

The following article was published in  
**SEN Magazine**  
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# High anxiety

**Márianna Csóti** looks at how to help anxious children manage their fear of school

**S**ometimes, children's anxiety is so intense it prevents them accessing education. School phobia is a complex mix of anxiety disorders: separation anxiety, agoraphobia, panic disorder and social phobia. It is not a true phobia in its own right, as it is not a fear of the school building but rather of what goes on inside school and what school represents. It is often referred to as school refusal.

Some children are so anxious about going to school that they are made physically unwell at even the prospect of attending. Symptoms include, crying, urgent visits to the toilet, feeling faint, headaches, hyperventilation, insomnia, nausea and vomiting, a racing heart, stomach aches, shaking and sweating. However, children can also become depressed and have general anxieties that affect every aspect of their lives.

Triggers for school phobia include, starting school for the first time or

starting a new school, being bullied, being off school through illness or holidays, bereavement of a person or pet, feeling threatened by the arrival of a new baby, having a traumatic experience, having problems at home, not having good friends or any friends at all, being unpopular, feeling a failure in PE or academic lessons, and fearing panic attacks when travelling to school or while in school. Some children are anxious because they have a disability or special need; they worry how others will react to them.

## Tips to help anxious children

Empathise with anxious children and don't attach blame. Make their time in class non-threatening, rewarding (by giving praise) and reassuring, so that they can relax enough to take in some of the lesson. Children under stress cannot learn effectively.

*Anxious children will be hypersensitive to any form of criticism, real or perceived*

Allow anxious children to visit the toilet without fuss. Lower expectations and do not force them to do something that will increase their tension or cause embarrassment. Understand that anxious children will be hypersensitive to any form of criticism, real or perceived. Acknowledge the effort it takes for them to attend school, and the distress it causes their family as well as themselves.

Explain a young child's problem to peers in a basic and matter-of-fact way, so that they become more understanding and tolerant. Older children who have social phobia will



not want more attention drawn to them but might appreciate very close friends being told, as they might have difficulty explaining themselves. However, it is important to get consent first.

Intervene immediately if there is any suggestion of bullying behaviour. Try to anticipate anxious children's needs and smooth over their fears. Create an environment where they can be successful; give plenty of warning about deadlines and organise work in bite sized pieces.

Try to include anxious children in group activities, as social isolation will compound their problems (with ASD, though, this can make anxiety levels rise). Being kept in the same small group can make them feel safe and included.

Have a special contact person for anxious children who can meet them on arrival in school or whom they can go to when they are very anxious. Inform all teachers involved with anxious children about their difficulties and ensure that they will be understanding.

### **Anxiety and ASD**

Children with ASD often take comfort in a regimented and precise routine and can be anxious if it changes, being unable to predict what might happen next. Stressed children with ASD can impose a more rigid routine than previously used in order to cope with their stress.

If a change in the school day is unavoidable, explain the situation to all and ensure that someone stays with any anxious child to give support and remind them of what will happen when. Whenever possible, prepare children in advance for changes in routine, such as sports day, special assemblies, having a visiting speaker, days out, inset days and exams.

Choice can cause anxiety, and children with ASD can gradually be exposed to a decision-making environment by starting with only two

## *Try to anticipate anxious children's needs and smooth over their fears*

options. Having too many variables adds to stress. When stress is extremely high, make the choice for them with their agreement.

Children can be anxious when they have finished their allotted task or if break times are unstructured. Give them a book to read or a puzzle to do, as even asking them to pick their own book can create anxiety. Alternatively, anxious children could come to school having prepared activities in their school bag.

Children with ASD may need time between activities to adjust to what will come next. For example, at break time they might need to be instructed about where to go and what to take with them. It can be hard for them to adapt between directed and non-directed time.

Social situations can be particularly stressful as children with ASD cannot process nonverbal (body language) information as well as other children can. They find it hard to interpret any meaning that is not literal and find it hard to give appropriate responses. Being teased or ridiculed over something anxious children cannot understand can distress them and they may eventually develop social phobia. Awareness of children's difficulties and providing clear explanations at times of confusion is extremely helpful.

Children with ASD can become very tired through having high levels of anxiety and by having to work so hard at trying to process all the social information given to them. Allow children with ASD to have breaks when their anxiety mounts. Sitting in a quiet corner of the class or the school library where they can read, do a crossword puzzle or become immersed in a special interest can help them relax through distraction,

change of pace and time out. Going on an errand can also give them a much needed break.

At home, more physical activity could be encouraged. Anticipate anxious children's needs by timetabling breaks into their home and school schedules.

Offering physical comfort or verbal reassurance can increase irritation and anxiety in children with ASD, although children without the condition may take emotional comfort in the experience. Anxious children with ASD find it more helpful to be given space, with the knowledge that there is understanding and help when required.

Sometimes children need a few days off school to unwind and regain their emotional balance, or to attend part-time or even be educated at home for a while.

Since children are individuals, cautious trial and error will help identify what methods suit, what to do when and which methods to avoid. Attention should be paid to what children say they need or show they need. Independence should not be forced if children are not ready for it, regardless of what other children their age are doing, and adults should accept their coping mechanisms. It is vital to involve parents and encourage them to give and receive suggestions and share understanding. **SEN**

### **Further information**

Márianna Csóti is the author of many books aimed at helping children, including *School Phobia*, *Panic Attacks and Anxiety in Children*:

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