

# How to Empower Your Child to Deal with School Anxiety

School anxiety is heart-wrenching for both parents and children. It is one of the most common reasons why students do not attend school, or develop school refusal behaviours. Sometimes school anxiety looks like other things such as illness (headaches, tummy aches), and sometimes it can even present as anger in the form of tantrums or aggression and defiance.

## What school anxiety is not

Separation anxiety and school anxiety have absolutely nothing to do with behaviour, defiance or poor parenting. Nothing at all.

It's likely that parents with school anxiety have already tried the 'tough love' approach, even if only out of desperation. This is completely understandable given that parents are highly motivated to support their children and are willing to try most things, keeping best interests at heart.

Anxiety masks itself in so many different ways and it can take many different failed approaches before anxiety is considered a possible cause or reason for the school refusal.

## Why getting tough won't work

School anxiety isn't just a case of 'won't', it's a case of 'can't'. Anxiety is actually a physiological response that is driven by the brain when the brain thinks we are in danger. It is a protective mechanism that help to survive. Sometimes school anxiety is driven by fear about what might happen to the parents while the child is at school, and sometimes anxiety driven by what appears to be nothing at all.

When the danger is real or not is irrelevant. Many kids with anxiety know logically that there is nothing to worry about, however there being driven by brain that tells them that there is something to worry about and that there is a real threat.

When this happens the brain goes into fight or flight, or freeze mode and triggers the body to automatically surge with neurochemical to help pump up the body to deal with the threat. Natural anxiety can very convincingly look like a tantrum (fight), or resistance (flight), or hiding in their room under the sheets (freeze).

When the bodies alarm system triggers and goes on high alert, the brain goes into a holding pattern and is not focused on thinking logically and problem solving, is based on survival and spontaneity. As humans we are programmed to keep herself safe above all. This response is instinctive, automatic, and incredibly powerful. That is why tough love does not work. Punishments for negotiation are not effective as the behaviour in the moment was not determined by choice but rather by instinct.

When you're dealing with an anxious child, you're dealing with a brain that will fight like a warrior to keep them safe. It's not going to back down because of tough words, threats of punishment or a motivational speech. To the child's brain this is a do or die moment.

Great news is that there are powerful ways to turn this response around!

## But first...

Is important to ensure that the anxiety isn't from any of the following environmental triggers:

- Bullying
- friendship problems
- problems with schoolwork
- unidentified learning difficulties
- Genuine illness within the family
- recent losses of life within the family or extended family

Teachers generally know what's going on within the school environment so it's always when having a chat to get a clearer idea of what you're dealing with in regards to your child's school anxiety. In many cases there are no other issues at school and on paper everything appears to be fine. In these instances anxiety may be the cause of your child's school refusal.

**To gain a better understanding of how anxiety packs young people, below is a poem written by young person suffering from anxiety and this is how they feel as they begin to drive to school with their parents each morning. The closer to school they get the more their body physiologically winds up to the point that they feel like this.**

## Panic Attacks

My heart is racing  
My chest is tight  
I'm feeling spacey  
I'm not alright

My feet are wobbly  
I can not stand  
I can't think straight  
Got shaky hands

Can't do the things I normally could do  
Can't cross the street  
Can't tie my shoe

My voice is slurred  
My vision is blurred  
I am consumed by worry  
For my safety

Wish I was alone  
In my safety zone  
Where no one could see me  
I'm feeling dizzy

I hate when this occurs  
These blurs and slurs  
Now in everyday chores it is my fear  
That anxiety should appear

I'm praying for a breakthrough  
I need to break free  
From this stronghold that keeps me in captivity

## Ways to help

When your brain is reacting to things that aren't really a threat, what it actually needs is for the child to come in and be the boss. Let's talk about how to do that.

### **1. Your anxiety isn't the enemy, so try not to fight it.**

Remember that the part of the brain responsible for keeping us safe is a fierce warrior trying to protect us. Even though it might be causing us a lot of distress, it doesn't mean to. If it could, it would hug you, cry with you and walk one step in front of you to ensure you are always safe. But in reality it cannot do the things, so instead fuel to your body to make you strong, fast and powerful whenever it thinks you need a helping hand. If you can get the thinking part of your brain back in control it will stop the fuel surging and help you feel more in control and feel better. The message needs to come from inside the child in a thinking brain to be believed.

### **2. Talk to your brain and let it know, 'I've got this. You can stop worrying now.'**

One of the most powerful tools we have to help the brain down is called the relaxation response. The only trick is it won't work until you flick the switch to come down. Best and most effective way to flick a switch is through breathing. Not just any type breathing – strong, slow, deep breaths that come from your belly:

- In through your nose for three beats
- out through your mouth for four beats

(Imagine you have a huge red balloon inside your tummy. When you breathe in blowing up the balloon, and then as you breathe out you are so slowly releasing the air from the balloon)

### **3. Intense exercise and get active for a couple of minutes**

Remember the fuel surging through your body needs to be burnt up in a proactive positive way. Walking or exercise will burn the fuel and stop the physical things that you're feeling. Doing intense exercise for five minutes like running, skipping, jumping, or anything intensive will really help. A brisk walk is just as good if intense exercise cannot be done.

### **4. Feel what's happening outside of yourself.**

When you become anxious to become hyper aware of what's happening inside your body. Your brain will continue to worry excessively about things in the future and ask millions of "what if" question. Bring your brain back to the present, the here and now, by turning your attention to what's happening around you. Take your shoes off and feel the grass to your feet, touch your arm and feel the touch of your fingers against your skin. Hear the noises around you, taste something sweet or sour (popping candy is great but a lemon or lime will do just the job). Use the five senses in your body to help you get in touch with the present.



Additional Extra – Add if you like

## **Overcoming Anxiety**

Empty your mind of negative things  
Take a deep breath  
Breathe out, breathe in

Get your body in tip-top shape  
Eat well, sleep well, exercise  
Don't you wait, don't compromise

Remember your fear is only in your head  
It's not as scary as what you dread  
Don't believe the frightening imaginings of your mind  
Also remember take it a step at a time

Don't be afraid of embarrassment  
Don't be afraid to fall  
You are much stronger than you know  
So don't be afraid to let go

Be confident, be empowered  
Stand up tall  
You are a Child of God, after all

You've got the power within  
The power to move mountains  
With faith as small as a mustard seed  
So believe

Say the words  
Words of affirmation  
Don't give in to frustration

Believe in your strength  
Your ability  
Find a quiet place, a place of tranquillity

Say your prayers in all situations  
Then be patient  
Be thankful for who you are  
Who you will become

The Lord will help you  
He'll answer your prayers  
You will overcome obstacles  
He will always be there.

If there real danger

or

is this my mind

playing

tricks



on me?