

*Helping
you to help
your child*

Supporting Children Who Struggle to Go to School

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



Working together with your child's school will help to get the best outcomes

Introduction

When a child becomes reluctant to attend school, but there is no clear reason such as bullying or struggling with academic pressures, it can be difficult to know how best to help.

In this guide, I've shared practical ideas to help you to help your child, as well as ideas for working positively with your child's school.

One of the pages is a mood journal for your child to complete. This is designed to be printable and copiable; feel free to copy, use and share it.

Good luck!

Pooky x

Understand the Problem

In order to help children overcome their anxieties about school, we need to take steps to understand the problem from the child's point of view. It's important that we give the child the space and time to tell their own story without jumping to conclusions. Some children might find it easier to share their feelings and experiences through drawing, writing or play.

In order to gain a fuller understanding, a useful exercise can be to support the child to keep a mood journal, which can help to chart dips in mood and potential trigger points using a simple scale to chart their mood.



Name: _____

Day & Date: _____

Time: _____ Where: _____ Who: _____

What's happening: _____

Current mood:



Notes:

Time: _____ Where: _____ Who: _____

What's happening: _____

Current mood:



Notes:

Time: _____ Where: _____ Who: _____

What's happening: _____

Current mood:



Notes:

Mood Journal Supporting Notes

Keeping a track of a child's mood over several days can help to us understand sources of anxiety that we can work to understand and relieve. The child should be encouraged to rate their mood on a scale of 1 to 10 – where 1 is completely calm and/or happy and 10 is so anxious they feel unable to continue with normal tasks.

Frequency

Agree with the child how often they will record their mood – depending on the child and the severity of the situation, this might be as often as every hour, or as little as at the beginning, middle and end of the day.

What to record

It is important that each entry is accompanied with the time and a brief description of where the child is, who they are with and what they are doing. This need only be short notes. This information is vital as it can help to identify if there are specific times, places, people or activities that stand out as causing anxiety to the child. In addition, if they feel able to add to any of their journal entries with some additional words or drawings to add some context, this can be helpful.

Discuss

It's important that the child understands that they are completing a mood journal in order to help you to help them and that they need to be as honest as possible. Explain to them that you'll be discussing it together every few days and looking for patterns.

Keep going

It can be helpful for a child to continue to keep a mood journal for several weeks. As well as helping to paint a complete picture of troughs and peaks in anxiety, a regular record can help to see what progress is being made when we compare the current week with previous weeks. It can also help to highlight if things begin to slip.

Looking for Patterns

When reviewing a child's mood journal, you are looking for patterns and peaks and troughs. We then want to use what we've learnt to find ways to tailor practical support for the child.

When discussing their mood journal with them, you could ask your child questions like:



You often feel more anxious at lunchtime, can you tell me a bit more about that?



Your mood dipped between breakfast and lunch on Thursday – can you remember what was going on to make things feel more difficult?



It looks like Mondays are hard, can we talk a bit about that?



You felt anxious at 10am on Wednesday but much more calm at 2pm – can you remember what changed?



Thursdays seem like a day when you feel more calm - why do you suppose that is? What could we do to make other days feel like Thursdays?



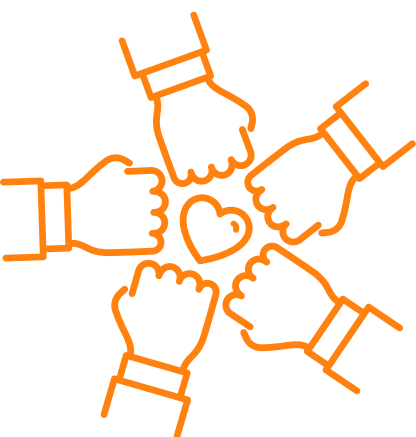
Team Around the Child

Where possible, parents and carers should work with relevant adults at school to support the child, adopting a child-centred approach – working with your child to consider what practical steps could be taken to help them to attend school regularly (There are ideas on the next page).

This approach both helps your child to feel more in control of the situation, thus reducing anxiety, and also means that the response is more likely to meet the needs of your child.

As a team, you could work with your child to set some goals – these should feel small and achievable.

Regularly revisit these goals with your child to re-assess the support being provided. Celebrate any progress that is made, however small. Where things have gone less well, consider what can be learned from the situation and what practical changes could be made to improve the situation.



A regular routine

Somewhere quiet to eat

A revised timetable

Feeling welcome and wanted

A safe space

Not being called on in class unexpectedly

A safety and support plan

An adult (or two) to check in with me

Support to catch up /keep up

This Might Help Me

Arriving early or late when it's quieter

Quieter break-times

Help from the school nurse, counsellor or support staff

An exit pass

A silent signal or scale to tell adults I'm struggling

A plan for Monday Mornings

Returning After Absence

In order to improve the chances of a successful re-entry to school after a period of absence or inconsistent attendance, it's important to ensure your child feels confident in their ability to keep up with peers, both academically and socially.

Discuss with your child any concerns they have and think carefully about how the home-to-school transition might work.

Thinking about the days and times that your child finds it easier to participate in school is a good starting point.

Ask the school if you can gradually build on these successes by increasing exposure to school. Each time your child has a positive experience of attending school, even if it is very brief, it will increase their confidence in returning full-time.

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Progress is Rarely Linear

In order to support your child longer term, they need to be enabled to seek support if they begin to feel anxious about school again. Additionally, both we and school need to carefully monitor their attendance in order to intervene early if things begin to decline.

We should also be aware of potential trigger points – these include:

- » returning to school after holidays
- » returning to school after absence due to illness
- » times of increased academic pressure e.g. exams
- » times of stress or distress e.g. loss, bereavement, friendship issues

At these times, do more of what's worked well before and listen to any concerns your child has.

Warning Signs

Picking up the early warning signs that things are slipping can help you to intervene early before things escalate.



Warning signs to look out for include:

- » Increase in absence or lateness
- » Regular complaints of physical illness
- » Difficulty getting up in the morning
- » Signs of distress when leaving home / arriving at school
- » Increased negative talk of school
- » Frequent requests to come home – possibly due to illness

If you see these signs, offer support to your child and flag your concerns with the school so you can all work together to try and prevent a negative spiral.

Works Best When

It's important that you find the way that works best for you and your child, but a few things that can really help include:

This won't be a quick win, but it will be a worthwhile one

- Keep Talking -

Try to keep an open and honest dialogue with your child. If they feel able to come to you with their concerns, you're likely to be able to address them before things deteriorate

- Work with School -

Working with the school is the best way to succeed for your child here, your child needs a cohesive home and school team around them

- Keep Learning -

Celebrate successes, no matter how small and learn from the things that go well or less well and keep your new knowledge up your sleeve for the next time you need it

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- Thank You! -

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Pooky x

