



School Problems

About school problems

School anxiety

Whether they are in primary, secondary, 6th form, special, mainstream or independent establishments, children and teenagers can find going to school difficult for a whole host of reasons. They may be very unwilling to get up, get ready and go in; they may feel sick, or complain of stomach/headaches; they may get angry or upset. If this kind of reluctance persists, it becomes increasingly stressful and worrying for the child and for parents.

Some children are anxious about the thought of school when they are at home, but settle down during the school day; some children are mostly well-behaved and happy at home but show difficult or anxious behaviour while they are at school. This could be due to what's happening in the environment, such as noisy classes or unsupervised playgrounds. Anxious feelings about school could also be due to problems with friends, bullying, or peer pressure to be naughty. Another cause can be learning difficulties such as dyslexia which have not been identified and which make the child feel they are no good at school; this may lead to behaviour that tells you "it's better to mess about and have fun rather than be shown up for finding schoolwork difficult."

Some parents find their children's distress at going to school so hard to bear they keep them at home, to avoid daily upsets. It may seem like a solution but doing this will confirm your child's fears about school and can make the problems much worse. It is really important to address these issues with the school and work together.

School refusal

When children refuse to go to school altogether, extreme fear and anxiety are the significant underlying factor. It is also called 'school phobia'. There can be many causes for school refusal; a child might feel overwhelmed by anxiety about schoolwork, relationships with peers or teachers, or low self-esteem; they might be experiencing bullying and are too afraid to talk about it.

They might be feeling worried about things at home – some kind of change, family breakdown, family dysfunction, a new sibling, moving to a new area, mental health conditions, illness, bereavement, divorce or separation – these can all heighten anxiety and fear that something bad will happen at home while they are at school.

Behaviours that accompany school refusal are typically tantrums, physical complaints such as stomach aches, headaches, vomiting, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, pleading or begging to stay at home and even threatening to harm themselves if made to go to school.

Alternative Provision (AP)

Pupils who can't attend mainstream school for a variety of reasons, such as school refusal (also school exclusion, behaviour issues, short- or long-term illness, or teenage pregnancy) are entitled to 'high-quality, alternative learning provision' from the Department for Education - Alternative Provision (AP). Settings for AP include Pupil Referral Units, in-school units, independent providers, home tuition or online tuition. Every local authority website should set out its AP.

Truancing

Children who truant without their parents' knowledge may be doing it due to the causes described above. They may just be fed up and bored with school and not see the point in going. It can be a real shock for parents to find out their child is not going to school, causing feelings of anger and worry. A child who truant may be very unhappy and out of control and may be showing other signs of behavioural problems as well, such as lying, stealing and aggression.

Some parents do not positively encourage their children to go to school and this can damage their children's attitude to education and diminish their chances in life.

Consequences of non-attendance

Parents must, by law, make sure their child gets a full-time education and will be held responsible if their child does not attend school regularly, whether through truancing, school refusing or taking term-time holidays. The main consequences for parents include:

- Penalties, including fines
- Being taken to court
- Their child being excluded
- Putting their own jobs in jeopardy, when they have to stay at home with their child
- Strain on their wellbeing and family life

Education Welfare Officers work for a local authority education welfare services department or a group of schools or academies in an area. They work closely with key staff in schools to identify and resolve attendance problems, they meet parents and pupils at school or home to support pupils' regular school attendance and to reduce unnecessary absence and truancy and they explain legal responsibilities.

Pressures and stress

There is a lot of pressure on children and young people to do their best and get good results, and the stresses and strains of all aspects of life can sometimes get on top of them, making it hard to get on with their learning.

At school this may include:

- Difficulties concentrating in class due to noisy or disruptive pupils
- Problems with friends or bullying
- Difficult relationships with teachers
- Pressure around course work hand-ins or exams
- Problems learning due to specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia
- Problems paying attention due to developmental problems such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Outside of school this may include:

- Lack of study space at home
- Problems at home getting in the way
- Feeling unsupported by parents or carers
- Lack of sleep, a good diet and exercise
- Problems with friends

Ways in which stress can manifest include children refusing to do their homework, or lying about having done it, not taking part in lessons at school; their marks falling; no longer trying their best; they may get stressed and angry, or develop behaviour problems; they may withdraw and develop depression or low self-esteem.

Exam stress in particular can cause problems with anger and anxiety levels. If a child is already experiencing emotional problems or mental health difficulties, exam stress can be the last straw.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Children with physical or learning disabilities and their families can have lots of extra stresses and strains, especially when managing their child's schooling. Parents can face challenges with their child's behaviour or ability to socialise and make friends, capacity for reading and writing, ability to understand things, concentration levels and physical capability.

If you think that your child has a special educational need or disability, contact the SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) at the school. Your child may be eligible for specialist support. Children and young people aged up to 25 who have more complex needs than can be met through special educational needs support, are entitled to an education, health and care (EHC) plan.

EHC plans identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs.

Finding out more about SEND support in your area

You can find out how to get local support through:

- Council for Disabled Children www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk
- Information, Advice and Support Service Network (the national network across England) www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/information-advice-and-support-services-network
- The Local Offer – search your local authority website to find out how you, as parents and carers of children with SEN, disability or disadvantage can access services in your area.

Parents and schools working together

1. Develop good communications

- Aim to build a positive relationship with your child's class teacher/tutor/ head of year/SENCO and always discuss any concerns you have that affect your child's education
- Agree on plans of action together so that you can measure improvements
- Recognise the ways they have helped your child

2. Know when and how to escalate a concern

If you have tried with more than one member of staff to improve a situation but have been unable to reach an agreement with the school, and are still unhappy with their response, you can write to the school governors with your concerns. You can also go to your local council website and follow the instructions in the Education section about making a complaint.

3. Make links with other parents

Your child's school should create opportunities for making links with other parents, especially at secondary level, when parents are less inclined to gather around the school gate. Opportunities for getting to know others could emerge at parents' and information evenings, social events, reading schemes, parents support groups.

What can help? What to do next

These are some things that can make a difference:

School / home partnership

- If you are worried about any aspect of your child's behaviour or wellbeing at school, or if they are not going in to school, it is essential to talk to their teacher as soon as possible.
- Parents and teachers need to work together to support the child and reassure them that there is a way through.
- A home-school book can be a good way of keeping communication going so that everyone is informed of what is happening in the other setting.
- If you are unhappy with the way a member of staff is responding to your concerns, escalate to a more senior person; after that, write to the school governors; lastly the LEA or Academy Trust.
- If bullying is a concern, the school will have an anti-bullying policy in place, which should be on its website but if not, ask to see a copy.

School anxiety and school refusal

- Tackle it early – the longer anxiety about school persists, the deeper it becomes. Seek professional help, such as counselling, through the GP.
- Talk to your child, listen to their fears and respect their feelings. Try out practical strategies that help them to be in control of their anxiety, such as a 'worry box' for younger children – designate a 'worry time' for each day, write it down, post it into the box, close the lid and don't give the anxiety any more airtime that day. For teens and young adults support them in finding anxiety-reducing activities and strategies (e.g. more exercise, fun activities, peer group support).
- Talk to the school – make them aware, agree on strategies to make things easier (e.g. flexible start time, a buddy) and check in regularly on progress.
- If you think it'll be viewed empathetically, talk to your employer – make them aware of the situation. More and more employers are committing to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their employees.

Exam stress and academic pressure

- Try to reduce your child's fear of failure and disappointment – help them to recognise that these happen to everyone and it's ok. One way of doing this simply is to have ordinary conversations about 'being human'
- Make sure their routines are good – sleep, diet, time for homework, exercise, fun
- Be the anchor in their rocky seas of revision-stress
- Simply be there for them if exam results are disappointing – avoid offering advice or empty platitudes. Sit with their upset, it will pass
- Help them to pace themselves and have attainable goals (this doesn't mean they can't be high goals)

Special Educational Needs

- If you think your child may have learning difficulties you can ask for them to be assessed so that help is provided. Speak to the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in the school to ask for an assessment from an LEA-based educational psychologist.
- If you are concerned about your child's mental health, discuss it with both the GP and the school to consider referring you to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) if necessary.

Finding support

All resources listed on this sheet are for information only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, YoungMinds cannot accept responsibility for changes to details made by other organisations.

Emotional support for your child

The Mix

www.themix.org.uk

If you're under 25 you can talk to The Mix about anything that's troubling you over the phone, email or webchat. You can also use their phone or online counselling service.

Helpline open daily 4-11pm: 0808 808 4994

Email: www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us

Webchat open daily 4-11pm: www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team

Counselling service: www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/the-mix-counselling-service

Finding a counsellor or therapist

School services

Ask your child's school whether they have a free counselling service. For example, Place2Be provides emotional and therapeutic services in many primary and secondary schools: www.place2be.org.uk

Free or low-cost services

You can search online and use the Youth Wellbeing Directory to find services near you: www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing

Private services

If this is an affordable option, you can find accredited private child and adolescent therapists near you by searching the Counselling Directory: www.counselling-directory.org.uk, BACP website: www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists, and UKCP website: www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist

Childline

www.childline.org.uk

If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small.

24/7 helpline: 0800 1111

Chat 1:1 with an online counsellor: www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat

Email: Sign up on the website, so you can send your message without needing to use your name or email address, at www.childline.org.uk/registration

Mee Two

www.meetwo.co.uk

A free app for teenagers providing peer support and resources. Young people can share what's going on for them and send supportive messages to others. All messages are fully moderated.

Download from Google Play or App Store.

Information and advice

Ace Education

www.ace-ed.org.uk

Independent advice and information for parents on education issues in England. Adviceline open Monday-Wednesday from 10am-1pm, term time only. Phone: 0300 0115 142

You can find information on exclusions, special educational needs, bullying and other issues at: www.ace-ed.org.uk/advice-about-education-for-parents

Contact

www.contact.org.uk

The national charity for families with children with disabilities. Provides online, printed and helpline advice on education, benefits and finances, childcare, social care, medical information and more. Helpline open Monday to Friday 9:30am-5pm.

Phone: 0808 808 3555

Email: info@contact.org.uk

British Dyslexia Association

www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

Information, support and advice for people with dyslexia and those who support them. Helpline open Tuesdays from 10am-1pm, and Wednesdays and Thursdays from 10am-3pm.

Phone: 0333 405 4567

Email: helpline@bdadyslexia.org.uk

Dyspraxia Foundation

www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk

Information and advice for people with dyspraxia and their parents, carers and families. Helpline open Monday-Friday from 9am-1pm.

Phone: 01462 454986

Email: www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/helpline

Finding support

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Child Law Advice (from Coram Children's Legal Centre)

www.childlawadvice.org.uk

Provides free legal advice and information on education, child and family law to parents, carers and young people.

Phone support available Monday–Friday 8am–6pm. If you are calling about education law the number is 0300 330 5485.

Email contact form: www.childlawadvice.org.uk/email-advice-education

You can find information on a range of school related topics at www.childlawadvice.org.uk/education.

National Autistic Society (Education Rights Service)

www.autism.org.uk

Support for people with autism and their families. Their Education Rights Service can help with information about educational rights and entitlements, as well as with specific issues such as school, assessments and education plans.

Phone: 0808 800 4102

Leave a message on the 24-hour answering service and someone will call you back, usually within 3-5 working days.

Email: www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/education-rights/education-rights-service-enquiry.aspx

Independent Parental Special Education Advice (IPSEA)

www.ipsea.org.uk

Free, independent and legally based advice to help families get the right education for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

You can book an appointment with their Advice Line or Tribunal Helpline, and/or request information at www.ipsea.org.uk/Pages/Category/service-overview

National Careers Service

<https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk>

Information, advice and guidance to help young people make decisions about learning, training and work. Open 8am to 10pm, 7 days a week.

Phone: 0800 100 900

Webchat: Select the 'use webchat' option on the homepage.

YoungMinds

#Take20

www.youngminds.org.uk/take20

Ideas and suggestions to help parents find 20 minutes to do something together with their child to support confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

Parents Lounge

www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge

Our Parents Helpline experts answer questions on school refusal, exam stress, anxiety and other topics.

Top Tips

www.youngminds.org.uk/take20/top-tips-for-you-and-your-child

Supporting a child through a time of difficulty or change.



MindEd

e-learning to support young healthy minds

www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html

MindEd for families is a website where you can hear about other parents' experiences and find clear, helpful guidance on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

CRISIS TEXT LINE |

If you, or someone you are caring for, is experiencing a mental health crisis, you can text the YoungMinds Crisis Messenger for free, 24/7 support. Text YM to 85258.

Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus. This service is powered by our trusted partner, Crisis Text Line.