



Tips for Parents - School Phobia

If a child refuses to go to school, they might be experiencing school phobia, an intense and debilitating level of anxiety in response to going to school. Emotionally based school avoidance, or EBSA, is a term which is often used to describe children who struggle to go to school because of their anxiety.

Anxiety about school can be caused by many different things, and the underlying cause might not be obvious at first. This might include:

- an undiagnosed learning difference or neurodivergence
- sensory differences
- distressing situations outside of school, such as bereavement
- bullying

Below we share some tips and practical ideas for what parents can do to support a child with school phobia.

Tip 1 - Don't try to cope alone

There are many families who are experiencing what you are. It might be helpful to connect with another parent who is going through something similar to share experiences and helpful approaches.

Tip 2 - Don't force your child into school

Supporting a child with school phobia can be a long journey. If you force a child back into school before they are ready this might damage your relationship, break their trust in you, and undermine the work you need to do together.

Tip 3 - Look after your own emotions first

As a parent, when a child won't go to school it can feel overwhelming, and it's normal to feel guilt, worry, sadness or stress. To be able to support your child effectively, it's important to also have self-compassion and to take care of your own mental health.

Tip 4 - Understand the problem

Try to understand your child's point of view and resist the temptation to jump in and fix things too quickly. When we really listen and acknowledge how hard things are this can help them to process their feelings and identify what needs to change.

Tip 5 - Look for patterns

You can help children to be curious about their own experience by asking questions about their anxiety. They may not know the answer straight away, but you can help them to notice patterns so the situation feels more predictable and manageable.

Tip 6 - Involve your child's school early on

The earlier children get support the better, and small adjustments at school can make a huge difference. This might be changing seating plans, letting your child arrive early or late when it's quieter, or avoiding calling on them in class.

Tip 7 - Work in partnership with their school

It can be helpful for a child to have someone in school they trust and can turn to when they are struggling. The school's SENDCo (Special Educational Needs & Disabilities Co-ordinator) will be able to explore any barriers to learning, make adjustments, or refer them to other professionals.

Tip 8 - Keep a predictable morning routine

Keeping a calm presence and composure can have a powerful impact on reducing your child's anxiety, and routines and predictability can also help anxious children to feel more in control.

Tip 9 - Make a plan and start small

Getting a child back into school needs careful planning, and too much too soon might overwhelm them. Make a plan, start small and remember that setbacks are expected from time to time.

Tip 10 - Be aware of potential trigger points

Children's anxiety will change over time so it can be helpful to notice triggers, such as returning to school after a holiday, academic pressures, or friendship break-ups. If their school phobia returns, remember what worked before and try again.