



Supporting your child with school-related stress and anxiety

Most of us have experienced anxiety at some point: the butterflies, racing heart and tight chest that accompany a case of nerves or apprehension about a future event. For a child, anxiety can even serve a purpose. For example, it's normal to feel anxious before a sports tryout, or seconds before reading the morning announcements. Additionally, low levels of anxiety can help your child with things like attention, problem-solving and detecting a threat. But when levels of stress increase and impact your child's ability to engage in daily activities at school and home, it can signal a mental health problem that requires support.

For some children, the most significant source of anxiety is school itself.

This resource was developed to assist parents and caregivers in supporting and navigating their child's anxiety related to school.

Note: While we use the term "child" throughout, we recognize that the child in your care may be a teenager or young adult and that you may be caring for more than one child.

There are numerous reasons students become school-avoidant that aren't exclusively related to school-related anxiety. Worries about fitting in and being included by peers may impact attendance for some. Others may experience discrimination and/or bullying at school, making it an unsafe space. In these cases, an active response that addresses these concerns is required. If your child has experienced racism, homophobia, or other forms of discrimination or bullying at school, reach out to your school principal to address the situation.

What is school-related anxiety?

School-related anxiety, which can affect students of all ages, is an excessive fear of school and school activities, such as making friends, completing assignments/tests, or answering questions in class. As a parent/caregiver, you are often the primary support person to help your child overcome school-related anxiety.

How do I know if my child is experiencing school-related anxiety?

If your child displays several of the signs below, they may be struggling with school-related anxiety.

- increased number of school absences
- decreased connection with peers at school
- decreased academic achievement
- lack of interest in school



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- worries about going to school
 - Acting out/refusal/crying/tantrums in younger children when it is time for school
 - physical symptoms of anxiety – headaches, stomach aches, other aches and pains
 - low mood related to going to school

What can I do to help my child manage school-related anxiety and stress?

There are many ways you can support your child with stress and anxiety:

- Keep a predictable routine around school. Knowing what to expect helps your child feel safe and lowers stress levels.
- [Practice being calm together](#). Relaxation strategies can help decrease feelings of pressure, discomfort and worry.
- Help your child challenge their anxious thoughts and replace them with more balanced thoughts. For example, you could ask, “What would you say to a friend who was having this worry?” or “What would your friend say to you?”
- Support your child in taking brave and realistic steps toward attending school. This will look different depending on the level of school avoidance.
- Motivate your child to keep trying. Praise their brave efforts, remind them of previous accomplishments, and support them to face new challenges.

How can I support my child’s transition back to school after an absence?

The following strategies may help your child return to school after a period of absence. Keep in mind that you might not be successful right away; the benefits of a new strategy can take time. Acknowledge that you’re feeling discouraged and keep trying new approaches that resonate with you.

- Believe your child will return to school and share that belief with them.
- Communicate expectations about school attendance (e.g., when staying home is allowed and when it is not). Life happens, and there will be times when your child isn’t well enough to attend school; however, consistent attendance helps build confidence and reduces feelings of anxiety.
- Listen and validate your child’s emotions. This sends the message that they are understood and heard. It also helps build trust, which can open the door to trying coping strategies.
- Develop a transition plan for returning to school in partnership with the school team and your child wherever possible. A transition plan will help set them up for success. It may include a gradual return process, reduced academic expectations, identification of key individuals that the student feels comfortable with, and what they can do when anxiety is strong.

When should I reach out for additional help?

If you don’t see an improvement in your child after trying various strategies, and school avoidance continues to be a problem, it may be time to seek outside help. Speak to your child’s classroom teacher or another school staff member with whom you feel comfortable.

Examples of available supports include the following:

- **Teaching staff** can help by modifying your child’s schedule and/or academic expectations. They can also help prepare for a transition back to school. You can request a meeting with the school team to discuss how best to support your child.



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- **Student support staff** can help share and support using coping strategies in school to help your child manage throughout the day.
 - **School mental health professionals** can work with your child on a graduated entry plan with skill development to support their attendance.
 - **For more serious concerns** requiring longer-term treatment, school mental health professionals can help with a referral to child mental health services and work with the services to ensure that recommendations and strategies get adequate school support.

You can also contact:

- [Children’s Mental Health Ontario](#) – Access free mental health treatment in your area, including walk-in clinics (virtual and in-person,) ongoing counselling and therapy, and intensive and specialized treatment. No referrals necessary.
- [One Stop Talk](#) – Instantly connect with a therapist from anywhere in Ontario to create a plan and access additional support when needed.
- [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#) – Access a range of services in several Ontario communities. Easily access free services by walk-in or appointment.

Supporting a child experiencing a mental health problem can be challenging; consider reaching out for your own support. Contact [Parent’s for Children’s Mental Health](#) to connect with other parents and caregivers going through similar experiences.

Helpful resources

- <https://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/for-parents-and-caregivers/>
- <https://www.ontario.ca/page/bullying-we-can-all-help-stop-it>
- <https://www.family.cmho.org/school-avoidance/>

References

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