

## School – no fear!

Márianna Csóti explains how you can help children overcome school phobia.

School phobia, often known as school refusal or school avoidance, is not a 'true' phobia. It is far more complex and can include a range of disorders including separation anxiety, agoraphobia and social phobia, although the child's anxiety is centred on the school environment. Some children with school phobia are depressed. Because it is complex there are no easy solutions for helping children overcome school phobia but by understanding what it is - and what it is not - and what teachers can do to help anxious children, the chances of a child's quick recovery are greatly improved. In this article I have used the term parents to encompass any adult carer.

### Causes and symptoms

Children suffering from school phobia are not attention seeking, spoilt or encouraged to stay at home by parents; they cannot 'snap out of it' or 'pull themselves together'. Symptoms anxious children experience include: crying, diarrhoea, feeling faint, frequent urination, headaches, hyperventilation, insomnia, nausea and vomiting, a rapid heart beat, shaking, sweating and stomach aches.

There are three main peaks for school phobia. The first is between ages 5 to 7, and is related to separation anxiety and can be triggered by many things including stress from starting school for the first time, being absent from school for a long time from ill health or a holiday, having a new baby in the family, suffering bereavement, having troubles at home or being bullied. The second peak predominates around ages 11 to 12, due to the anxieties associated with changing from a primary to a secondary school and is linked to social phobia but children may also have separation anxiety. The third peak for school phobia is between ages 14 to 16 and is linked to social phobia and other psychiatric disorders including depression and other phobias.

Sometimes children with school phobia are accused of truanting because they fail to attend regularly or, in extreme cases, fail to attend at all. But children who truant experience no anxiety about attending school and, when they 'bunk', don't tend to stay at home but are out all day whereas children with school phobia, when not in school, are relieved to be safely at home with their parents; it is only then their anxiety recedes. If a child produces a doctor's note confirming that he has a problem with anxiety he should not be accused of truanting or treated as though he were. It is important for children's emotional and mental health to be supported through their difficulties.

### How to help anxious children

It is often hard to understand why a child is so scared when we see the school environment as a safe, friendly place. So to help you empathise with a child who has school phobia, imagine your greatest fears and how you would feel if you had to face them day after day: with many people being unhelpful because they do not understand.

Also imagine how you would like to be treated when you have to face a fear. Children too will want to be treated in a sensitive and caring way and be given comfort, reassurance and some sort of acknowledgement for being brave enough to turn up to school, let alone stay there all day. Make children's time in class non-threatening, rewarding and reassuring – then anxious children might relax enough to take in some of the lesson. Schools that are highly evaluative and authoritarian increase children's stress and children under stress cannot learn effectively.

### Practical tips

If an anxious child is being bullied, the perpetrators of the bullying must be made to stop. No amount of reassurance and support will aid a child's recovery if bullying issues remain unresolved. It is also important to ask parents if anything has happened at home to cause their child stress – they may not make the connection so you could give some common reasons to see if any strike a chord. However, avoid apportioning blame as this is not helpful.

Some teachers have said to parents of children with school phobia: 'It's not a school problem but a problem at home' and, 'We haven't had anything like this in our school before.' Regard the child's difficulties as something that you, the child and her parents need to work together to resolve.

Involve parents in the strategies that the school is going to use – and perhaps suggest some that they could use themselves such as by keeping to the routine of a school day should their child be unable to attend school through anxiety. This would include giving the child school related tasks appropriate to age and ability and giving breaks at the same time of day the school gives breaks. This also helps re-integrate children after a long absence. Setting work so that the child can be kept abreast of what his peers are doing is also helpful.

If a child has been unable to attend school for some time allow a gradual return to school routine using graduated sensitisation – starting with, for example, standing in the school yard for 5 minutes before the bell and increasing time in school in 5 minute increments daily depending on how well the child copes with the stress.

Let the child be educated in the Special Unit in mainstream schools (if the school has one) if his difficulties are severe so that it acts as a halfway house between home and full mainstream schooling. As soon as he is ready he can be re-integrated into the classroom with his peers. The advantage of the Special Unit is that it more closely resembles the cosiness and security of children's homes. Only when she a child feels secure will he be calm enough to gain from being in school.

Anxious children often need multiple visits to the toilets. To reduce class disruption and attracting the notice of other children, allow an anxious child to visit the loo without having to ask permission each time.

- According to Anxiety Care, the number of children who dislike school and avoid it whenever possible, is probably more than 5 per cent of the school age population, but less than 1 per cent could be genuinely called school phobic. The Royal College of Psychiatrists suggest that between 5 and 10 per cent of children and young people have anxiety problems bad enough to affect their ability to live a normal life.
- A phobia is an irrational fear of something that is not necessarily harmful.
- A panic attack is an extreme response to an anxious event, usually starting following the onset of a phobia.
- Separation anxiety is a fear of being away from parents: children worry about something happening to their parents or to them. Signs of separation anxiety include: becoming nervous about being left alone, shadowing parents, not wanting to sleep alone, having difficulty getting to sleep, having larger than usual fears of being burgled or of something lurking in a dark corner of the bedroom, needing a light on at night, and showing signs of distress at parting from parents which can continue long after parents leave.
- Agoraphobia is a fear about being in places or situations where escape is not possible, or from where escape might be embarrassing, and in situations where help is not immediately available should children suddenly feel panicky.
- Social phobia is a fear of being judged and evaluated by others. In school, children will fear being the centre of attention; having to answer or read aloud in class; being involved in assemblies, performances, games lessons and sports day; being picked last for teams, and having others laughing at their mistakes or ineptitude.

Explain the a young child's problem to the others in the class in a basic and matter-of-fact way so that the other children become more understanding and tolerant to help the anxious child to be socially accepted. (Check with the child's parents first and ask the child's permission, explaining why you think it may help.) Older children may appreciate their very close friends being told about their difficulties as they may have trouble explaining themselves. Inform all teachers the child is likely to be in contact with about the difficulty she has and give appropriate advice so that they, too, can make the child's experience rewarding - but without drawing unwelcome attention.

Comfort a highly anxious child of primary school age. Very young children may appreciate being met at the gate or in the class the moment they come in, as this will be the highest stress point of their day. The sooner they calm down,

the sooner they will be more receptive to what is going on around them. They need to know that you can care for them and that they are safe with you. Give a special contact person (a mentor) for a secondary school aged child with school phobia so that he feels there is someone to turn to who cares about his well being. He may appreciate going to this person when he arrives in school.

Do lower expectations. For example, an anxious child might not want to join in with PE or read out loud in class or perform in assembly: don't force her to do something that will increase her tension.

Try to anticipate her needs and smooth over fears, particularly if it is known beforehand she will find a forthcoming event hard. For example, if a child has difficulty coping with a normal school day it would be unrealistic to expect her to cope with going on a school trip – or even to stay behind in school without her friends and usual teacher. You could suggest she stays at home. Or you might know there will be a fire drill that morning – you could take the child aside and warn her about what to expect so she won't panic at the sudden change in activity. This is especially important if the child has a fear of dying and might suspect there really is a fire.

Social isolation can compound a child's difficulties so try to include him in group activities - unless he has an Autism Spectrum Disorder as this could increase his anxiety.

A child in the throes of a panic attack will feel extremely unwell and may well believe that her symptoms indicate that she is too ill to remain in school. If that child is sent home rather than being reassured and comforted in school, she is not helped to cope with being in school and will expect to be allowed home every time she feels anxious. However, be wary of the 'cry wolf' syndrome. Just because a child's symptoms have been down to anxiety in the past it doesn't mean that the next time they will be. The child and parents need to trust teachers to take care – if a child arrives home with a high temperature and complains that the teacher wouldn't listen to her about feeling ill trust is lost by both parent and child.

Be especially careful to treat an anxious child with consideration and respect and give praise whenever possible to make school a rewarding place to be to help motivate him to try to get to, and stay at, school.

### Anxiety and special educational needs

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) experience a high degree of school phobia. But children with ASD need to be handled differently to children without ASD as, for example, graduated exposure or being taught relaxation techniques may cause further distress in children with ASD yet can help children without ASD. Children with ASD respond better to strict routine, time alone and 'time out' doing a preferred activity, or using up physical energy by running errands.

Children with ASD who attend special schools catering especially for them may have fewer of the problems such children face in mainstream schools because the environment is adapted to suit their particular needs.

Jayne Jardine, Headteacher of Springhallow (Ealing, London), a special school for children with ASD, says: 'Our

environment is ordered and structured, calm and quiet, even when pupils and staff move around the school. Lunchtimes and assemblies too have a routine and are well staffed. Our teaching styles are designed to assist the pupils in managing their anxiety: we break things into small manageable tasks. Much anxiety is caused by pupils not knowing what is going to happen next, needing to control their environment and often not being able to, and wanting reassurance and confidence boosters. We also teach our pupils (from a very early age) how to calm themselves and how to ask for help. Calmness is the key to managing and working with pupils with ASD and most of our pupils do not need breaks because of anxiety.'

Children with other conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Learning Difficulties are also prone to anxiety and anxiety disorders. Part of this may be because of having to deal with their condition, often in an environment where the people around them do not understand their difficulties or because they have not had their condition diagnosed and so are not on the road to help. Some children have more than one condition making diagnosis difficult as some symptoms of one condition can overlap with symptoms of another.

In term time children spend most of their time in school, so if they find it an unrewarding and frightening place to be it can have a big negative impact on their lives, causing immense distress and suffering, affecting their physical and mental health. School phobia is a difficult problem for a child to recover from, but with the child's teachers and parents working together, there is a much better chance that the child's problems will be short-lived and that the severity of the child's unpleasant physical symptoms will be much reduced.

#### **Further help**

Anxiety Care ([www.anxietycare.org.uk](http://www.anxietycare.org.uk)) can be contacted on 020 8478 3400.

Scared of School ([www.scared-of-school.tk](http://www.scared-of-school.tk)) is a website set up by young people who had school phobia for other young people with anxiety about going to school. See their SoS School Survival Guide for tips to help young people anxious about school.

National Phobics Society ([www.phobics-society.org.uk](http://www.phobics-society.org.uk)) can be contacted on 0870 122 2325.

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