

Anxiety and School Avoidance

A guide for parents and carers



STOCKPORT
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

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This booklet has been adapted for Stockport from resources developed by the West Sussex Education Psychology Service. Stockport Family and Stockport Education Psychology Service are grateful to the West Sussex team for allowing us to use their resources.



Anxiety – an overview

We all need some degree of stress to keep us functioning, but some children and young people experience higher than usual levels of anxiety, which can have a serious impact on their lives.

Sometimes, children experience these higher than usual levels of stress in relation to school attendance, which can lead to school avoidance and non-attendance.

Anxiety is one of the most common causes of distress in children and young people. Research shows us that levels of anxiety in children have risen over the last ten years and as many as six children in the average class of thirty may be struggling with low wellbeing and high anxiety levels.

Anxiety is not only common, but also extremely debilitating. If you are the carer of a child or young person who experiences anxiety you will know the impact an anxiety problem can have on the whole family's life.

Anxiety can affect us all in very different ways. Experiences of anxiety can vary greatly from person to person and no two people have precisely the same experience. Anxiety is a completely normal emotion - we all experience it from time to time. However, when a person is suffering with an anxiety disorder, the feeling of anxiety is far more intense and long lasting.

As a parent, you are well placed to notice the signs that may identify anxiety, especially school-related anxiety.

Some common signs to look for can include:

- Fearfulness, anxiety, tantrums or expression of negative feelings, when faced with the prospect of attending school.
- They may complain that they have abdominal pain, a headache or sore throat, often with no signs of actual physical illness.
- Anxiety symptoms that include a racing heart, shaking, sweating, difficulty breathing, butterflies in the tummy or nausea, pins and needles.

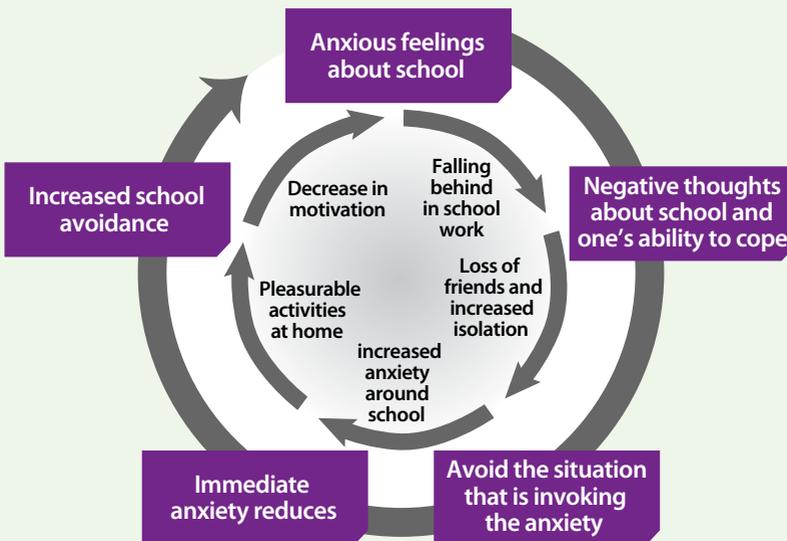


- Some parents have told us that their child showed signs such as not wanting to socialise with friends or family, and increasingly withdrawing to their bedroom
- There may be a change in eating habits
- Sometimes all of this can be happening while the child is still attending school, where he or she may appear well behaved and even a model student

The symptoms are typically worse on weekday mornings and absent at weekends and school holidays.

Not all anxious children and young people will display the symptoms described above. Some hide their anxiety for fear of someone finding out that they are anxious, with others showing no signs of anxiety at all, keeping all their feelings inside.

If your child is worried about going to school, it is very important to try to help him or her overcome these difficulties as soon as possible. Absences mean that children miss out on learning and friendships, making it even more difficult when they come back to school. The longer the problem goes unaddressed, the harder it can be to resolve.



Helping Your Child to Overcome their Anxiety – the Stepladder Approach

The stepladder approach for the treatment of anxiety is medically known as graded exposure. It is one of the 'behavioural' components of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and it is useful to know about when encouraging your child to address their fears.

This treatment approach can be applied to many common childhood anxieties such as the fear of separation, fear of social situations or fear of sleeping alone. It can be used to help anxiety in children (and adults) of all ages.

To make a start, picture a simple stepladder with several rungs. Decide on the final goal (this task becomes the top of the ladder), then determine what an easy starting point might be (this becomes your first step). Next, work out what tasks might serve as intermediate steps with each situation a little bit more challenging than the last as you get closer to the top of the ladder.

When planning your child's stepladder, it's important that the leap between steps isn't too daunting. If the jump from one step to the next seems too great, consider how you might break it up into a few smaller steps by creating variations based on what it is your child does, how long for, where they try it or who they're with.

This step-by-step approach allows your child to practise coping with their anxiety in manageable doses. In this way, your child also experiences successes along the way which builds up their confidence and sense of mastery.



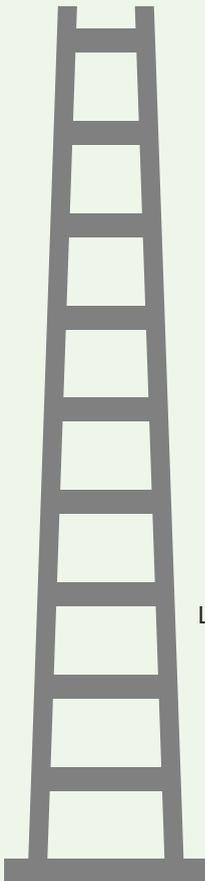
Here are a few hints to improve your chances of success:

- 1** Let your child decide what tasks they add to their ladder. If you do need to help with this, make a few suggestions from which your child can choose. As much as possible, your child needs to feel like they're an active, motivated participant in this process as this makes it more likely that they'll stick with it.
- 2** Teach your child some strategies for managing their anxiety before you start. An example might be slow relaxed breathing, or a simple message to think about, for example, "I'm safe and this worried feeling will go away". It's a good idea to plan and practise these strategies with your child before starting so that they know what to do as soon as they start to feel anxious.
- 3** Encourage your child to try to stay in the situation until their anxiety has passed. Anxious feelings don't last forever. In fact, our bodies can only maintain high levels of anxiety for a matter of minutes (rather than hours) but if your child always flees while they're still anxious, they might never learn this.
- 4** Wait until your child has mastered one step on their ladder before moving onto the next. This might take one attempt or it might take ten before a step is no longer considered anxiety provoking. It's always best to work at your child's pace.
- 5** Reward success. This doesn't need to be something expensive or chocolate-coated... Praise, letting your child know how proud you are, suggesting they call a grandparent/close adult to share news of their success or spending some special time together are all great ways to reward your child.
- 6** Be a good role-model. Children learn so much from us. If they watch us panic each time a dog approaches, they'll soon be doing the same. Consider what you say and how you behave when you become anxious. Sometimes we have to be as brave as we'd like our children to be!

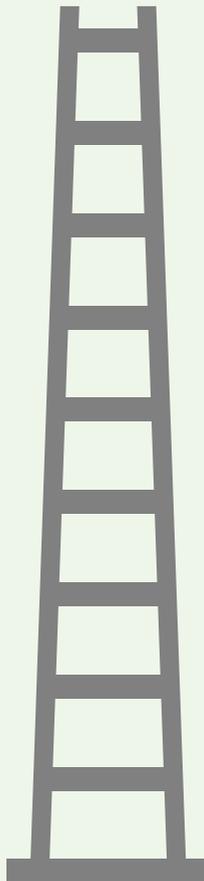


Create your own anxiety stepladder

Use the example below to help create your own anxiety stepladder. This example suggests steps you could take if you were afraid of spiders. Work with your child to come up with steps that could help to tackle their school anxiety.



- STEP NINE**
Let a spider crawl on your hand
- STEP EIGHT**
Let a spider crawl on your sleeve
- STEP SEVEN**
Let a spider crawl on your trousers
- STEP SIX**
Let a spider crawl on your shoe
- STEP FIVE**
Let a spider crawl on your desk
- STEP FOUR**
Hold the box with the spider
- STEP THREE**
Look at a real spider in a closed box
- STEP TWO**
Look at a photo of a spider
- STEP ONE**
Think about a spider



- STEP NINE**
-
- STEP EIGHT**
-
- STEP SEVEN**
-
- STEP SIX**
-
- STEP FIVE**
-
- STEP FOUR**
-
- STEP THREE**
-
- STEP TWO**
-
- STEP ONE**
-



Coping with an anxiety attack

In the middle of an anxiety attack it can feel as if you can't breathe, are going to pass out or have a heart attack. If your child experiences severe anxiety, they can get exactly the same feelings and symptoms as adults. They may look pale or clammy, cry, shake and / or say they are going to be sick or pass out.

However, when an anxiety attack happens, although they may look ill, they are actually OK. It is extremely rare for someone to pass out when anxious, because the anxious feelings raise their blood pressure. People pass out when their blood pressure falls, not when it rises. The feelings are very real, but they are feelings – and they will pass.

Remembering this and trying to stay calm will help you stay in control of the situation, and help you to manage your child's anxiety. If you feel confident that the feelings will pass, you can help your child understand this, too.



Skills for coping with an anxiety attack

If your child is experiencing symptoms of anxiety, as well as using the stepladder approach, you can encourage them to try one of the following techniques.

Try relaxing your body

1. Sit or lie somewhere quiet and comfortable
2. Stretch out your arms and make a fist, then relax
3. Push your legs out, wiggle your toes, and then relax
4. Shut your eyes tight and pull a scrunched-up face, and then relax

Try calm breathing

1. Take a slow breath in through your nose for about 4 seconds
2. Hold it for 1 or 2 seconds
3. Slowly let it out through your mouth for about 4 seconds
4. Wait 5–7 seconds before taking another breath
5. Repeat 5–10 times

Try visualisation

1. Close your eyes
2. Take slow deep breaths in and out
3. Think of your favourite place, maybe somewhere that you go on holiday
4. Focus on the place and picture yourself there
5. What can you see? What can you smell? What can you feel?



Tips and strategies for parents

- Severe anxiety symptoms typically last for 40 minutes. Help your child understand that they will pass. Talk again when they are calm. Explore ways to help your child relax.
- Do everything you can to step back from your own anxiety so you are better able to hold your child through theirs.
- If difficulties occur frequently in the morning and your child seems in distress, speak to the school and ask for arrangements to be made to allow for a slightly later arrival when he or she is feeling better and more able to cope.
- If your child is not attending school, keep to the same routine as if he/she were attending school. It is particularly important to keep to the usual getting up time and to put on and wear school uniform during the day.
- For absences of more than 10 days, ask the school to send home or email work for your child to complete.
- Refuse access to TV, computer games or other home entertainment until after the learning day is over. Do encourage your child to socialize with friends after school hours.
- Remember to measure progress in small steps.
- School anxiety is not uncommon. You are not on your own. There are professionals who can help you and it will get better with time.



What you can do to support your child

One of the most important ways you can support your child is to listen calmly and acknowledge that their fears are real to them. Remind them how important it is to attend school and reassure them that you and the school will work with them to make school a happier place for them.

Tell the school there is a problem as soon as possible and work in partnership with the school to address the issue. A plan should be made with the school to help your child. Towards the beginning of initiating the plan, your child may show more unhappiness and you should prepare yourself for this.

It is important that all adults both at home and school work together to agree a firm and consistent approach. Any concerns about the plan should not be shared with your child - a positive 'united front' is recommended.

It is likely that there may be difficulties putting the plan into action – try to anticipate these and problem solve in advance. Try to keep an optimistic approach: if your child fails to attend school on one day, start again the next day. It is also important to remember there is likely to be more difficulty after a school holiday, period of illness or after the weekend.

You may feel tempted to change schools, however research tells us that often difficulties will re-emerge in the new school and whenever possible it is usually better to try to resolve the issue in the current school.

Finally, as a parent, it can be really difficult to see your child unhappy. Make sure that you have someone to talk to, too, such as a friend, family member or health professional.



Talking to your child about their worries

Any child currently avoiding school is likely to become anxious when they are asked to talk about their difficulties or returning to school.

A good place to start is to acknowledge that it may be difficult, but that you would like to know what they think and feel. If they find it difficult to talk, you could ask them a specific question to help them start to sort through their fears and feelings. For example:

What three things are you most worried about? Or, what three things were you recently worried about?

It is also important to focus on positives: What are the three best things about school?

Sometimes children may find it hard to tell you face to face, perhaps you could ask them to write it down, email or text you. Some children also find it easier to draw how they are feeling.

What can you expect from school?

You can expect your child's school to:

- Listen carefully to you and your child. They should acknowledge the challenges faced both by your child and you as their parent.
- Maintain close contact with you and your child, even during extended periods of non-attendance. An agreed member of staff should be named as a link person.



- Work in partnership with you and your child to find out what difficulties your child is experiencing, find ways of making school a happier place and improve their attendance.
- Hold meetings to devise a plan in conjunction with you and your child. The plan should include what the next steps will be.
- Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, dealing with bullying or support with social relationships.
- Consider the support your child might require upon arrival at school. This might include meeting with a friend at a specific place and time, using a quiet space to settle before school starts, engaging in a preferred activity or being given a responsibility such as a monitor role.
- If difficulties persist, the school should consider requesting involvement from other professionals.
- The school should refer to the Stockport Anxiety Based School Avoidance Guidance Document.

When your child is feeling anxious, it can impact on you as a parent / carer and you may be feeling anxious too. Knowing what you can do and where you can find help will help reduce your anxiety.

If it is proving difficult to improve attendance, the school will be able to work with other professionals in Stockport who may be able to help. If a number of services become involved, the school may suggest an Early Help Assessment would be helpful to plan and coordinate the support.



Support services in Stockport:

- The School Nursing service – available to all young people in Stockport schools – ask your child’s school for details of the linked school nurse.
- Primary and Secondary Jigsaw are services for young people in mainstream schools who are experiencing school-related difficulties – ask your child’s school for a referral
www.behavioursupportservice.co.uk/topic/primary-jigsaw
www.pendleburycentre.org.uk/about-jigsaw/
- Educational Psychology Team – for assessment, advice and consultation – accessed via your child’s school
- Parents in Partnership Stockport – a parent-led charity supporting Stockport parents and carers whose children have additional needs – visit www.pipstockport.org for more information
- Living Life to the Full course (a supported CBT course run by Self Help Services) visit www.selfhelpservices.org.uk for more information on this and their other services
- Healthy Young Minds – a specialist mental health service for young people with severe and complex mental health needs – visit <https://healthyyoungminds pennine.nhs.uk> for more information
- Team Around the School - The ‘Team Around the School’ is a term used to describe some of the services that work together with schools to offer support to the children who attend, along with their families. They aim to coordinate services with and for children and families within the communities they live or are educated in, to identify the right support at the right time.



Useful Websites

The Stockport Local Offer: Details of Stockport services for children and young people with additional needs

www.sensupportstockport.uk

MindEd is a free learning resource about the mental health of children and young people

<https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk>

Mighty Moe - an anxiety workbook for children aged 5-11

<http://www.cw.bc.ca/library/pdf/pamphlets/Mighty%20Moe1.pdf>

Worksheets for children, parents and teachers on tackling anxiety

<https://www.anxietybc.com/parenting/worksheets>

Anxiety workbook for young people and adults

https://www.mcgill.ca/counselling/files/counselling/anxiety_moodjuice_self_help_guide.pdf

The MIND guide to anxiety and panic attacks – this details the different types of anxiety disorders and looks at treatment options

https://www.mind.org.uk/media/1892482/mind_anxiety_panic_web.pdf





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If you would like this information in an alternative format, please email communications@stockport.gov.uk

This booklet was produced by Stockport Family, part of Stockport Council.
For more information about the topics in this booklet, please email:
schoolwellbeing@stockport.gov.uk



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