



## **Back to school worries can affect the whole family: some tips to help you and your child feel more confident starting the new school year**

The last eighteen months have been tough for everyone. The COVID pandemic has left both adults and children feeling uncertain, stressed and anxious at times. Recent research has highlighted the heavy burden the pandemic has put on parents of young children. If you are a parent or carer you may have found things overwhelming at times. You are not alone in those feelings. We are parents ourselves and we have often had these feelings too. Almost every mum and dad across the country will have done at some point.

The new school term can be a relief, but with everything that is going on it may also be making you and your children feel worried. We see this in the families we work with and so we wanted to share some evidence-based tips to support you and your children as schools re-open. We hope these will be useful to all parents and in particular if you or your children are experiencing high levels of anxiety.

### **Helping your child with their anxiety**

We know there are a lot of children who are experiencing anxiety and many children will be feeling nervous about going back to school. Some common worries for children returning to school include:

- How will I find my way around/what if I get lost?
- Who will I be sat with/what if I don't like them?
- Where will I put my things?
- What if I fall out with my friends?
- What if I don't like my teacher?

If your son or daughter is expressing some concerns or worries, don't panic! It can be distressing when our children are sad or worried, but it is completely normal for all children to worry at times, even young children. However, there are things that parents can do to help. Here are our top tips:

#### **Encourage them to talk, and then just listen!**

Sometimes your child may start a conversation with you about their feelings and worries, but we can also help them to do so by making space to talk. Pick a time when both you and your child are feeling relaxed. We often find that children are more open to discussing their feelings when they are already spending time with you; this way they don't feel like they've been put on the spot. This could be during an activity such as drawing or building Lego, or it could be driving home or walking back from the shops.

**Professor Sam Cartwright-Hatton**, Clinical Psychologist

**Abby Dunn**, Research Fellow

**Chloe Elsby-Pearson**, PPI Researcher

Are members of the Parenting with Anxiety Project, University of Sussex.

Find out more: @PWASTUDY  
[parentingwithanxiety.org.uk](https://parentingwithanxiety.org.uk)  
[parents-study@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:parents-study@sussex.ac.uk)

### **Not everything will work and that's OK**

Every child and every family is unique. Our suggestions are informed by research into anxiety but they are quite general and some may not be appropriate for you or your child. You have the best idea what will suit your family. Feel free to try things out but don't worry if it doesn't all work

Start off by just letting them share what they are feeling. You *do not* have to solve everything – you might not be able to and that is OK. Once you have spent some time listening, acknowledge their feelings and then try to distract them from their worries by focusing their attention onto something more pleasant.

If worries are coming up at bedtime, focus on just soothing them. Unless it's a really quick and easy worry to solve, tell them you will think about sorting the worry out tomorrow.

### **Notice changes in mood**

Children can't always tell us what they are worried about. If you notice your child is becoming more upset, frustrated or cross than usual, you can gently point it out to them. By noticing their emotions, you will help them to understand what they are feeling and help them to understand that all emotions (even strong ones) are normal. You can also be curious with them about why they may be feeling a certain way. For example: "I notice that you seem a bit cross today. I'm wondering if it is because we were talking about going back to school this morning?"

### **Give them info – but only as much as they want**

Worries thrive when we feel uncertain. We can help our children manage their worries by giving them information about what going back to school will be like. For children who are moving key stage or school there may be more changes to discuss, but for all children it is useful to know what is going to happen. You know best the type of things that are important to them and you can always ask them what they want to know. It may include some of the following:

- Who their teacher will be: even if they already know (and may have met them) it can be helpful to talk about their new teacher and remind children of their name
- Changes to timetables including start times, breaktimes
- How they will get to their classroom
- How they will get lunch
- PE days (especially if they have changed)
- Age appropriate information about COVID procedures (e.g. will you be wearing a mask when you drop them off, will their teacher?)

You may not have all of this information and that is OK, just share what you can. Being honest with your child about not knowing all the details shows them that even adults don't have all the answers sometimes and that is OK.

If your child is starting a new school, it's a great idea to go and visit it before they start. In normal times their current school or nursery would probably have organised this before they left, but things have been very different this year and many children are starting new schools that they have never seen. If so, try to visit over the holidays. You probably won't be able to go inside the grounds, but just being familiar with the journey and with how the school looks will help. If there is time you could combine the visit with stopping off somewhere your child likes to go (a playground, library, café) to make the whole experience feel special. If your child is particularly anxious, make a few trips to the school and maybe take some photos of them standing by the gate to stick on the fridge when you get home.

### **Prepare them (and you) for the start of term**

Avoid last minute panic. Help them feel ready for the new school year by trying to get everything sorted in good time for them to start. If you can, try and make this fun – for example making a list

and going shopping for pens and pencils or a new water bottle can make your child feel prepared for their return to school.

### **Get sleep on track**

Not getting enough sleep can really fuel anxiety. Waking up a tired and grumpy child on the first day of school makes for a much more stressful morning for everyone. If your child has got into a late-night habit over the holidays, start moving bedtime and wake-up time a bit earlier (about 15 minutes a day) about a week before school starts again.

### **Encourage them to play and connect**

Playing with other children is really important for kids. It gives them space and freedom to learn, to share their thoughts with others, to let off steam and most all to have fun. Every child is different in terms of how much and what form of playdates they prefer, and you will know best what works for yours, but if you can, try to get them together with friends before the start of the new term.

If you struggle with arranging or holding playdates think about how else you can help your child have that contact. You don't need to pack your diary with sleepovers and swimming sessions but see if you can arrange something small before school starts. If that really doesn't feel comfortable perhaps there is a mum or dad who will have your child round for a play in the garden for an hour. Another good tip is to just take your child to the local park when you know there will be lots of local children about – no need for planning or hosting – just instant play!

### **Help them to gradually face their fears**

If there are things your family has been avoiding because of the pandemic, for example public transport, public loos, busy places, think about whether your child needs to get used to these again before the new term. Use the remainder of the holidays to gradually move them out of their comfort zone and get them used to these things again. If your child is very frightened, the following tips can help:

- Build up to doing the scary thing in gradual steps.
- Do it when they are feeling OK – not hungry, tired, cross.
- Lots of rewards, cuddles, treats each time they try. It may not always go smoothly, but focus on the fact that they tried; it takes real courage to try to do something you are scared of.
- Sometimes it will be too hard for them – that is OK. Take a break and try again another time.

***If you have anxieties too and helping your child face their fears is overwhelming, that is completely OK. Do not put yourself in a position where you feel really distressed – they will pick up on your vibes! Ask someone else to help them instead – a friend or family member they trust.***

For example, if your child needs to go to school on the bus but has not been on a bus for 18 months and is worried about this, you could start by going together on a short, quiet bus journey. Next you could try a longer bus journey, or a busier time of day, and then keep building up until your child is confident catching their normal bus during rush hour. However, if you feel very worried about catching buses too, maybe consider getting a friend who is confident with buses to come along too - or get them to just take your child without you!

## **Managing your own anxious feelings**

You may also be feeling quite anxious about the start of the new term. Many parents do, and it's probably more common than usual this year. If so, you may find the approaches below help you to feel a bit calmer as the new school year approaches. This will in turn help you to support your child.

### **Is there someone you can chat to?**

Sharing worries really does halve them. Talking to someone else can help you to break free from a cycle of worry. If you prefer to speak to someone you don't know, you can find some suggestions at the end of this tip sheet.

### **Distraction**

Find ways to distract yourself from your thoughts. It may not always work, but distraction can help when you are overwhelmed. You may have to test out different activities to find something that suits you. Some people find colouring, leaving the house for a walk, exercise, podcasts or reading useful, but you will know what works best for you.

### **Recognise that transitions can be challenging**

The end of last term may have felt a bit different or strange. Many parents found they were not able to mark the end of their child's school year in the way they would have liked. You may now be worried about your child starting a new year, a new school, or even starting off in Reception. However, please be reassured that schools know that children have not had the normal experience coming into this new school year – they are expecting children to be under-prepared and a bit more anxious than usual. It can also be helpful to hold in mind that these transitions will feel more normal after a few weeks.

### **Decide ahead about boundaries and activities**

The start of term can bring a whole raft of new requests from kids: to join clubs, to do things after school, to have more independence. If you know there are some things which are likely to come up with your child, it is worth deciding what you are comfortable with/can afford and having a conversation with them about it. For example, perhaps they can go to tea at a friend's house but can't sleep over. Or, they are not old enough to walk to school alone, but they can walk themselves to the local park.

If you are not certain about how much independence you should give your child, it can help to discuss with other (sensible) parents.

There may also be things your child doesn't want to do, for example sleepovers. Coming up with a plan together before the start of school can help them and you feel more prepared and reduce any feelings of anxiety about any particular issues.

### **Remember, your children's worries do not have to be your own**

When you are feeling anxious, your child's worries can be overwhelming. You may want to step in and fix things for them so they don't have the same experiences you did. But just because your child is worried about something, it doesn't mean you have to be too. If you can step back a little from their worries you will be better able to help them cope with them. This is not always easy and don't beat yourself up if you find yourself sharing their fears about school.

## Let the school know

If you have concerns about your child's return to school, it is fine to send a message to your child's new teacher. They may not be able to respond immediately, but it means they will be aware of your concern when the term starts and sometimes it helps to manage your anxiety by getting your worries written down.

## The Parenting with Anxiety Study

The Parenting with Anxiety project, at the University of Sussex, is testing a new online course to help parents who experience anxiety and their children so they can become more confident together.

The online course takes the form of eight interactive modules - each around 20-30 minutes long - which offer a range of approaches that anxious parents can use to raise confident children.

Parents will complete the course in their own time, at their own pace, at a time that suits them and on whichever device they prefer. Parents will also be asked to try out the skills they have learnt with their children.

Half of the parents who join the Parenting with Anxiety project will be enrolled on the online course and half will only be asked to complete questionnaires at two or three points over the next 12 months. The project is designed like this because it is the most effective way to evaluate how well the online course works. If the course is found to help parents in the study, the team hope it will be rolled out across the UK and to help the tens of thousands of parents experiencing anxiety.

### Who can take part?

We are looking for any parents (birth, adoptive, step) who would describe themselves as follows:

- A UK resident, parent of a child aged 2-11
- Has at least 50 days' contact with the child per year and can confirm that they see enough of the child to report on the child's current anxiety level
- Experiences substantial levels of current or lifetime anxiety (see notes).
- Able to commit to completion of questionnaires at up to three time points over the next 2 years, even if allocated to the control arm

**Find out more and sign up at**  
**[www.parentingwithanxiety.org.uk](http://www.parentingwithanxiety.org.uk)**

## Some additional sources of support and information

**NHS Information on Returning to School:**

<https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/coronavirus/going-back-to-school-or-college/>

**Childline Calm Zone:** Activities to support children to feel calmer

<https://www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/>

**Safety Net:** lots of helpful information and activities to support children with returning to school. The most recent e-zine is focused on starting secondary school

<https://www.safety-net.org.uk/news/e-zine-issue-9-stepping-up-to-secondary-school/>

**Billy and the Big New School:** Really nice book for children about to start reception.

[https://www.amazon.co.uk/Billy-School-Anholt-Family-Favourites/dp/140833979X/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=billy+and+the+big+new+school&qid=1627640945&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Billy-School-Anholt-Family-Favourites/dp/140833979X/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=billy+and+the+big+new+school&qid=1627640945&sr=8-1)

**Young Minds:** Charity focused on the mental health of children and young people

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk>

**Anxiety UK:** Resources for adults and children experiencing anxiety

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>