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Supporting Children and Families with School Avoidance and School-Based Anxiety



A Guide for Parents and Carers

Understanding School Gate and Separation Anxiety

Many children feel anxious about separating from their parent or carer at the school gate. This can show up as crying, clinging, refusing to enter school, running away, or becoming distressed in other ways. For some children, they can explain why they feel anxious. For others, the anxiety is overwhelming and harder to understand.

It's important to recognise that this anxiety is real and often deeply felt in the child's body, even if there isn't a clear "reason" for it.

A child may appear "fine" once they are in school. This does not always mean the anxiety has gone away. Some children:

- Calm down through connection with peers and routines
- Or mask their feelings by suppressing distress to cope

This masking can mean anxiety is released later at home or the next day.

Why a Joined-Up Approach Matters

Children feel safest when the adults around them are working together. Parents and carers are a child's main source of emotional safety, so your role is essential.

Supporting school anxiety works best when:

- Home and school communicate closely
- Adults respond with empathy, not blame
- Everyone understands the child's needs and works together

Supporting Yourself as a Parent or Carer

Seeing your child struggle at the school gate can feel overwhelming, embarrassing, or upsetting. Many parents feel judged, which can lead to stress, guilt, or feeling like a "bad parent."

It's important to remember:

- This is not your fault
- Your child's anxiety is not a reflection of your parenting
- You are not alone in this experience

How schools can support you matters. A calm, non-judgemental partnership will help reduce both your stress and your child's anxiety.

Key Principles to Support Your Child

1. Stay Calm and Regulated

Children "borrow" calm from adults. Your body language, tone of voice, and energy matter.

Try to:

- Speak calmly and gently
- Keep your body relaxed and open
- Breathe slowly and steadily
- Avoid rushed or tense goodbyes

2. "Think Out Loud"

Children feel safer when they understand what is happening.

Helpful examples:

- "I'm thinking about you and I'll be back at 3:15."
- "After school, we're going to go to the park together."

Avoid sharing information that may increase anxiety (e.g., your own worries or stressful plans).

3. Keep Goodbye Simple and Consistent

Goodbyes should be:

- Short
- Predictable
- Calm

Create a simple script such as:

“Goodbye, I love you. You’re going to school, and I’ll come back to get you.”

Avoid:

- Linger
- Changing routines
- Going back after leaving

Consistency builds safety.

Creating a Calm Morning Routine

Before school:

- Prepare clothes, bags, and shoes the night before
- Keep mornings calm and predictable
- Avoid rushing or multitasking
- Focus only on the “mission”: getting to school

Helpful ideas:

- Let your child wear school clothes the night before (if appropriate)
- Watch a short favourite programme together before leaving
- Keep routines simple and steady

Supporting Yourself After Drop-Off

Your child is supported when you are regulated too.

After drop-off:

- Take a short walk
- Sit with a warm drink
- Talk to someone supportive
- Avoid jumping straight into stressful tasks

This helps your brain and body calm down, which reduces anxiety for both you and your child.

Working with the School

A strong partnership with school staff is key.

Helpful strategies include:

- Having one **key adult** to communicate with
- Regular check-ins about how your child is settling
- A communication book between home and school
- Clear, specific updates (not just “they are fine”)

Making Drop-Off Easier

Schools and parents can work together to reduce overwhelm:

- Use the same drop-off spot every day
- Keep transitions predictable
- Avoid entering the classroom at drop-off
- Build a consistent routine

After school:

- Greet your child warmly and confidently
- Have a snack or favourite item ready
- Focus on reconnecting

Creating a “Return to Nest”

Helping your child feel safe about coming home can ease separation anxiety.

At home, create a “nest”:

- Cushions, blankets, and comfort items
- A drink and snack ready
- A relaxing activity planned

This gives your child something to look forward to and reassures them that home is safe and waiting.

Reducing Sensory Overwhelm

School environments can feel intense for anxious or neurodivergent children.

You can support by discussion these options with school staff:

- Having an earlier entry to school
- Using quieter entrances if possible
- Providing ear defenders or calming tools

The goal is to “make the world smaller” and less overwhelming.

Helping Your Child Understand Time

Many children struggle to understand time, which can increase anxiety.

Helpful tools:

- Visual schedules with pictures
- Simple explanations like “after lunch”
- Counting down the day using familiar activities (e.g., TV shows)

Supporting the Feeling of “Being Held in Mind”

Some children worry that their parent or carer will disappear or forget them.

You can support this by:

- Reassuring them you are thinking of them
- Talking about your day and where you are
- Sharing what you will do before picking them up

Example:

“I’ll be thinking about you while I’m at work, and I can’t wait to hear about your day.”

Using Transitional Objects

A transitional object helps children feel connected to you during the day. It is important that this strategy is in partnership with school staff.

Examples include:

- A small scarf or keyring
- A hairband or badge
- A small personal item from home

The object:

- Belongs to the child
- Is agreed with the school
- Acts as a comfort and reminder of you

Supporting Emotional and Physical Feelings

Children may express anxiety as:

- Headaches
- Tummy aches

- Feeling sick

Rather than dismissing these, try to connect to the emotion:

“I wonder if your tummy feels wobbly because you miss me a bit.”

This helps your child feel understood and supported.

Supporting Gradual Progress

School anxiety is usually not solved quickly. Progress may be:

- Slow
- Non-linear (steps forward and back)
- Different for each child

It's important to:

- Stay patient
- Celebrate small successes
- Work consistently with school staff

Final Thoughts

Supporting a child with school avoidance and anxiety requires:

- Patience
- Empathy
- Consistency
- Strong teamwork between home and school

When children feel safe, understood, and supported, they are more able to develop confidence and begin to feel more comfortable in school.



If you are looking for counselling or play therapy for your child or a parent/carer consultation to receive bespoke support, please contact the Your Space Therapies team by emailing servicemanager@yourspacetherapies.org. We would be happy to help!