



## **Anxiety and School Phobia/Refusal**

### **– Advice for caregivers, professionals, and schools**

Written by a psychotherapeutic counsellor who has also worked as a TA in a special school and has personal experience.

Free for caregivers, professionals and schools to use.

### **ANXIETY BASICS**

Anxiety is a normal human reaction to stress and it actually serves a purpose. When we're stressed, our body produces more adrenaline, allowing us to think and move faster and to speed up our reactions. In our caveman days, a good dose of adrenaline when faced with a sabre-toothed tiger, would certainly help deciding that this is a dangerous animal and running away very fast would be a great idea. This is great in the short term and when there's something we can actually do but it becomes a problem when the anxiety us long term and it seems there is nothing that helps. For some people, especially if they've not experienced much stress or anxiety before, the symptoms can be very distressing and can feel like something is seriously wrong. Symptoms include:

- Palpitations/racing heart
- Feeling hot
- Feeling nauseous
- Shortness of breath
- Light-headedness/dizziness
- Struggling to concentrate
- Sleep problems
- Being more emotional
- Stomach aches
- Headaches or backache
- Sweating
- Aggression

Experiencing a few of those symptoms together is going to make you feel pretty rubbish and it can be a surprise to find that they're caused by anxiety, when you feel them very physically.

Adults are regularly referred for counselling or given medication to help with anxiety and/or advised to take up exercise, meditation and sometimes given breathing or muscle

relaxation techniques. Now adults have usually encountered a fair amount of stress and anxiety in their lifetime and will have usually, without realising it, have developed some coping strategies, talking to friends or family, having a glass of wine (maybe 2!), etc. When these don't work, we head to our doctors.

Now imagine you're a child. You have no idea why you're experiencing these symptoms, you have no idea how to cope with them. It can be frightening and overwhelming enough for an adult or who can call someone, articulate what they're feeling, make a doctor's appointment, search for it online etc. A child has no control in this situation.

There can be many different reasons why a child may start to resist going to school. It can happen gradually, or it can happen overnight. The reason can be obvious, or it can baffle both caregivers and school staff but when a child is frightened, adults must pay attention.

There is still relatively little research on the rise in school phobia or it's causes but there are things you can do to help.

- Keep calm. Easier said than done sometimes when you have a child who appears to be defiant or they're upset and frightened but as adults, we have to model that there is nothing to be afraid of right in that moment and it's very hard to have a conversation or reason with someone who is scared. Use a slow, quiet voice and keep talking to a minimum, encourage slow, deep breaths. Distraction and humour can be good tools once the initial anxiety has calmed a little but used too early on, this can cause a child to not feel believed and discourage them talking to anyone.
- Ask the child where in the body they feel their worry. If they can, ask them to tell you what that part of their body would tell you if it could talk and what they would say in response. A child can feel almost separate from their body when they feel out of control and this helps to build a connection again between the mind and body.
- Act at the first sign of anxiety around school. If a child expresses being unhappy or worried about anything related to school, ask to meet the school teacher and discuss any concerns. Try to explore what it is that's causing the anxiety with the child. Sometimes asking children to write their worries down or draw them is more successful.
- Don't talk in hushed voices or whispers or allow others to, about your child. It's normal to want to protect them and not make them feel awkward but it can cause more anxiety if a child doesn't know what's being said but knows they're being talked about.
- Make an appointment for the child at their doctors to rule out anything physical. This can also help reassure a child that nothing is physically wrong, but it also helps to have a record of concerns over anxiety.
- The same techniques above for adults are also good for children (except the wine!).
- Break down what they need to do in small chunks so that it doesn't seem so overwhelming and reward every small step they make towards becoming calmer and going to school.

## REFUSAL / PHOBIA

If the anxiety has escalated, a child can start to refuse to go to school altogether. This can be blatant refusal or by feigning illness or finding reasons and excuses not to go. It's very important at this point that serious action is taken, and parents and schools need to work together. The quicker any issues are resolved and the more seriously a child feels they are being taken, the easier it usually is to get them back into school. A diagnosis of anxiety from a GP can be very helpful and at this point, often a referral to CAMHS from the GP or the school is wise. Waiting lists are long and if you reach complete refusal, that's a long time for a child to be out of school. The longer they're out of school, the harder it is to get them back. After all, if you don't need the appointment by the time it rolls around, someone else will. Also, a diagnosis of anxiety means your child is entitled to more help as anxiety is a disability under the equality act 2010. If a child has a SEN, including a disability such as anxiety, a school MUST make their 'best endeavours' to identify and secure appropriate support. A support plan needs to be put in place the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and the child needs to be added to the SEN register. More information can be found here: <https://www.ipsea.org.uk/what-you-need-to-know/school-duties>

It is important to note however, that it is recognised how much strain caregivers are under by this point. Usually there has been a gradual build-up and a parent has already spent time with a child complaining of illness or becoming upset. They have often already missed a lot of work or even had to give up work (to which I can personally attest to). It usually starts on a Sunday evening, way before ever getting anywhere near school and can cause lost sleep, disagreements on how it should be handled between caregivers, issues at work and with siblings etc. The mix of guilt for the child, pressure from schools and heavy-handed threats of fines and prosecution does nothing to ease the strain on these families and is not evidence based. Relationships between caregivers and schools can start to break down as their priorities diverge at this point when the focus needs to be on working together in the best interests of the child. I have not yet met a parent that doesn't desperately want their child in school, home educating aside. There is a mammoth gap between not making an effort to ensure your child attends school and battling with an anxious child every day. Many caregivers are in fact feeling forced into home-educating, often at great personal, emotional and financial expense.

Sadly, I am witnessing more and more caregivers experiencing mental health problems themselves as a result, even post-traumatic stress disorder. Schools can go a long way in supporting these caregivers by knowing the law, using the appropriate guidelines, making sure appropriate support is put in place as soon as possible and being understanding and aware of the stress this situation causes.

So how do you get a child to go back to school? This will depend on a number of factors:

- What caused the anxiety in the first place?
- Whether that is a real or perceived issue and whether those issues have been addressed
- Whether the child has other SEN and their needs are being met.

All efforts should be made to resolve any of these issues but sometimes there is no identifiable cause, or a child is unable to articulate what it is.

## WHAT DOES AND DOESN'T WORK?

The number one rule of getting your child to go back to school is: **DO NOT FORCE THEM**. If a child has been 'fine' at school previously, it can be very difficult to deal with initially. It seems logical that if you just make them go, they'll get over it, they're just being silly etc. This is often where the opportunity to nip refusal/phobia in the bud is missed and the consequences can be a lot more serious and difficult to overcome in the long term. Usually by the time school refusal starts, a child's anxieties have been developing for some time and on reflection, parents often realise there were signs.

Below are the two most common approaches to school phobia/refusal:

## FLOODING

There is this deeply concerning belief that forcing a child to 'face their fear' is the answer. I have personally sat across for a head of the pastoral team of my child's school and been told that after a CAMHS run course on anxiety, she had been told the best thing you can do is force them to school, despite knowing my qualifications. This comes from the idea of 'flooding', where someone is exposed to their fear for an extended amount of time, in order for the fear to reach a peak, for the person to become exhausted and still be in that environment once they're 'calm' again. Sounds very traumatic doesn't it? So of course, there are a number of issues with this.

- It is not suitable for some phobias
- It needs to be carried out by a qualified therapist
- It is not very successful
- It can make it worse and more worryingly, cause other severe mental health problems.

Adults who have this therapy at least make that decision, in full knowledge of what they're about to experience and few choose this option. When adults do this to children with anxiety, it can reinforce their fear, lose trust in those around them and make going back to school an almost impossible task. As adults, were we to have someone treat us like this

against our will, the perpetrator of such behaviour would be guilty of a number of crimes. Research is clear on this approach now and it has inadvertently been being used to get children back into school for many years. Without a qualified therapist doing extensive work with a child before trying flooding, it is dangerous and should be avoided at all costs otherwise.

## DESENSITISATION

Desensitisation is based on the idea that a person is gradually exposed to their fear. This is an effective technique, but it is widely misunderstood and wrongly interpreted. Again, this would ideally be carried out by a qualified therapist but even when steps such as a reduced timetable are introduced by a school and some compromise is made, they often fail. Why? Because for desensitisation to work, the person with the phobia **HAS TO BE IN CONTROL**. This seems counterintuitive to adults, but the research is clear. Very small, incremental steps are made, sometimes even starting with just putting uniform on on the first day and not even leaving the house. Every child is unique and they should be the ones to lead how much they can do each day, every other day etc. The longer a child has been out of school or the more serious the reasons, the longer it can take and the smaller the steps often need to be. Although time-consuming, this allows a child to build in confidence again, learnt to recognise and manage their anxiety and is far more successful.

## FURTHER ADVICE

Schools are concerned with attendance, but this is nonsensical when the flooding approach leads to far more time off over an educational lifetime. Research is now showing that for pupils, attendance is not the key factor is academic success at school. As an adult, can you concentrate when you are worried, concerned or stressed?

Anxiety is not just a few nerves or being a bit worried and it needs to be taken very seriously by all involved to prevent long-term mental health problems. By law, as mentioned above, schools **MUST** identify and support children with SEN. There is also statutory guidance to schools from the Department for Education on supporting pupils with medical health needs and this includes anxiety and can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions--3>

Getting the child back into school is what parents and schools want and often, the child themselves wants to be in school but their anxiety is debilitating and preventing that, rather than a wilful refusal to engage or comply. If parents and schools come together quickly to explore a child's anxieties, take them seriously and act on them, putting all possible support in place and allow the child to ease themselves back in to school, the child will be back in education all the quicker. A few tips for schools that may assist this are:

- The most important is to make sure that every member of staff is fully aware of the child's difficulties, what makes it worse and what to avoid and to make sure that during any transition back into school, this is adhered to. Often reintegration's fail when there is inconsistency, and someone wasn't made aware of a child's needs.
- Having a designated 'safe' person. This should be someone the child chooses, a TA, pastoral team member etc., that the child trusts and has a rapport with. If they feel they have someone to go to other than at home, they're more likely to feel able to go and stay at school.
- A 'safe place'. Often children with anxiety like to have somewhere to escape to if they feel overwhelmed. This can be the office of someone they trust, a library etc.
- Give children a special card that they can show a teacher that allows them to leave a classroom unquestioned. There should be a plan in place for where they go when they need to use it, but this also means that they don't feel trapped in a class for an hour.
- A buddy system in school. Using someone appropriate who is older or who has experienced something similar and can offer support to a child is a great way to show that it can get easier.
- Give the child a 'special' role/job or appeal to their interests, ask them to help organise something etc., that gives them motivation and helps them associate school with something positive.
- Arrange for the child to meet staff members that they may be more cautious around outside of normal school hours. Allowing anxious children to see teachers in a more relaxed way and allowing them to feel they know them more personally, helps them to experience teachers as individuals and children often feel more relaxed with that added element of security.
- Allow the child to devise a timetable that builds gradually. This may start with just coming in for lunch for a week or for their favourite lesson but as long as it gradually builds at a child's pace, progress is being made in the right direction.
- Lastly and by no means least, consider that there may be other SEN that is causing the anxiety. Often children are diagnosed with SEN's after being seen for anxiety.

## **PUPILS WITH OTHER SEN**

There is even less research on pupils with other SEN and school phobia/refusal. There is some pointing to group work with children with autism that incorporated desensitisation which was generally successful. An important point which is often overlooked is that behavioural difficulties in children with SEN is often due to anxiety. Schools and caregivers of children with SEN and anxiety need to make sure that they are both catered for in support plans and EHCP'S. Sometimes, the development or increase in anxiety is due to

needs not being met in school. If all the support a school can offer has been tried, it may be time to consider a different placement with more experience of dealing with anxiety and other SEN. Behavioural based settings are often not appropriate due to the unpredictable nature of many of the pupils, so these should be avoided and calm, nurturing environment be found.

## **References**

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