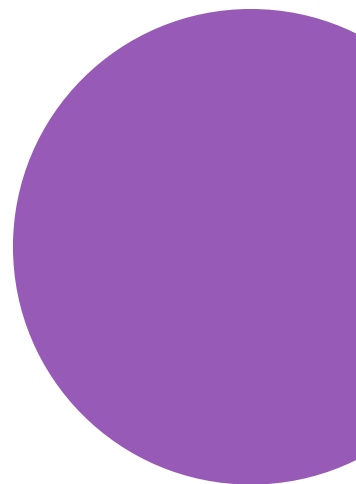


*Helping
you to help
your child*

Back to School Anxiety

Simple, actionable ideas for parents, carers
and other supporting adults



Each child is different, pick the ideas that work for you and your child

Introduction

The return to school can be an anxious time for both children and families with some children finding the transition into education settings especially challenging after the long summer break.

In this guide, I've shared 10 practical ideas to help you to make the transition a little bit easier for both you and the child you're supporting.

Cherry pick the ideas that you think might work for you and give them a go. You can always revisit others later if you need to.

Good luck!

Pooky x

If...Then... Planning

Instead of minimising worries, let's talk about them and plan for them.

Take your child's top worries and explore... 'what if' - what could they do if the thing they're worried about happens?

A common example is a fear of getting lost. If your child is moving to a new setting this may be a big worry for them, so think with your child... 'Okay IF you do get lost THEN what can you do?'

Try to encourage your child to come up with ideas here e.g:

- I could ask a teacher
- I could ask a student
- I could retrace my steps

You can add your own ideas if helpful. This kind of planning can give your child confidence that if the scary thing happens, they'll be able to manage it.





Tiny Steps

I'm a big fan of teeny tiny aims. Instead of shooting for the stars, let's shoot so low that it feels impossible we'll miss. Think with your child about aims that feel possible to them - maybe they feel up to wearing one item of school uniform or feel they could walk past the school when it's empty?

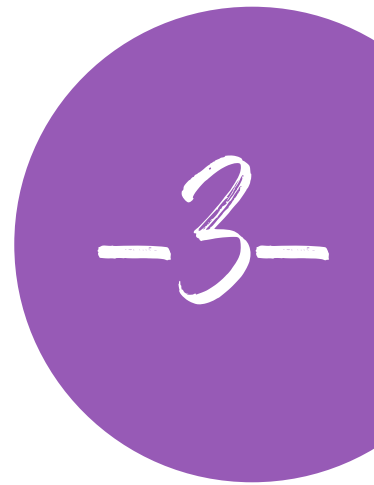
Each time your child takes a successful tiny step, it empowers them to take the next tiny step - and before we know it those tiny steps are equivalent to a giant leap.

The great thing about tiny steps is if we miss one, we don't have too far to fall back and if anything disrupts our progress (illness or a holiday) we can go back a few steps and work our way back to where we were without having to return to square one.

"I Did It!" Jar

Celebrate successes with your child in a visible way - you might write down each success, no matter how small, on a slip of paper and put it in a jar, or perhaps you'll use sharpies on pebbles, or maybe create a poster with marker pens or post-it notes.

However, you do it, having a visible reminder for your child of the things that they have succeeded will boost their self-esteem and confidence and make them feel more able both to repeat the things they've successfully done and also to try new things too because they've learned 'I can! I did!'





Your Child's Motivations

One of the easiest mistakes we can make when supporting a child to do hard things, is to use adult motivations to encourage the behaviour change we're looking for. But adult motivations make little sense to a child and will not spur them on at all. Instead, step into the child's shoes and think, 'What's in it for them?' and use those motivations as the hook for the hard work.

We can often travel in the same direction with very different motivations, maybe you have an eye on public examinations down the line or your child's social skills. Your child though, might not care about those things now, but might really like to be able to go to school to join in with lego club or to see the school dog.

Look with your child for the little things they like in school and refer to these often.



Three Good Things

When things are feeling difficult, it's common for us to mentally filter out the good bits and focus in on the bad bits; our brains are always looking for evidence to back up our existing point of view. This means that if your child has the narrative 'school is hard' or 'I don't like school' then, without intervention, they will focus in on all the bad bits which confirm this.

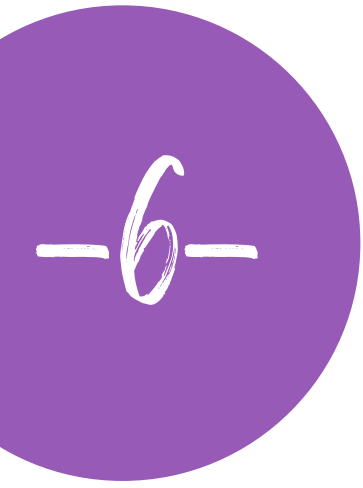
We can help to change this narrative though, by specifically hunting for the good in every day with our child - I ask my children every day to tell me three good things about today.

They don't have to be big things; but each day searching for little nuggets of joy can help your child to see the good in school, and help you understand more about what makes your child tick and give you a pool of nice things to remind them about.



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Laminated Kiss

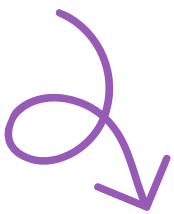
For children struggling specifically with separation anxiety, some sort of tangible object that they can hold and look at that reminds them of a trusted adult at home can be really helpful and enable them to feel connected when they're apart. Some people favour jewellery or a stone in the pocket, I'm a big fan of a laminated kiss.

Kiss a small piece of paper (with a little lip balm or lipstick on so it leaves a mark; and then write a little message of love for your child if you wish to. Laminate it (or get busy with some sellotape to protect it) and then your child can keep it in their pocket. They can touch it or get it out as needed or simply just know it's there. Many kids will slip a hand in a pocket and stroke the card without ever getting it out which can be an unobtrusive way for a child to seek reassurance as often as they need it.



Slow-Low-Low

School mornings can be a challenge if your child is anxious about school. What they need from you is for you to be super calm and supportive. That can be tough when their anxiety is triggering your anxiety but using slow-low-low speech can really help.



slow

Speak more slowly

—

low

Lower the volume

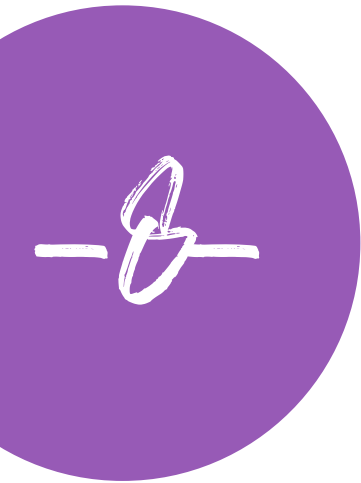
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low

Lower your pitch

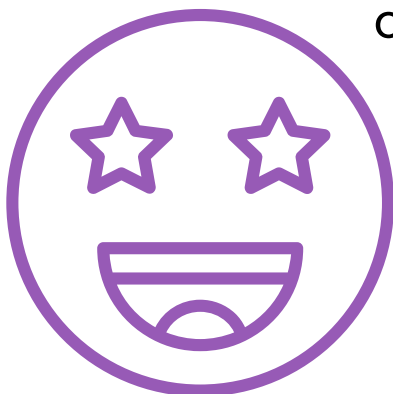
No matter how you're feeling or what you're saying, slowing down, lowering the volume and speaking more deeply will help you to sound and seem calmer and in more control. This will reassure your child, and the great thing is that after a short while, it will help you too as this kind of calm, measured speech will trick your brain and body into thinking you've got this, and you'll start to genuinely feel calm and in control... fake it 'til you make it!

Flip the Feeling



Anxiety and excitement feel pretty similar in our bodies, so sometimes we can succeed in flipping the feeling. We do this by talking to our child about how excitement feels and get curious about whether we might be a little bit excited as well as scared. Consider what there might be to look forward to... 'That fizzing in your tummy and how your heart feels a bit funny... that feels a bit like when you're excited about going on a fast ride at the fair doesn't it? I wonder what's exciting today that's making your body feel like that?'

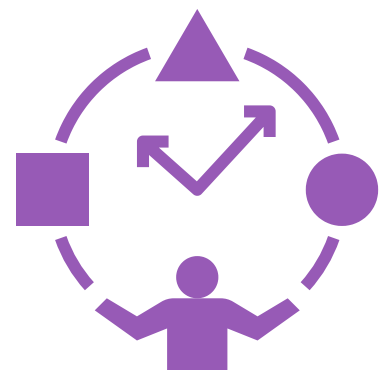
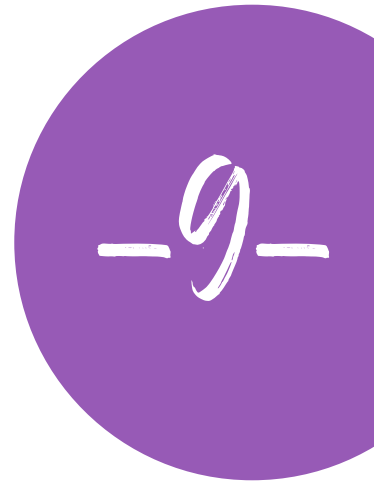
Lots of things, especially new situations can trigger a combination of both fear and excitement in us, so the game here is to tap into the excitement and use that to help our child to get into school.

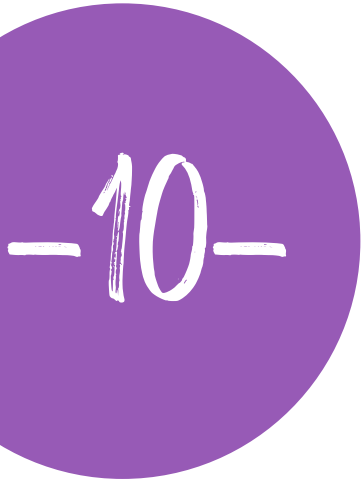


Routines and Rituals

Creating repetitive routines and rituals as part of your morning routine, including the school drop-off, can really help to ease your child's anxieties. When we do things the same way every day, they soon begin to feel familiar and safe and they also provoke less anxiety because we know we've done this thing in this way before so we don't have to invest a tonne of mental energy into grappling with a new situation.

It can also help to reassure you to know that your child has a standard routine after drop off, maybe the two of you have a funny little goodbye handshake then your child waves goodbye as they walk into the building with Mr Jones who'll take your child straight to the lego corner where they'll play until it's time for silent reading... whatever the routine, doing the same thing each day will give both you and your child confidence that it's possible and that your child will be okay.





Get it Out

If your child has lots of worries circling in their head as they arrive at school, I find that one of the 4Ss will usually help to get the anxiety out...

- Share it -

Talk, write or draw about your worries. Get them out of your head and into the world.

- Shelf it -

If now is not a good time for exploring a worry, shelf it for later – make an appointment with worry

- Shout it -

Sometimes we need to run, jump, shout or scream to try and get rid of the fizzing, bubbling worry feelings

- Shed it -

Some worries are not yours to carry, pass adult worries onto an adult to worry about, it's their job!

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- Thank You! -

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Pooky x

