

Orchard Primary School Well-being Newsletter

Supporting the Emotional Well-being and Mental Health of Our School Community

Autumn Term - 2024

At Orchard, we are committed to supporting children, staff and parents in their wellbeing and mental health. We know that wellbeing, physical and mental health are all vital to successful learning.

This term's Mental Health and Well-being newsletter focuses once again on Emotionally Based School Avoidance (previously known as 'School Refusal') and attachment.

Did you know?

Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA), also known as Anxiety-Based School Avoidance (ABSA), is a term used to describe children and young people (CYP) who experience persistent challenges in attending school due to negative feelings, such as anxiety.

It's now called Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) rather than 'school refusal' because 'school refusal' makes it sound like it is the child's *choice* not to attend.

In reality however, EBSA is actually associated with emotional and physical distress. In short, it's when difficulties attending school have escalated to a point where the CYP has *continued* to struggle to attend school over a period of time.

Why does it happen?

EBSA can happen at any age, and it can be more common among children with additional or special educational needs (SEND).

It can be a stressful and worrying time for you as a parent/carer, so be kind to yourself as well your child. The most important thing is to listen to your child and to try and be calm, patient and show empathy. It's also important to look after yourself.

School anxiety can happen suddenly or build over time. If it persists, it shouldn't be ignored, but rather be explored.

Often, anxiety is at the root and these anxieties can include:

- Social or work pressures at school.
- Difficulties maintaining positive relationships with peers or staff.
- Unmet needs e.g. additional needs or feeling unsafe.
- Home and/or family factors.
- Sensory needs making the environment feel overwhelming.

How school anxiety might show up at home ...

Although some of the below may be typical behaviours in childhood development i.e. homework and defiance, some ways you might spot school anxiety in your child includes:

- Not wanting to get up, get ready or go to school.
- Anxiety and heightened emotions when getting ready to leave for school.
- Physical symptoms like headaches, stomach ache or feeling sick.
- Repeatedly complaining of feeling poorly at school.
- A change in behaviour either by becoming more withdrawn or acting out more.
- Trouble sleeping or getting to sleep.
- Performing less well at school or refusing to do any school work at home e.g. reading, homework.
- Tantrums, inflexibility, separation anxiety, avoidance, and defiance may show up too.
- If the child is allowed to stay home, the symptoms quickly disappear, only to reappear the next morning. In some cases a child may refuse to leave the house.



Anxiety

The most common way of managing anxiety is avoidance.

When we avoid the anxious situation, we get an immediate relief. However, this is only a short-term solution as when we face the situation the next time the anxiety reaction is much greater due to the increased anticipation of the event. This happens in EBSA. CYP who are anxious about attending school get an immediate sense of relief when they avoid school, however the fear of attending the next day is then much greater. They are then even more likely to avoid school again. This is called an avoidance cycle.

Instead of using avoidance to cope with feeling overwhelmed, we need to support our CYP to:

- Recognise the triggers of their anxiety
- Identify small steps they feel they can take
- Have ways they can calm themselves when they are starting to feel anxious.

This will help them deal with stressful situations throughout life and not become overwhelmed or avoid the things they find challenging.

Remember also that anxiety can make people behave in different ways, for example...

- A desire to control people and events.
- Difficulty getting to sleep.
- Feeling agitated or angry.
- Having exceptionally high expectations for self, including schoolwork & sports.
- Struggling to pay attention and focus.
- Intolerance of uncertainty.
- Crying and difficulty managing emotions.
- Avoiding activities or events (including school).
- Over planning for situations and events.
- Feeling worried about situations or events.
- Pain like stomach-aches and headaches.
- Defiance and other challenging behaviours.

The Anxiety Iceberg

Sometimes however, children simply can't express why they are anxious. Young Minds recommends

drawing an 'anxiety iceberg' with them. Here's a video

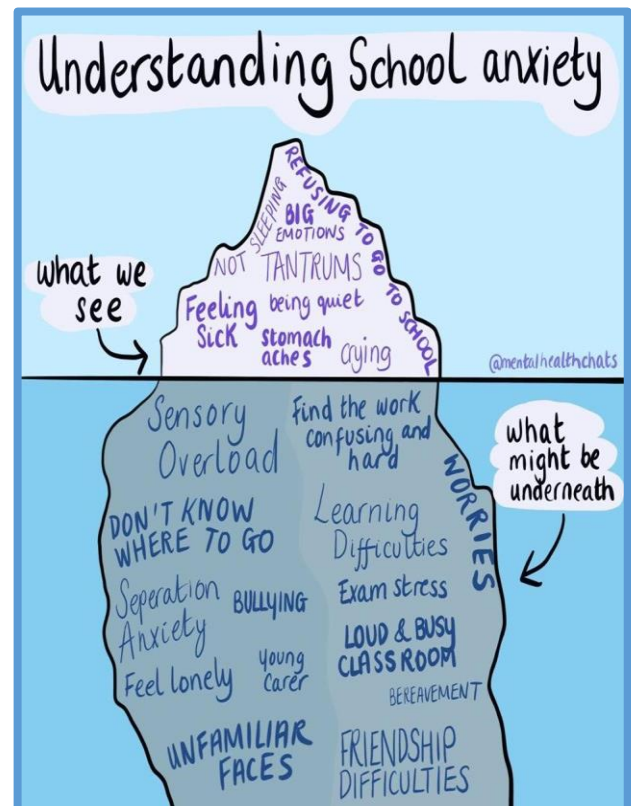
explaining how: <https://youtu.be/s51qvDmJ9I>

What can parents/carers do to help?

Help identify issues - Try to find out why your child is avoiding school. At a time when you're both feeling calm (and not on busy school mornings), ask your child to describe the key challenges of going to school. Gently ask about what is making school feel hard. Is your child struggling with friendships? Are they worried about their work? Are they fearful of being separated from their parents for a full day? Together, you may be able to solve these problems or develop a plan to manage them.

Be empathetic but firm - Tell them you are confident they can face their fears. Let your child know that while physical symptoms of anxiety, such as stomach aches, headaches and tiredness, can be unpleasant, they often ease up as the school day progresses and children overcome their fears.

Create a morning routine - A daily routine can give a feeling of security and reduce your stress! Pack bags and lay uniform out the night before. In the morning, focus on completing one task before moving on. For example, say 'Put your socks on first,' rather than making the goal too big. E.g. 'Get ready for school.' If your child isn't able to get into school, avoid arguing with them and be supportive of any small achievements they make, like putting their uniform on or walking to the school gates, even if they can't go in.



Break the task down - Give your child a choice of two alternatives if you're struggling to get a morning routine established. For example: Do you want to put your socks on first or your underwear? Would you like jam on your toast or honey? Do you want to take route X to school or route Y to school? Would you like to go by car, or by scooter? This gives your child a feeling of empowerment and can result in better cooperation.

Make staying at home boring - Is there anything about the out of school environment that makes it extra tempting to stay home? Make home as school like as possible therefore if your child stays home by setting up a routine similar to school:

- Get up and dressed by school time
- Limit access to TV and the Internet during school hours
- Encourage the child to complete their homework/work
- Limit one on one time with the parent until after school hours
- Reduce activities out of the home, such as shopping
- Reduce sleeping or lounging in bed and less genuinely sick.

Communicate with school - If you notice that your child is feeling anxious about school and it is becoming an issue, arrange a meeting with your child's class teacher. Just making them aware and knowing that they understand your child's worries can and can help them if the need arises, can be reassuring and can help to build that trusted relationship with your child.

Personalised Plan

Working with school, we can form a plan of what can be adapted to reduce some of the anxiety.

The stress hormone cortisol is often higher in the morning (to help get us out of bed!), however this can make feelings of anxiety worse in the mornings. It can therefore be helpful to focus on morning routines to start with - maybe arriving 10 minutes early to do a special 'job' or chat with a special 'mentor' in the Bubble Room. This also provides them with a 'safe space' in the school – a quiet area away from a bustling classroom first thing. Alternatively, pupils who are anxious about separation are welcome to join Breakfast Club 10 minutes early, arriving via the front entrance. It might be that it is beneficial for a child to start the school day a little later, arriving after the main drop off.

We can do a 'Meet and Greet' with a nurture activity for the first 10-15 minutes of school to help children to settle, or we can find 'special jobs' to help provide a focus and purpose...

We can work with the young person's strengths and areas of interest and resilience – drawing on past successes and positive relationships. For example, if a young person loves sport, we can arrange for each morning to begin with 10 minutes of basketball, football etc. with a 'buddy' and mentor before they join in with the main learning task.

Please do get in touch if there's anything we can do to help.

What is separation anxiety disorder in children?



A child with Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) worries a lot about being apart from family members or other close people. The child has a fear of being lost from their family or of something bad occurring to a family member if they are not with the person.

All children and teens feel *some* anxiety. It is a normal part of growing up. Separation anxiety is normal in very young children. Nearly all children between ages 18 months and 4 years old have separation anxiety. They are 'clingy' to some degree. But the symptoms of SAD are more severe. A child must have symptoms of SAD for at least 4 weeks to be diagnosed with SAD. A child with SAD has worries and fears about being apart from home or family that are not typical for their age.

What causes separation anxiety disorder in a child?

Experts believe SAD is caused by both biological and environmental factors. A child may inherit a tendency to be anxious. An imbalance of 2 chemicals in the brain (norepinephrine and serotonin) most likely plays a part.

A child can also learn anxiety and fear from family members and others. A traumatic event may also cause SAD.

What are the symptoms of separation anxiety disorder in a child?

The first symptoms of SAD often appear around age 5-6. They may start after a break from school, such as during holidays or summer. Or after a long-term sickness. Each child may have different symptoms. But the most common signs of SAD are:

- Refusing to sleep alone
- Repeated nightmares with a theme of separation
- Lots of worry when parted from home or family
- Too much worry about the safety of a family member
- Too much worry about getting lost from family
- Refusing to go to school
- Fear and reluctance to be alone
- Frequent stomach aches, headaches, or other physical complaints
- Muscle aches or tension
- Too much worry about safety of self
- Too much worry about or when sleeping away from home
- Being very clingy, even when at home
- Panic attacks or temper tantrums at times of separation from parents or caregivers

How can I help my child live with separation anxiety disorder?

As a parent, you play a key role in your child's treatment. Here are things you can do to help:

- Create quick good-bye rituals. Even if you have to do major-league- baseball-style hand movements, give triple kisses, or provide a special toy as you leave, keep the good-bye short and sweet. If you linger, the transition time does too. So will the anxiety.
- Be consistent. Try to do the same drop-off with the same ritual at the same time each day you separate to avoid unexpected factors whenever you can. A routine can diminish the heartache and will allow your child to simultaneously build trust in their independence and in you.
- Keep the promises you make to your child. Your child's trust and independence will increase when you stick to your promise of return.

- Pack a Transitional Object - Pack a small, familiar object to help ease the transition. Tuck a family photo in your child's backpack or small pocket heart in your child's pocket as a reminder that they're still loved and connected, even when you're apart. Give your child something that smells of your perfume/aftershave, or a comfort toy. A heart drawn on the hand – the comfort button – is also a lovely idea. A note in a lunchbox... a note on a handkerchief...



- Practice short "away times" with people your child trusts. For instance, a short playdate with a friend or a visit to a grandparent's house.
- Show your child reassurance and support. Encourage age-appropriate independence.
- Recognize situations that may stress your child. Knowing what stresses your child and planning ahead can help you prepare your child so they are successful.
- Reach out for support from local community services.
- Contact your child's healthcare provider if symptoms increase or new symptoms occur.
- Work with school to create a personalised plan.