

School Anxiety – What Can We Do?

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When school anxiety becomes so overwhelming for children that they refuse to even go at all it can be tough to get them back in the classroom door. We know that trying to force them back into school doesn't work, therefore we need to develop a re-entry plan. Using carefully drafted accommodations and environmental modifications to identify the source of anxiety, no matter how irrational that source may seem, we can help the child to maneuver through the anxiety. While there are many ways to approach this situation, the suggestions below have proven successful in getting the anxious child back into school.

- **Creating a modified, shorter day:** This will give the child time to reset a bit and view school with less trepidation. The thought of 6 or 7 hours in school can be overwhelming for them, so an easy fix is reducing the length of time the child is in school each day. Start small and try to get through one hour of the school day. Select a class or a part of the day that they enjoy and are less stressed. It may be a particular teacher who makes them feel more secure or a subject matter that they are particularly interested in. Do that for a week or two and then add another hour. It is important to include a fun part of the day like physical education, art, lunch, music, etc. The gradual re-entry is really important; a whole day overwhelms them, but if they think of just an hour, they can do it. It's critical to ensure that the child has a tutor at home to make up the instruction that they will be missing when not in the classroom. If they start falling behind on their schoolwork, anxiety can increase and defeat the entire purpose of the gradual re-entry. This process should not be rushed, and often can take many weeks or, in some cases, months to get the child completely integrated back into a full school day.
- **CBT:** The use of some CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) and/or medication to address the anxiety can be very important. It's essential to be guided through this process by qualified medical personnel.
- **Support System:** The student will need a strong support system at school; someone whom the child truly relates to who can meet them at the school door each morning, take them to the classroom and whom they can go to during the day if they feel stressed.

- **Identify the Source of Anxiety:** It is crucial to identify the source of the anxiety. This can be difficult because anxiety is so irrational, however, many times the source can be identified and accommodations can be implemented to address it. Is it a fear of something bad happening? Is it separation anxiety? Is it a particular class subject or part of the day? An example of a simple source of anxiety and quick and easy accommodation is a child who fears something bad happening being allowed to always sit by the classroom door so that they can get out quickly. Just asking the child where they are the most comfortable sitting could be enough to alleviate anxiety.
- **Security Objects:** Allowing the child to identify and carry with them an object that they find reassuring can be helpful; some children might choose a photo of their parent to carry in their pocket, something a loved one has given them or even a mobile phone to carry in their pocket, which, while not used, can give them some sense of comfort. Some students find the use of headphones with music beneficial. Because each child is different the possibilities are endless.
- **Positive Reinforcements:** It is also helpful to have someone meet with the child everyday that they are at school to help them identify what they really enjoyed - even if they were only in school for just an hour. Looking at the positives of the time they spent in school and getting praise for the courage they demonstrated and for what they were able to accomplish can do wonders for getting the child back in the door the next day.

Listen to the child (within reason). Simply telling the child not to worry probably won't work, they need to experience a tangible lessening of the anxiety to be able to continue. Be creative, be flexible and always *THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX!*