

HELPING YOUR CHILD MANAGE ANXIETY

AROUND STARTING SCHOOL

Transitions are always stressful, and even more so if you have been out of the swing of things for a while. I have pulled this information together to give you some ideas about the best ways to support your child with the anxiety that they may be feeling about going to school.

It's not surprising that the pandemic and the restrictions that have resulted from it are having an impact upon all of us. Whilst we are all in very different situations it is far from what any of us are used to and children will be noticing these changes. They are likely to be seeing more worried adults, hearing more stressful news, and will not have been able to see friends. For many, especially the little ones who struggle to talk about what they are feeling, this seems to be coming out in behaviour.

Lots of children are showing behaviour that they used to use to cope when things were hard, such as being more clingy, getting their comfort blanket back and sleeping with the lights on. This is a normal response to a stressful time and uncertainty about the future will still be around when your child starts school in September.

I've written this short pack to help you support your child with anxiety, particularly about starting school. I'll talk a bit about what anxiety is and how you can notice it in your child, then give you some tips to help your child understand and manage it.

If you have any concerns about how your child is at school please do let a teacher know. The more parents and teachers communicate the easier for children to learn that they have more than one adult to trust and that grown-ups can work together to make things easier for them.



WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is the body's response to threat. It's worse when things are uncertain as they have been over the last few months. It comes from a part of the brain called the amygdala – which sort of works like a security guard. It's instinctive and aims to keep us safe. When the amygdala senses a threat it releases chemicals including adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormone). These put us into fight or flight mode which is helpful if we need to escape from something but can make us feel confused or frightened.

We have all experienced anxiety, and most of us have probably had times when it has felt overwhelming. Even if we know that what we are worried about probably isn't going to happen, our brain can trick us into thinking it will and that we need to do whatever we can to get away from that threat.

When we are anxious, especially as children, we can show some big feelings – this helps other people notice and keep us safe. It may seem like an over-reaction to us, but for children it is their brain's way of calling in the troops (quite clever really!). Children often need help understanding what is happening, finding ways to calm their bodies, and get back into a state where they can start thinking more clearly again. This works best if they have an adult that they can trust to support them with this.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CHILD IS WORRIED?

Children show anxiety in lots of different ways including becoming irritable, having problems sleeping, going back to behaviours they have shown before, having bad dreams, finding it hard to concentrate, being restless, having a sore tummy and being demanding and controlling (the list is long!). They can take their worries out on you and can find it hard to understand what is going on.

Anxiety presents itself in many different ways...

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<p>The desire to control people and events</p> 	<p>Difficulty getting to sleep</p> 	<p>Feeling agitated or angry</p> 
<p>Defiance and other challenging behaviors</p> 	<p>Having high expectations for self, including school work & sports</p> 	<p>Avoiding activities or events (including school)</p> 
<p>Pain like stomachaches and headaches</p> 	<p>Struggling to pay attention and focus</p> 	<p>Intolerance of uncertainty</p> 
<p>Crying and difficulty managing emotions</p> 	<p>Over-planning for situations and events</p> 	<p>Feeling worried about situations or events</p> 

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WHAT IS SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Separation anxiety is a normal developmental process – you probably experienced it with your children when they were younger. It's normally a sign that your child has started to know that you are available to help and shows you that they feel safer by your side. They need to explore the world to learn, but, when they feel a bit wobbled they return to you as they know you can help them (before they go off on their curious little ambles again!).

Separation anxiety often increases when a child is feeling more worried in general and when they are trying new things – both might be relevant to your little one now. They might show this by finding it hard to leave you when they start school and by saying they don't want to go. There are lots of things we can do to help your child with this (some of which I have outlined in a list of "Top Tips" on the next pages).

Separation anxiety is likely to be even more pronounced at the moment - most children have been in a safe little bubble at home for some time. It must be hard for them to understand how things that were unsafe are now safe and that, if things are safe, why they can't do things that they would have done before (like be close to and play with friends).



I hope that this pack is helpful and that you and your child have a great start to school!

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Sarah Mundy'.

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TOP TOPS FOR MANAGING ANXIETY ABOUT SCHOOL

THINK ABOUT YOURSELF

- It's really important that you, as their trusted adult, can **show your child that you can cope**. It's quite normal to feel worried about your child going to school (we too can have separation anxiety). It's helpful if you can notice this and try to find ways to manage your own feelings.
- **Emotions are catching** and if our children see us as worried this is likely to increase their own anxiety. We regulate our children's nervous systems - our responses can affect their breathing, heart rate etc.
- **Ask yourself what you are feeling worried about**. It might be something you need to check out with teachers so you can have some reassurance about how they will support your child at school. The more information you have the easier it is for you to feel that your child is in a safe place where they can learn and have fun (and for you to show them that you believe that!).
- Think about your own anxiety more generally - have you been more preoccupied or less available during the lockdown? Remember that we might be present physically but sometimes more absent emotionally.

FOCUS ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD

- Children are better able to manage stressful situations if they feel safe with you - you are the most influential and important person in their lives. Starting school will probably mean that your child wants you around more.
- Try to have more **special time** with them outside the school day. They might need more comfort than usual and to check that you are still available to them. Try to include lots of cuddles as there is so much less physical contact for children anywhere outside of family at the moment.
- **Let them know that you still want to be with them** and will miss them, but that school is an exciting new step and there will be lots of fun things there that you don't do with them.
- It can be helpful for them to **have something that reminds them of you** - it will probably be difficult to bring in belongings to school (due to COVID) but you could draw a little picture on their arm (not on their hand as it will probably wear off due



to the amount of handwashing that they need to do at the moment). An alternative is that they wear a wrist band (like those you get at festivals or from charity shops).

- When things are a bit more stressful the fun can go. Try to include **playfulness** in your relationship as much as you can.
- If your child is struggling with their behaviour try to **connect with them before you correct** what they are doing.
- Try to show your child that you **accept** what feelings they have and that you have **empathy** for them. This helps them feel better understood and brings you closer together. Don't just think about what you are communicating through words but with your body too - anxiety registers non-verbal communication much more easily than words.
- Working **with** your child is an important way of overcoming everyday challenges. I talk about ways you can do this and give some useful insights into children's emotional and behavioural development in my *Parenting Handbook*. The handbook is aimed at parents of 2 to 4-year olds but lots of the ideas and principles can be applied to older children too.

HELP YOUR CHILD UNDERSTAND THEIR FEELINGS

- Explain to your child what anxiety is. Tell them how, when our body thinks something is unsafe (even if it isn't) it prepares itself to fight or run away. Let them know that their heart beats faster, their breathing gets quicker, and their muscles might get hard or wobbly. Let them know that sometimes our body gets it wrong and we need to train our brain to calm down so we can think more clearly and feel better.
- Help your child notice how their body feels when they are worried. It can help if you draw a body and show on it where you feel anxiety.
- You can also help them learn ways to calm their bodies by doing some mindfulness, breathing, yoga or relaxation with them. A couple of examples are below:
 - A simple breathing exercise which calms the body is to pretend you have just taken out a baking tray of hot cookies from the oven. Ask them to pretend to smell them, breathing in through their nose, and then blow on them to cool them down.
 - It can also be helpful to ask your child to pretend different parts of their body are like spaghetti - sometimes uncooked (hard) and sometimes cooked (soft). This helps them learn the difference between feeling tense and relaxed in their bodies.

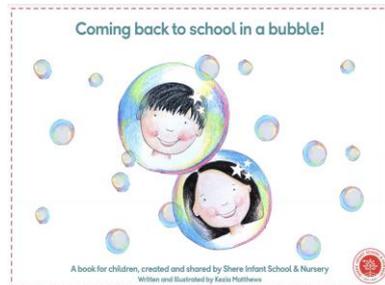


- Let your child know that you have **noticed how they are feeling** (if you don't know what they are feeling then try to guess - be curious and try to work it out together).
- Help them understand that it is **OK to be worried** and that you can help them with this. My interactive children's book, *Please Stay Here - I Want You Near*, helps children understand that **anxiety about being away from parents when they go to school is normal**. As well as a story about a bear going to school, there are prompter questions (under lift-the-flaps) which ask about your child's own feelings - helping you explore this together.
- It's so important **not to dismiss their feelings** - they will feel much better if they are understood and you can come up with some ways together to help them.
- Try not to say "don't worry" or "don't be silly". Whilst we want to make things easier for our children by saying this, what they actually **need is to feel understood and learn that you can help them manage their big feelings**. Instead, say something like *"you're probably feeling a bit wobbly...that's not surprising when you are going somewhere new without me and you haven't seen your friends properly for ages"*.
- Try to help your child learn that their behaviours (however annoying they might be for you!) are likely to relate to a feeling driving them.

PREPARE YOUR CHILD FOR WHAT HAPPENS AT SCHOOL

- Children feel more secure when they are appropriately prepared and know what to expect.
- **Start by thinking about what questions you might have** as a parent and what questions they might have (even at the age of four they should be able to give you an indication of what they think school might be like). Try to find out as much as you can from their school about what it is going to be like.
- **Help them understand what is going to happen at school** and see whether they have any questions about this. It can be useful if this is not just through talking but pictures, videos and play too.
- Try to **get into a routine** that you can carry on when they start school. You could even practice your journey to school before they start there.
- Don't forget to **tell them about all the fun things** that they will enjoy at school. Making friends, doing art, playing, learning etc.

- They may have been to childcare before starting school and it can be helpful to **think with them about how this might be different**. There is a useful book that explains what school might be like at the moment, here is a link: <https://bit.ly/3hAaaV2>



WHAT TO DO BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL

- If you can, have a **calm bedtime with a little extra time together** the night before they start school.
- **Consider how you will manage drop off** - talk to your child about this. Try not to make the goodbye too prolonged or sneak away without saying goodbye.
- Show them that you **trust the teacher** you are handing them over to. You can show this through a brief conversation and through non-verbal communication.
- After school **check in with them about how they felt the day was**, find out what they enjoyed and what they found difficult. Make plans with them for what you could do next time to make the difficult times easier. Try to keep in touch with their teacher about the tricky times so you can come up with ways they can help your child when they are at school.

FURTHER SUPPORT AND INFORMATION

Parenting Through Stories social media pages and website have regular blogs, top tips, and Instagram live sessions to answer any questions you might have about supporting your little ones emotional and behavioural development.

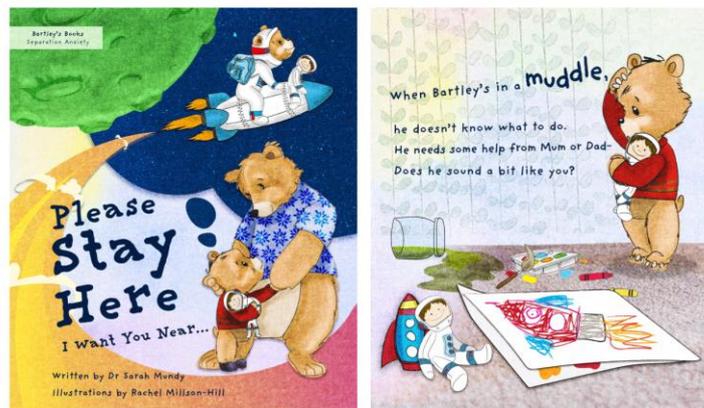


The children's book, *Please Stay Here - I Want You Near*, and *Parenting Handbook* are available to buy from Amazon and our Facebook Shop.



Facebook: parentingthroughstories
Instagram: @parenting_through_stories
Twitter: @bartleybear

An interactive children's book to support
2-4 year olds starting school or pre-school



A parenting handbook to help you and your child make
sense of everyday challenges together

