



CNWL Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

Managing Children's Back-to-School Anxiety

This leaflet is to provide tips for parents on how to help their children manage any fears they have about returning to school after the Covid19 'national lockdown'. It must be hard to know how to help your child feel secure about the return to school. There's no perfect answer to manage the new term and how to help your child settle. It is perfectly normal for them to feel apprehensive and experience some anticipation anxiety.

Please see our [CAMHS website](#) for more help, sign-posting to national and borough-based resources, support groups and services available to you, and how to access the service.

The following outlines some tips and ideas on how to support the transition.

Talk to your child about how they are feeling

It is normal for a child or young person to feel apprehensive as well as excited about the return to school. Younger children sometimes struggle to express emotions and what they are feeling.

- **They can't link their feelings, thoughts, and behaviour in their early years.**
- **Young children have limited ability to think, reflect, and be reasoned with.**

Simply talk to them that it is normal to be worried during this time. Children may also find it difficult to be physically distanced from friends and teachers while at school. You could encourage them to think about other ways to bond and stay connected.

Reassure them the school has safety measures and the best way to stay healthy is to wash their hands.

How will I notice my child or young person may be anxious at school?

Children show anxiety in three ways:

1. Physiological Symptoms



This is created by the fight or flight stress response. Teach them where they feel it in their body.

- **Lots of tummy aches**
- **Feeling sick**
- **Headaches**
- **Feeling dizzy**
- **Dry mouth**
- **Wanting to go to the toilet a lot**
- **Not being hungry or wanting to eat too much**

You may notice these symptoms during the first week or the first morning of returning to school. Hopefully, they will pass and your child will settle in.

There are many more ideas on how to help your child relax and feel calm by clicking here: **Relaxation Ideas for Children**

2. Negative Thoughts

Thoughts can be overwhelming for children in the same way they are for adults. Younger children will struggle to identify them but older children might be:

- **Worrying about the family's health and preoccupied with catching COVID-19.**

- **Suffering from lots of " what if " thoughts, they often seem unrealistic and occur in the future.**
- **Thinking the worst, "catastrophising" about what may occur.**

They can manage their thoughts by being a detective:



3. Behavioural Symptoms of Anxiety

Children in the main show us how they feel through their behaviour. You might notice:

- **They may refuse to return to school.**
- **In younger children, before a situation, you may notice extreme aggression, meltdowns or distress and extreme crying.**
- **Not wanting to go to bed or sleep alone.**
- **Nighttime fears, waking in the night, and nightmares.**
- **Find it hard to separate from you and want to cling to you.**

(This may be more apparent if you or anyone in your family suffered a bereavement or loss during COVID-19; your child maybe even more worried about leaving you). You will need to link the behaviour to the worry.

For example, you could say:

I've noticed that since we discussed returning to school, you've wanted us to stay with at night, maybe you might be worried about it?

What can I do to help the worry?

Shall we try this.....would that help?

School can be especially hard if your child suffers from **social anxiety**. While avoiding their fears is not the answer, being fully exposed to them is not the answer either.

Providing overwhelming social experiences may lead to overwhelming fear and failure, and may make anxiety sufferers less likely to try again – or at all.

Start small and build their courage and work with the school to implement a managed exposure plan. This may mean they have a graded return to school. They may manage mornings instead of the whole day.



Solutions for back to school anxiety

Talk about their Worries

Do talk about and name it. Parents worry that it will escalate certain behaviours. It may be helpful to contact the school and have a home and school shared plan. **Children feel safer when the adults around them are consistent and work together.** If your child has a new teacher, find a photo of them and show them. Sometimes schools have even sent a video of the new class layout. You can always request this.

Play out the Worries

Rehearse the new drop off, role play it with toys or use puppets. If they suffer from separation anxiety, identify an adult (attachment figure) they can turn to at school for support. It is not helpful if you are anxious to have multiple attachment figures.

Devise a Simple Goodbye Plan

This may be helpful for the return, even if your child was not anxious before the pandemic, they might be now. Have a plan, hug, goodbye, and handover. Draw out the instructions, if the layout/building are different (they may be attending juniors or senior school).

Help them to ask for help; who would be the best adult to talk too. Help the transition with a transitional object. Something of yours to keep if they are worried about being away from you. This is good for children whose parents separated or if they've lost a parent during the pandemic for example.

Ensure your child has an emotional vocabulary. Do they have a word for anxiety such as fear, worry, or being scared? Give it a name and tell them it is not the whole of them and they can be in control of it.

- **The worry wobbler**
- **The worry monster**
- **The scariness**
- **The wibble wobble**

Communicate that anxiety is normal and everyone feels anxiety or worry some of the time. Therefore, it is normal to worry about being away from mummy or daddy.

It is normal to feel worried before starting school.

Tell them worry/anxiety is not dangerous within themselves however, they are uncomfortable but the feeling/s will pass.

Whether at school or home, creative activities, such as playing and drawing, help them express and communicate any negative feelings they may be experiencing. This helps children find positive ways to express difficult feelings such as anger, fear, or sadness.

What ideally not to do and say

Refrain from saying “Don’t worry it will all be fine”.

Reassurance sadly does not help anxiety but having a plan and empathy does.

While you want to support your child by providing them with comfort and encouragement – ensure you also encourage them to face and not avoid the fears that cause anxiety. They are less likely to face their fears if they are not encouraged to do so by you.

You cannot promise negative things or feelings won’t happen. Fear is hardwired, so we can’t eliminate it, just recognize and manage it.

If your child suffers from **social anxiety**, try to help them to reframe a situation. If we are successful and confident adults, we often underestimate how our child may be feeling. Sometimes, we may wonder why they are stressing about this syndrome. Your often child knows their fears are irrational, but can't control them.

It’s natural for you to be anxious too

It is normal for you to be anxious, as this is not only a new situation for them but you too. It may be even harder if you have lost a loved one or suffered bereavement during this time. Be kind and compassionate at this difficult time. Seek help and support from friends, partners, or teachers, or a therapist. Keep

checking in and listening to your children's concerns, speak kindly, and help them to manage their emotions.

Remember, you are not a bad parent if your child suffers from anxiety. There are many complex reasons why your child may suffer from anxiety.

In conclusion and how to find more help

This is all new, so remember there are no rights or wrongs. We hope some of these tips are found to be helpful.

Please visit our [CAMHS website](#) for further information, [resources](#) and support.

If you need to contact [the service in-hours](#), contact your borough-based CAMHS service on:

Westminster CAMHS - 020 3317 5999

Kensington & Chelsea CAMHS - 020 3317 3599

Brent CAMHS - 020 3317 5050

Harrow CAMHS - 020 8869 4500

Hillingdon CAMHS - 01895 256521

Milton Keynes – 01908 724 228



During out of hours, please call 111 or your out of hours GP service.

In an emergency please contact your [Accident and Emergency Department](#).