is no physical threat and the avoidance actually increases the anxiety in the long term, as you never get the opportunity to challenge the fears or build confidence in managing them. If a young person is worried about their return to school, they may avoid reminders of school, any preparation involved for the return to school, or even their school peers.

What may my child be worrying about?

There could be a number of different reasons for why a young person may be worried about the return to school, and it is important to explore the different reasons your child may have. It may be what they are worried about is different to what you yourself may be worried about their return to school. Some of the themes which anxiety may be around are:

- ❖ Physical safety and illness
- ❖ Friendships
- ❖ School set up and changes
- ❖ Academic pressures and feeling behind
- ❖ Uncertainty

So what can I do as a parent to help manage my child's anxiety on their return to school?

It is helpful to be as *proactive* as possible with anxiety. This means trying to *check in* with your child on a regular basis and identifying worries and concerns when they come up.

Remember, young people may not always be able to articulate what they are experiencing and often it can be helpful to take a *curious stance* with your young person and say out loud what you wonder may be going on with them. These interactions will often allow a connection with your child and make them feel heard and listened to.

Once that connection is established, and their hyperarousal has reduced, there are a number of *strategies* you can use to try and help manage your child's anxiety. These will need to be tailored to your young person, but may include breathing techniques, tension releasing exercises, or present moment awareness. There are many websites and resources which provide more information on techniques to help manage anxiety and worry such as <https://www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/> and <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/>

Is it okay to just keep reassuring my child if they are feeling anxious? What about letting them stay off if they don't want to go into school?

We know that excessive reassurance seeking and avoiding school will both likely increase the anxiety over time, so these are two really important elements to address.

Giving reassurance to your child is natural and it's okay to give this reassurance sometimes. However, if it's an ongoing anxiety then reassurance is not usually effective in the long term, so it is important to explore other ways to respond to your child. This may be helping them problem solve and helping them to explore and *learn by themselves* with support.

It can be really tough for parents when children do not feel that can go into school and it can create added stress and anxiety for everyone. When this happens, it can be important to strike a balance between being *supportive and understanding*, whilst also *enabling, encouraging and placing boundaries* around your child making gradual steps towards returning to school. It can be helpful to have a conversation about what are the barriers your child has about going to school, and how together you can work on those barriers. Also establishing your child's *motivators* to go back can be useful. This motivator can be internal

(feeling good about themselves) or external (something to look forward to like a treat or reward).

If a young person is consistently avoiding to go to school due to anxiety or they have SEND needs which are impacting their ability to attend, you may wish to get extra support and advice from the school and other agencies. Suffolk County Council have resources which may be useful, such as <https://www.suffolksendiass.co.uk/education/sen-support/school-anxiety>.

How may school be able to help?

If your child is anxious about the prospect of school, it can be helpful for schools and families to ***communicate and work together***.

Schools may be able to offer a range of things to help support you and your child with the return to school. If your child has questions about what school may look like on the return then this is something you can ask school to share. They may also be able to think through with you how they can support your young person, particularly in the first few days. This could include having a member of staff they know and trust to touch base with them on the first day back. It may include being able to have some time at break or lunch to debrief on how the day is going and be supporting with calming strategies. It may be that school can help plan how to gradually ease your child into the school routine again.

It is helpful to get this conversation with school started as soon as possible. Also, this may be a good opportunity to check in with your child's school about what emotional support they can offer and where your child can go if they are really struggling.

But how am I meant to manage my child's anxiety when I am stressed and anxious about it myself?

It's really important to acknowledge that as parents and carers you will have your own emotions about the return to school, and be facing return to work as well.

One of the most important things is to be ***kind to yourself***, parents are not immune from finding things difficult and there will be many parents out there going through similar emotions to you. Having some ***time to talk*** about your own worries and stressors with other adults or parents can be very beneficial. Also, planning in time to allow rest and ***self-care*** can be hugely important, but is often overlooked. Once you have been able to share and discuss your concerns, and gained some support for you, you will find it is easier to manage your child's worries. Suffolk Parent And Carers Together (PACT) offer support and resources for parents <https://www.parentsandcarerstogether.co.uk/about>.