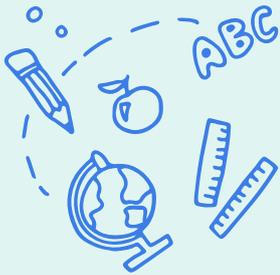




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Back to School **Anxiety**
A parents toolkit



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Back to school wobbles

It is very normal for children to feel anxious before going back to school, especially after a break or when starting somewhere new. Even confident children can have wobbles with changes in routines, people or classrooms. For many, these nerves settle after a few days, but for some the worries can linger. The brain sometimes treats change as a threat, setting off the body's "fight, flight or freeze" response.



Getting stuck in the cycle

- Worries about school trigger body symptoms like tummy aches, racing heart or shaky legs.
- Children may try to avoid school talk or seek constant reassurance to ease the worries.
- This brings short-term relief but makes the anxiety stronger over time.
- Parents can get caught too by giving endless reassurance or removing stressors.



In the weeks before school

Choose a few of the ideas below to try. Remember don't overtalk or overdo it, as that can increase anxiety levels. The aim is to keep preparation calm and casual so school feels like a normal part of life.





Uniform try-on



Have a dress rehearsal with the uniform. Take a fun photo or dress a teddy bear to make it light-hearted.

Practice the school journey



Practice the route to school and take photos of landmarks. Helps children (and teens) feel more confident about getting there.

Countdown calendar



Create a simple countdown chart and mark off each day. Makes the return feel predictable and less sudden.

Reconnect with friends



Arrange a playdate, park meet-up, or video call. Familiar faces help ease the first-day nerves.

School map treasure hunt



Use a map or photos to “find” key places like the hall, playground, or library. Older kids can talk you through the buildings to help remind them where to go and the layout.

Visualise the first day



Ask with curiosity: “I wonder what toys will be in the playground.” **Or** “I wonder what will be for lunch”. **This helps build a mental picture of the day helping them imagine being there.**

Morning practice runs



Try the full routine, wake up earlier, get dressed, have breakfast, get out the door. This shows your child they can manage the pace and earlier starts.

Practice grounding tools



When your child is calm, practice calming and grounding tools like 5-4-3-2-1 senses game or slow belly breathing. Doing this ahead of time makes it easier to use on the first day.





Brave moments jar



Write down times your child was brave (like trying something new) and pop them in a jar. This builds confidence over time especially in the run up to school starting. It helps build a narrative of 'I can cope' or 'I can do hard things'.

My voice box



A box for your child to pop in notes or drawings of worries, questions, or things they want you to know. Open together to talk through or problem-solve calmly.

Create a visual story



Make a simple "first day storybook" with drawings or photos showing the journey, timetable, classroom, and teacher.

Be curious, don't just reassure



Acknowledge the feeling: "I can see this feels tricky." **Then ask:** "What has helped before when you felt like this?" or "What would you tell a friend who felt the same?"

Rehearse the goodbye



Practice your drop-off routine in advance. It might be the same hug or a silly handshake. When your child knows exactly what to expect, their body feels calmer and more in control.

Go in with a friend



Plan ahead as for some children and teens it helps to meet a friend and walk part of the way together. A familiar face can make the first steps back into school feel less daunting.

Read back-to-school stories



Books can help children make sense of feelings and see that worries are normal. Try *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst (about feeling connected when apart) or *The Koala Who Could* by Rachel Bright (about facing change and being brave). Reading together opens space to talk about feelings in a safe way.





Supporting Teenagers with Back-to-School Anxiety

Starting secondary school or returning after holidays can feel overwhelming. Teens are often more aware of expectations and compare themselves to others, so anxiety may show up as irritability, withdrawal, sleep difficulties, or physical symptoms like headaches and stomach aches.



Why anxiety can increase at this stage

- Moving to a larger school with more teachers and changing friendships.
- Pressure from the exam curriculum and frequent testing.
- Hormonal and brain changes making stress feel stronger.
- Worries about fitting in socially as well as keeping up academically.



Practical tools for parents

- Normalise the nerves and connect to emotions: Remind them many students feel the same. The first days are about settling in, not perfection.
- Starting GCSEs or A-Levels: Focus on settling in getting used to the timetable. The first weeks are for adjusting to new routines and teachers. Exams come later.
- Keep routines steady: Sleep, meals, exercise and downtime all help regulate stress.
- Encourage outlets: Sport, music, or seeing friends release tension.
- Model calm: Let them see you manage your own stress in balanced ways.



Problem-solving back-to-school worries

When teens worry about school, work through it together in a practical way:

- Problem solve: For example if the worry is about getting lost, look at the timetable, and map out routes. If it's about what to do if the anxiety pops up at school make a plan about what to do, where to go, or who to approach for support.
- Write it down: Write it in their phone or on a small card they can check during the day.
- Use peer perspective: Ask, "What would you tell a friend who worried about this?"
- Encourage moving on: Once the plan is made, help them shift focus back to something else.
- Reassurance card: Some teens like carrying a card with a calming phrase such as "I can handle this" or "It will pass."



Talking with Teens

Conversations about worries can feel intense face to face. For many teens it works better in the car, on a walk, or while doing an activity side by side. This can help them open up without feeling pressured. For those with phones text conversations can work well too.





The Night Before



Keep the evening calm

Stick to your usual dinner, wind-down and bedtime routine so your child feels steady and safe.



Pack bags together, lay out clothes

Lay everything out for the morning and let your child help. They can choose one fun or comforting item to go in their bag, like a favourite pen, keyring, photo or snack.



Choose a story or memory

Younger children: Read a back-to-school story where the character feels nervous. The Invisible String by Patrice Karst is a lovely story about staying connected to loved ones even when apart.

Older children: Share your own first-day story, especially one that was tricky but turned out okay. Show them you believe they can cope with difficult situations.



Prepare a transition object

A small reminder of home can help, such as a toy, photo or simple card with "I can do it." Or "I can cope". Get them to create their own.



Avoid heavy school talk at bedtime

If worries arise, talk earlier. Keep the last part of the evening light and soothing so they can settle.





The Morning of School

1

Wake up early

Allow plenty of time so the morning doesn't feel rushed. A calm pace helps lower everyone's stress levels.

2

Set the tone with calmness

Keep the morning quiet and steady. Your child will pick up on your energy and calm.

3

Offer a familiar breakfast

Stick with foods they usually enjoy and that aren't too sugary, to keep their body steady and comfortable.

4

Use a grounding activity they have practiced

This could be deep breathing or 5-4-3-2-1, whatever works best for them and is rehearsed and familiar. This is not the time to learn a new tool.

5

Name the worry

If they say they are nervous, acknowledge it calmly whilst avoiding lingering on it: *"I can see you are worried. I know you can get through it."*

6

Keep moving forward

Move through each step of the routine without long debates. Avoid "ping-pong" back and forth that can make both of you more anxious.





Tips for the Goodbye



Keep it short and confident

Long, drawn-out goodbyes can increase worry. A calm, upbeat tone reassures your child more than lots of words.



Always say goodbye

Never slip away, even if your child is upset. Saying goodbye builds trust and helps them learn they can cope.



Use your goodbye ritual

The familiarity will help in the moment.



Hand over to staff if needed

If your child is struggling, pass them to a teacher or staff member with a smile. This shows your confidence in the school.



Remind them you believe in them

Use a steady phrase: "You've got this. I'll see you later."



Your Mindset Matters

- Children mirror you, calm confidence helps them feel capable.
- Ground yourself first with slow breaths or positive self-talk.
- Keep routines steady so life feels predictable and safe.
- Respond consistently so they know what to expect.





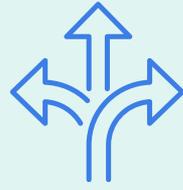
When to Seek Extra Help

While many children experience nerves about school from time to time which resolve themselves, some may need additional support from school or a mental health professional. It's important to remember that early help can prevent anxiety from becoming more entrenched and harder to manage.

Signs your child's school anxiety may need additional support:

- Anxiety is persistent for several weeks and does not improve despite your support and adjustments at home.
- Worries or fears are making it hard for your child to attend school regularly or on time.
- Physical symptoms like stomach aches or headaches happen most school mornings and disrupt the day.
- Your child is often unable to concentrate in class because of anxiety.
- Sleep is regularly disturbed by school-related worries.
- Your child avoids multiple school situations such as assemblies, PE, eating in the lunch hall, or group work.
- Anxiety seems much more intense than is typical for their age.
- You notice sudden changes in mood or behaviour, such as withdrawal or irritability, linked to school.
- Your child expresses thoughts about wanting to run away from school, harm themselves, or not be here.





Pathways to Support

Start with the school

- Speak with your child's class teacher, form tutor, or head of year about your concerns.
- Ask about pastoral support, wellbeing mentors, or the school counsellor.
- Agree on a consistent plan for mornings, drop-off, and in-school support.
- Request adjustments if needed (quiet start, buddy system, check-in points).

GP (General Practitioner)

- Can assess your child's needs and rule out physical causes of symptoms.
- Can refer to CAMHS or other specialist services for assessment and therapy.

CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)

- Specialist NHS service for children and young people with significant mental health difficulties.
- Referrals can come from a GP, school, or other health professionals, in some areas you can self-refer.
- More information: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/mental-health-support/mental-health-services/>

Emergency and Crisis Support

- Call 999 if your child is in immediate danger or at risk of harm.
- Call 111 for urgent mental health advice (available 24/7 in most areas).
- Childline: 0800 1111 (free, confidential, 24/7).
- Samaritans: 116 123 (free, confidential, 24/7).
- Text "SHOUT" to 85258 for free 24/7 crisis support.



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