

Anxious About School

Guidance for Parents / Carers

“
Working together
to provide support
for every anxious child
earlier.”



**Anxious
About School**
Support



Contents

Introduction	3
Understanding Anxiety.....	4
Anxiety About School, and links to Attendance	6
Neurodiversity and Anxiety	8
Getting the Right Support at the Right Time	9
What can you expect the school to do?.....	10
What you can do at home (1): Promoting wellbeing	11
What you can do at home (2): Talking about emotions	12
What you can do at home (3): Maintaining close and positive connections	13
What you can do at home (4): Providing structure & routine.....	14
What you can do at home (5): Remembering self-care.....	15
Contacts	16

“ I wanted to pass on that I think resources like this are hugely important to provide children and parents with the tools needed to overcome obstacles in the present and, hopefully build a more empathetic generation in the future. ”

(County Durham Parent)



Introduction

Background

In 2023, County Durham's **Children and Young People's Mental Health Partnership** created a guidance document called '**Anxious About School**'. This document aims to help school staff identify and support children and young people (CYP) who are anxious about school, including those who are struggling with their attendance as a result. Since then, lots of schools across the county have used this guidance, and we have seen some huge steps forward in the support being offered in schools as a result.

Now, we would like to provide similar guidance to the parents and carers of CYP in County Durham who are feeling anxious about school. We hope this booklet offers helpful ideas for supporting children who may be receiving professional help for anxiety, as well as those who sometimes experience anxious thoughts or feelings. After all, the support parents and carers can provide at home is just as important as the support that staff can provide in school. Things are most likely to change for the better when everyone is on the same page and working together. We want to help parents and carers feel really confident in their ability to provide this sort of support. So, if you have a child who is feeling anxious about school – this document is for you!

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank West Sussex County Council for the fantastic work they have already done in this area. We have drawn lots of inspiration from their work. We would also like to give a huge thank you to all the parents and carers that have so kindly helped us to develop this document.

Anxious About School:

An umbrella term used to describe any child or young person who is struggling to engage in their education due to emotional stress and distress.



Understanding Anxiety

What is anxiety?

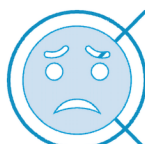
Anxiety is a natural emotional response to uncertainty, something new or a lack of safety. Everyone experiences it from time to time and it is a very normal part of daily life. Sometimes anxiety is even helpful because it keeps us alert and safe. Generally, we only get anxious about ‘big’ things (like exams, or starting at a new school or job) and for most people it normally only lasts a short time. However, for some people, anxiety can become a real problem.

What are some of the signs that anxiety might be becoming a problem?

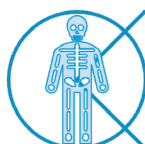
While it’s natural for children and young people to feel anxious sometimes, there are certain signs that suggest anxiety might be becoming a bigger problem. These include:



Anxiety is stopping them from doing everyday things – like going to school, playing with friends, or trying new activities.



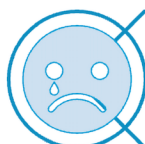
They feel anxious very often or for long periods – and their worries don’t go away, even after the situation changes.



They have strong physical reactions to anxiety – such as headaches, stomach aches, trouble sleeping, or panic attacks.



They avoid things that make them anxious – like going to school or social situations.



They seem unhappy or distressed – withdrawing from family, feeling overwhelmed, or struggling with emotions often.

If anxiety is affecting your child’s wellbeing, talking to someone like a teacher or a healthcare professional can help. Early support can make a big difference. More on this more in the **‘Getting the Right Support, at the Right Time’** section.



What keeps anxiety going?

When we feel anxious about something, it is natural to try to avoid it. This generally makes us feel relieved for a while. BUT! That feeling of relief also tells our brains that we were right to avoid the thing that made us anxious, and this can make the anxiety grow. This is sometimes known as the **'anxiety maintenance cycle'**. More on this in the next section.

What about the role of the environment?

When a person is feeling really anxious, it's easy to focus all our attention and energy into trying to help them feel less anxious. Of course, this is a sensible goal and so lots of widely used interventions for anxiety are based on this idea. However, this doesn't mean the issue rests entirely within the person who is feeling anxious. A helpful expression to remember is *'The person is not the problem. The problem is the problem'*. This reminds us to also consider the role of the environment. In the next section, we look at how the school environment can contribute to feelings of anxiety for some children and young people, and how this can affect their attendance.

Maintaining a broad and balanced view

Although we refer to anxiety throughout this guidance, this does not mean we should take a narrow view of the issue at hand. Indeed, we know some CYP who are finding it difficult to attend would tell us this is not primarily due to feeling anxious. For example, some might see it as a strategy for self-protection in response to a stressful environment. For this reason, we should always take personalised and balanced approach in our efforts to bring about positive change.

Anxiety About School, and links to Attendance

What is 'Anxiety About School'?

People can feel anxious about lots of different things. Sometimes, children or young people (CYP) can become really anxious about school. Sometimes, they become so anxious about school that it stops them from being able to attend regularly. This is sometimes referred to as **Emotionally Based School Avoidance** (or EBSA). In Durham, our families told us that they prefer the term '**Anxious About School**'.

Why do some children and young people develop Anxiety About School?

There are lots of different reasons some CYP develop anxiety about school and we have to treat each person as an individual. There is very rarely one simple reason – more likely there are lots of different things going on. Trying to get a better understanding of the reasons behind a child's anxiety about school is an important step towards giving them the right support. Often, it is easier to figure this out by working together with your child's school and perhaps even professional services. We talk about this more later on (including things you can expect a school to do when you raise concerns).

Research does tell us that there are four common 'functions' of school-based anxiety. These are shown in the graphic to the right.

You might notice that the first two could be seen as factors that 'push' the CYP away from school, and the second two could be seen to 'pull' them towards staying at home.

There might be more than one of these 'functions' going on for your child at the same time.

To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school such as low mood or anxiety

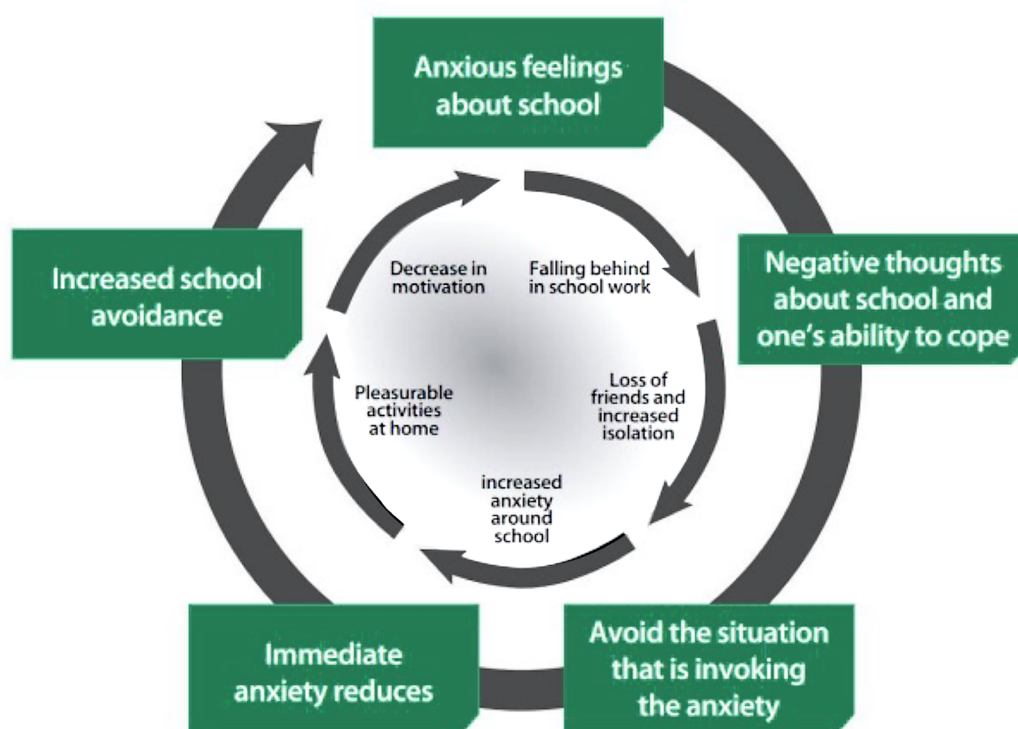
To avoid uncomfortable situations that might be stressful such as academic or social demands

To reduce separation anxiety or to seek attention from family members

To pursue tangible reinforcers outside of school such as going shopping or gaming

How can non-attendance make anxiety about school grow?

In the last section, we explained how avoiding the ‘source’ of our anxiety can lead to that anxiety growing. West Sussex County Council have produced a handy diagram that shows exactly how this cycle can play out when a CYP is anxious about school.



So, when CYP who are anxious about school avoid it by not attending, there are lots of things that can end up making the problem worse. Things like feeling cut-off from friends, or falling behind with school work. This is why it's so important for people like family and school to work together to identify the problem early and provide timely support. More on this in a later section.

Using the right language

Most CYP who are anxious about school would like to feel less anxious and would like to be able to attend more regularly. The problem is that high levels of anxiety can leave us feeling powerless and stuck. For this reason, we have moved away from terms like ‘*school refuser*’. The word ‘*refusal*’ makes it seem like CYP who are anxious about school are ‘*doing it on purpose*’. This is both untrue and unhelpful.

Neurodiversity and Anxiety

What is neurodiversity?

Human beings are wonderfully varied in both body and mind. The natural variation in brains and minds is sometimes described using the term neurodiversity. There is no right or wrong way of thinking, learning, and behaving – just different ways.

When people's mind works differently to what is considered typical, we sometimes describe this using the word 'neurodivergent'. Neurodivergence is a wide spectrum, including conditions like autism, attentional deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and more.

Neurodivergence, autism, and anxiety

Research shows that CYP who are neurodivergent are much more likely than to experience Anxious About School than their 'neurotypical' peers. This is particularly true of CYP with social communication and interaction difficulties, like autism. Of course, not everyone with these sorts of difficulties will have a diagnosis of autism.

We know that autistic CYP can sometimes find elements of the school day difficult to cope with. Three key areas that can be particularly challenging (and can contribute towards feelings of anxiety about school) include:

- Communicating and interacting (including talking about their worries)
- Processing information (including understanding their emotions)
- Sensory processing

What specific things about school might cause an autistic CYP to feel anxious?

Looking at the school day in a little more detail, we can identify some common 'pressure points' for autistic CYP. These are areas that they can sometimes struggle to manage confidently, and so may become associated with feelings of anxiety.

- Transitions, e.g. moving from home to school, lesson to lesson, task to task etc.
- Busy physical spaces, or spaces that otherwise provide lots of sensory stimulation (e.g. corridors, lunch halls).
- Social situations like lunchtimes or group learning activities.
- Changes to things like staffing and routines, especially when unexpected.
- Academic learning tasks, especially if they are new, challenging or open-ended.
- Activities that involve being independent and organised.

Importantly, none of this is to say that anxiety is simply a part of autism. Anxiety in autistic and other neurodivergent CYP can and should be supported in its own right.

Getting the Right Support at the Right Time

One size doesn't fit all

As mentioned before, feeling anxious can vary from being a completely normal part of life, to being a significant and lasting problem. This means it's important we match the support we provide CYP who are anxious about school to their level of need.

In Durham, schools and services use something called the 'i**Thrive** model' (pictured in the image on the right) to help us think about the different levels of support that might be needed. We also follow something called 'The Graduated Approach', which is a process involving four stages:

- **Assess** – Work together to gather information to understand what's going on.
- **Plan** – Co-create a support plan with clear goals and strategies.
- **Do** – Put the plan into action with everyone involved.
- **Review** – Regularly check how things are going and adjust the plan as needed.



The importance of early intervention

We should always aim to identify needs early and respond quickly. If we do this well many CYP will only need a little bit of support to get back on track. For CYP who are anxious about school, an early-intervention approach should focus on maintaining their attendance. As a parent or carer, you will want to calmly listen and talk to them about their worries, and at the same time be clear about the importance of going to school. Reassure them that you and the school will work together, with them, to make things better. You will want to tell the school as soon as possible that there is a problem, and work in partnership to create a plan.

When anxiety about school becomes really 'stuck'

For some CYP, however, anxiety about school is already a big problem that has got in the way of them attending school for a while. In these situations, our approach to support will need to be quite different. Here, we don't tend to focus on getting them back into school as fast as possible. Instead, we focus on building up their emotional wellbeing and taking things one step at a time. At this stage, it is likely that some extra support and guidance from specialist services will be helpful. This might be from the **Emotional Wellbeing Effective Learning (EWEL)** Team, for example.



What can you expect the school to do?

When the school learns that a child or young person is feeling anxious about school, key members of staff (like the Senior Mental Health Lead) should refer to the '**Anxious About School Guidance**' document. This document will help them to follow a graduated approach and make sure your child gets the right level of support, at the right time.

Some specific examples of things you can expect a school to do include:



They should listen to both you and your child. It's important that the school acknowledges the challenges your child is facing, and the impact it's having on you as a parent too.



Stay in touch, even if your child isn't attending. A named staff member should be your go-to person, keeping regular contact and offering support during any time away from school.



Work together to understand what's going on. The school should partner with you and your child to explore what's making things difficult and look for ways to make school feel safer and more positive.



Make a plan – together. You, your child, and the school should meet to create a clear plan with small, manageable steps to help improve attendance and wellbeing.



Support school-based needs. Whether it's extra help with learning, support with friendships, or addressing bullying, the school should respond to what your child needs to feel safe and supported.



Think about the start of the day. Some children need a little extra help settling in. This could mean meeting a friend at the gate, having a quiet space, or calming activity to go to, or having a small responsibility in school.



Bring in extra help if needed. If things aren't improving, the school should consider involving other professionals who can offer more support.

If you feel like it would be helpful to have some support when talking to the school about your child's needs, you can contact Durham SEND Information Advice Support Service (SENDIASS). Find out more about them on their website: durhamsendiass.info

What you can do at home (1): Promoting wellbeing

When a child is struggling to attend school due to anxiety, we generally want to them to be able to rejoin as soon as possible. However, if we rush into this before they are ready it is likely to fail. We need to make sure that they are in the best possible position to join successfully. This means focusing on their emotional wellbeing.

Evidence suggests there are '5 Steps' we can all take to improve our mental health and wellbeing. Read through the steps below with your child, and together try to find some simple ways you can build them in their daily routine.



Connect

Connecting with others helps us to feel close to people. It can make us feel like we belong and feel valued for who we are. You can connect to people in lots of different ways. Text or call a friend, watch your favourite TV show with your family, or eat a meal together.



Be Active

Being physically active can help maintain good mental health. It can also help you to sleep better, clear your head, and lift your mood. You don't have to do anything especially difficult! Focus on doing something that you enjoy. Walk the dog, bounce on the trampoline, dance around the kitchen, or do your own favourite activity.



Take Notice

When we pay more attention to the present moment, it can improve our awareness and help with our mental wellbeing. This can involve taking notice of your thoughts and feelings, your body, and the world around you. You might find that you enjoy mindful colouring or doodling, or going for a walk and connecting with nature. Try tuning into all five of your senses and see what you notice.



Keep Learning

When we learn something new it can boost our confidence by helping us to feel like we are growing and developing as a person. Trying to do some school work is going to help you feel like you're not slipping behind, but of course you can learn to do new things in lots of ways. Read a book, watch a documentary, or pick up a new hobby.



Give

Research has shown that people who help others are more likely to rate themselves as happy. After all, helping others is a nice feeling! You can fit 'giving' into your day in lots of different ways. Do a household chore, give someone a compliment, phone a friend and ask how they are, or maybe read with a younger sibling.

In the toolkit section you will find: '5 Steps to Wellbeing' planning template.

What you can do at home (2): Talking about emotions

Learning to understand and manage our emotions helps us feel more in control – that’s especially useful when thinking about returning to school. When children feel more emotionally prepared, the transition becomes a little easier and less overwhelming. The starting point for this is talking about feelings in the first place.



Role-Model by Talking About Your Own Feelings

When we share our own feelings in a calm and honest way, we’re showing children that it’s okay to talk about emotions. Saying things like, *“I felt really nervous today too, and here’s what helped me”*, shows them that all emotions are normal and manageable.



Name Them to Tame Them

Naming / labelling the emotion you notice in your child can be a helpful way of reducing the strength of it. Saying something like *“I can see you’re really worried, you’ve started fidgeting more and have gone very quiet, let’s have a think about what might help”*.



All Feelings Are Welcome

Let your child know that every emotion is okay – whether they’re feeling sad, angry, worried, or excited. There’s no such thing as a *“bad”* emotion. What matters is helping them understand what they are feeling, in order to manage those feelings safely.



Be Present and Listen

Sometimes young people just need to know you’re there. You don’t always need to fix things – just listening with your full attention without offering suggestions about how to fix things can be really comforting.



Check-In Often

Make regular check-ins part of your routine. It can be a quick *“How are you feeling today?”* at breakfast or a little note or message with a smiley face. These small moments show your child you care and that it’s safe to talk.



Help Them Learn Calming Tools

Support your child in finding what helps them feel calm – like breathing exercises or drawing. Practice these together so they feel confident using them when they need to.



Help Them ‘Rethink’ Unhelpful Thoughts

Sometimes young people get stuck in ‘thinking traps’ like *“I always mess up”* or *“Nobody likes me”*. Gently help them reframe those thoughts – try something like, *“What would you say to a friend who felt that way?”* or *“Let’s look at the facts together”*.

In the toolkit section you will find: Useful prompts for talking to an anxious child.



What you can do at home (3): Maintaining close and positive connections

The best way to support an anxious young person is by working together as a team. Keeping in close and regular contact with the school throughout this process is really important to maintaining the child's sense of connection. This is important both for wellbeing and for re-engagement. We talk about this in the 'What can you expect schools to do?' section too – staying connected is a two-way street!



Talk to the School Early

If you notice your child is struggling with feelings of worry or anxiety, let the school know as soon as you can. Acting early and getting a plan together before the problem gets too big can make a massive difference.



Work Together as a Team

It really helps when everyone – both at home and at school – is on the same page and presenting a united front. Try to agree on a clear and consistent approach so your child gets the same message from all the adults around them.



Keep it Positive

If you have any concerns or doubts about the plan, it's best to talk them through with the school privately. In front of your child, keep things as positive as possible. They need to see that you believe the plan will work. Avoid saying anything that could lessen their confidence in the process, or their trust in the school.



Stick With It, Even When It's Tough

It's totally normal to hit a few bumps when putting a plan into action, so try to expect some challenges along the way, and work with the school to find solutions together. It's especially common for things to feel harder after weekends, school holidays, or if your child has been unwell. That's okay – just go gently and keep the routine going as best you can. Remember, every day is a fresh start.



Try to Avoid Big Changes Where Possible

Changing schools can feel like a solution when things are really tough. A 'fresh start' can sound appealing, but it does mean more uncertainty to manage which can make things harder. If it feels possible, working things through with the current school is often preferable, as your child already knows the environment and the people. Of course, we recognise that one size doesn't fit all and there will be situations where this won't feel like the right thing to do for your child. It's about finding the path that best supports your child's wellbeing.

What you can do at home (4): Providing structure & routine

When a young person is struggling to attend school due to anxiety, it is important to maintain some routine and structure. This creates predictability, reduces uncertainty, and helps us feel safe and secure. It also brings purpose to the day and ensures the child is completing essential tasks like getting dressed and washed, eating at mealtimes, and getting enough sleep. This will also help towards their readiness for re-attendance.



Self-Care and Self-Esteem

Sticking with self-care routines like washing and teeth brushing ensures we are keeping ourselves clean and healthy, which is important for positive self-esteem (i.e. thinking positively about ourselves).



Staying Well Rested

Sleeping well means we can cope and manage better in the day. Everything is harder when we're tired (especially getting up in the morning!). Start by sticking as closely as you can with your normal nighttime routines.



Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

Eating well, and at regular times, nourishes our bodies. Similarly, exercising (of any kind) keeps our bodies active and strong, while also releasing positive natural chemicals in the brain (called 'endorphins'), which can lift our mood.



Balancing Demand (aka 'Energy Accounting')

Some tasks will feel 'high demand' for anxious young people, like leaving the house, learning time, or doing chores. Aim to balance these with 'low demand' activities throughout the day, like colouring or listening to music, which allow them to rest and recharge. Make a list together of activities that drain and recharge your child's 'battery'.



Make a Clear Plan Together

Then, work with your child to create a daily plan that balances these high- and low-demand activities. You might want to create a visual timetable that clearly shows the plan – if helpful, you could break this down into smaller chunks of time (e.g. morning, afternoon, and evening). If needed, you could also use a social script/story to support the young person to understand why some structure is useful in the day.

In the toolkit section you will find:

An example social script/story to read with your child/young person
Energy Accounting resources
Visuals to help structure the day



What you can do at home (5): Remembering self-care

Last but by no means least! Having a child who is anxious about school can be emotionally, mentally, and even physically challenging for a parent. Always remember, your health and wellbeing matter too. Even small things – like a quiet moment with a cup of tea or a short walk – can help you to recharge your own battery. Here are some things you can do to look after yourself:



Feel Your Feelings

Although we have suggested trying to keep things positive in front of your child, know that it's okay to feel overwhelmed or unsure. Nothing about parenting an anxious child is easy! Be kind to yourself and know that your feelings are valid.



Talk to Someone

You don't have to figure it all out alone. Maybe start by reaching out to familiar members of school staff or other parents. A little support can go a long way.



Keep It Real

Progress might be slow – and that's totally normal. Celebrate the little steps forward, and try not to compare your child (or yourself) to others.



Stick to a Routine

As mentioned in the last section, CYP feel safer when things are predictable. This is often true for us as adults as well! So, maintaining a simple routine can actually help all of you to feel more settled.



Breathe Together

Try calming activities like deep breathing, mindfulness, or gentle stretching. Doing it together with your child can help you both to feel more relaxed and connected with one another.



Focus on What You Can Do

You can't take away all the anxiety, but you can choose how you respond. It won't always be easy, but doing your best to stay calm and patient will make a big difference.



Remember, You're Doing Great

Every small step forward – every hug, every encouraging word – helps your child feel safer and stronger.

You're not alone in this, and support is available.



Contacts

SENDIASS:

[Durham SEND Information Advice and Support Service](#) – Durham Special Educational Needs and Disability Information Advice and Support Service is a statutory service supporting parents/carers of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and children and young people with SEND.

Telephone: 0191 587 3541 or 03000 267 007 Email: sendiass@durham.gov.uk

Making Changes Together (MCT) – Durham’s official Parent Carer Forum:

[Training & Workshops – MCT Durham](#)

Email: info@mctdurham.co.uk

Family Hubs:

Find out what’s on at your nearest [Best Start Family Hub – Durham County Council](#)

Our Best Start Family Hubs support families from pregnancy right up until your child turns 19, or 25 if they have special educational needs and disabilities. They are open 8.30am to 5.00pm, Monday to Thursday and 8.30am to 4.30pm on Friday.

Telephone: 03000 261 111

Educational Psychology Drop-ins:

[Educational Psychology drop-in sessions for parents and carers – Durham County Council](#)

Educational Psychology led parent workshops on anxiety:

[Understanding and responding to anxious thoughts and feelings about school – Durham County Council](#)

CAMHS Nurse Drop-ins:

[Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services \(CAMHS\) nurse drop-in – Durham County Council](#)

FearLess anxiety programme for parents:

[FEARless – Durham County Council](#)

Mental health and emotional support in County Durham:

[Mental health & emotional support for children, young people & families in County Durham](#)

Please ask us if you would like this document summarised in another language or format:



Braille,



Audio,



Large print.

العربية Arabic, (中文 (繁體字)) Chinese, اردو Urdu,
polski Polish, ਪੰਜਾਬੀ Punjabi, Español Spanish,
বাংলা Bengali, हिन्दी Hindi, Deutsch German,
Français French, Türkçe Turkish, Melayu Malay.

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