



## Managing Separation Anxiety



Everyone experiences anxiety sometimes, and it is completely normal. In the current circumstances it is understandable that you or your child might be worried about being apart when schools reopen. We've put together some strategies to cope with separation anxiety, and support with the transition back to school.

- Face your fear.** Although avoiding a feared situation (such as going to school) brings short-term relief from anxiety, in the long term it will only increase the anxiety as we never learn whether our fears will come true or that we can cope if they do. It can be helpful to gradually build up to facing fears, one small step at a time. For example, in the lead up to school you could practice walking to the school gates, or go to a busy park to get used to being around people. If anxiety is extreme, it might be that you grade the return to school so that on day 1 the child only goes to the playground in the morning to see people and then goes home, on day 2 they stay for one lesson, day 3 they stay for a half day etc. Remember to praise every attempt at facing fears.
- Create a visual timetable.** Children and young people could benefit from making a timetable so they know what to expect from the new school structure. Children with anxiety may be apprehensive about changing from one activity to the next, especially if they are unprepared for the change. The timetable can have pictures for each activity in the day e.g. a picture of a parent/carer collecting them from school at 3pm, as this will remind children they will go home at a certain time, and manage their expectations.


- Make a goodbye ritual.** You could plan a goodbye ritual in advance such as a silly handshake or a hug and a positive mantra. When it comes to the moment, perform the goodbye ritual and then go.
- Grounding techniques.** It is important to keep calm during separation even though it is very stressful, and model being calm for your child to contain their own emotions. You can use grounding techniques to help you stay calm, and practice them with your child when they are anxious. Try the 54321 technique; list 5 things that you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. Another technique is to pick a colour, and list 5 things around you that are that colour.


- Familiar faces.** Children can benefit from having trusted, familiar school staff present when they arrive at school. If possible, help your child to identify two familiar school friends who will be there in the morning, at least until the anxiety is reduced. Can they travel to school together? Can they arrange a meeting place at the gates to enter together? Could you speak to a teacher to ask if they can sit near each other for the first few days?
- Safe place.** Speak with school to identify a safe place where children can go to reduce anxiety during stressful periods. Some children benefit from taking some time to adjust by talking, which is another benefit of having a safe space before going to the classroom.

7. **Trusted adult.** Help your child to think of a teacher or staff member that they can go to during times of stress. They will speak to your child with empathy and will be understanding of their feelings. However, the adult should encourage the child to return to class once they are calm and review self-calming strategies that they can use when anxiety arises. Self-calming strategies may include deep breathing, counting, muscle relaxation, holding an object that provides comfort (e.g., picture of a parent or favourite item from home), drawing a picture, writing down feelings, or thinking of a funny time. Connect with school and the trusted adult about this plan.

8. **Transitional objects.** Your child could take a handkerchief with a parent's perfume or soothing smell such as lavender, or take an object from home (e.g. a pen, photo, toy, keyring) as a token to remind them that they are still connected to you even though you're apart.



9. **Positive affirmations.** Coping statements such as 'I love you', or 'Soon it'll be home time', or 'You're doing really well' can be helpful. Encourage your child to come up with some of their own, and write them down on cards they can keep with them at school. You could even slip some positive affirmations into their lunchbox or bookbag as well for extra reassurance.

10. **Contact.** At times of stress at school, a brief phone call—a minute or two—with a parent or carer may reduce separation anxiety.



11. **Practice positive reframing.** It is essential to help children and young people think positively about situations. For instance, remind them that they

will get to see friends in school or work on a project that they enjoy. Encourage your child to make a pro and con list about the return to school and help them notice the good points.

12. **Give positive feedback** when your child makes an effort to get through anxiety-provoking situations, like going to school, or uses strategies in order to cope with anxiety. You could create a visual reward system where your child gets recognised on a daily basis for making an effort and, at the end of the week, receives a bigger reward. You could also plan something nice as a reward to look forward to at the end of the first day back, such as a favourite meal or movie night.

13. **Problem solving.** Make a plan for new situations. This can alleviate the fear of uncertainty that may arise when children are separated from a caregiver. Firstly, identify the problem, e.g. 'I might not be able to find my friend at break time'. Come up with as many solutions as you can think of together, no matter how weird or wonderful. Then go through the pros and cons of each solution, and give them a mark out of 10. At the end you'll be left with a couple or one solution that your child can take forward should that situation arise.



14. **Stories.** Provide examples of coping role models by reading stories about children who are afraid and conquer their fears. Story books are a good medium to support children with a range of emotional difficulties. The following website has recommendations for books on anxiety [www.littleparachutes.com/category/feelings/anxiety](http://www.littleparachutes.com/category/feelings/anxiety). The Invisible String Book by Patrice Karst is a good book to support with separation anxiety.