



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

HOW TO TACKLE STUDENT ANXIETY

A guide to addressing student anxiety
in primary and secondary schools



Three action plans for schools to tackle:

- Low level anxiety
- Social anxiety around friendship groups
- Emotionally Based School Avoidance

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**CARNEGIE CENTRE
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MENTAL HEALTH IN
SCHOOLS**

Minds
Ahead

SUMMARY

Anxiety levels in children and young people are on the rise.

According to [NHS Digital](#), the proportion of 6 to 16-year-olds with a probable mental disorder increased from 11.6% in 2017 to 17.4% in 2021. While The Children's Society [Good Childhood Report 2022](#) shows that young people are on average less happy with their life as a whole than ten years ago.

The impact of student anxiety can be far reaching. It isolates people, saps their confidence and prevents them from enjoying a fulfilling and successful time at school. And with so many students affected, teachers are finding themselves dealing with a wide range of complex issues.

In this guide, we set out some practical strategies from educational psychologists and school mental health specialists to spot the red flags of anxiety and help children build the coping mechanisms they need to deal with life's challenges.



WHAT IS ANXIETY?

We all experience feelings of anxiety now and then. It's a normal response to the daily pressures we encounter, and in some situations can even give us the boost we need to perform at the top of our game.

However, when anxiety becomes relentless, leads to catastrophic thinking or manifests in physical symptoms – that requires additional support.

The signs of anxiety

Student anxiety can manifest itself in a range of tell-tale signs including:

- Restlessness and inability to concentrate in class
- Headaches or stomach aches
- Tiredness
- Irritability
- Feeling sad or withdrawn
- Panic attacks

The difficulty for teachers is that primary school children can't always express how they feel. Teachers have to help pupils talk about how they are feeling so they can get to the heart of what is making them anxious.

On the other hand, secondary school children often recognise they are anxious but don't always want to talk about it.

In a [survey](#) conducted by BBC Children in Need, 25% of 11 to 16-year-olds say they feel the need to hide how they are feeling, and a third (32%) do not feel comfortable asking for help with their feelings and emotions.

That's why it's so important for schools to create a culture of openness around anxiety and give students somewhere to turn when they need support.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

With waiting lists for specialist provision such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) at an all time high, and teachers' workloads stretched, what schools need are some practical strategies to help them support students with anxiety.

We have spoken to our experts in educational psychology and school mental health from the Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools to provide action plans for schools to tackle anxiety in three specific areas:

- Low level anxiety
- Social anxiety around friendship groups
- Emotionally Based School Avoidance

The following sections look in detail at each of these areas and examine how teachers can recognise the causes of anxiety and help students build a toolkit they can use to manage their feelings and deal with the challenges of school life.



LOW-LEVEL ANXIETY

While teachers and school leaders strive to create a positive and welcoming environment for their students, there are many aspects of the school day which can unintentionally provoke feelings of anxiety.

The causes of low-level anxiety

For primary school children, the causes of anxiety are often linked to separation from home and parents. This might include:

- Leaving a parent in the morning
- Daily routines of school
- Trying something new
- Unexpected changes of plan

Secondary school students are likely to be anxious about a combination of internal and external factors, including:

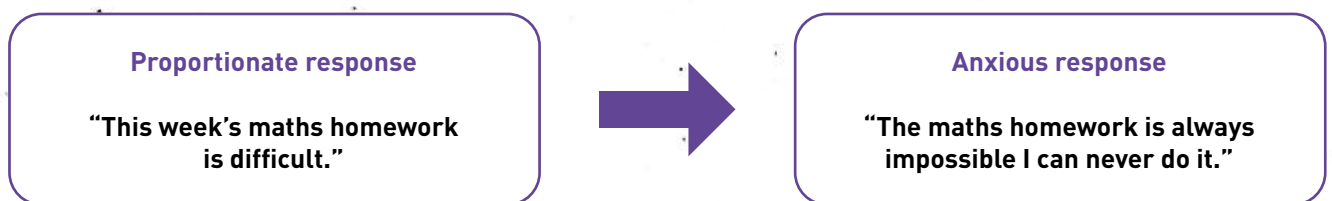
- Family relationships
- Pressure to achieve
- Being organised during the school day
- Current events or issues such as the climate crisis

The impact of low-level anxiety

When day-to-day worries start to spiral into persistent anxiety, students can fall into the trap of unhealthy thought patterns and negative thinking. Some examples of unhealthy thought patterns include:

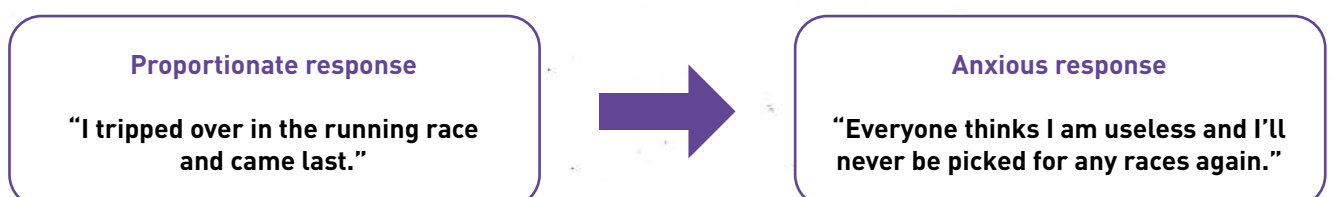
Polarised thinking

This is when a student sees everything in extremes with no room for the middle ground. Whatever the issue, a person is either right or wrong or something is either good or bad. This type of thinking makes it difficult for a student to see the nuances in a situation. Instead, they might think 'this always happens' or 'that never works.'



Catastrophising

Catastrophising means turning small problems into big ones or blowing things out of proportion and assuming the worst will happen. Catastrophic thinking can put a student off trying something new or attempting something which didn't work out well last time.



Mental filtering

When a child or young person only remembers the bad parts of a situation or the aspects of themselves they consider negative, they filter out the good news. This type of thinking ignores all the positives and leads someone to focus exclusively on the things they did wrong.

Proportionate response

“Today was mostly good except when I got lost on my way to the science lab.”



Anxious response

“Today was dreadful, I am never going to find my way around this school.”

How can schools help?

Students with negative thought patterns might seek to avoid a situation which makes them uncomfortable, but it's unhelpful to allow a child to simply avoid anxiety-provoking situations because this denies them the opportunity to grow in maturity and build resilience.

Instead, students need to develop their own coping techniques so they can face the challenges they fear, and experience success.

These are some of the strategies which teachers find effective in helping children and young people build a toolkit to support them through their daily anxieties.

1

Help children recognise triggers

Talk to the student and help them understand which part of the school day makes them anxious, perhaps it's a particular lesson, or the transition between break and learning time. One way to do this is by using the [House of Worries](#) where a student uses a house template to write or draw the things which are worrying them. You can then help them explore the issue further – are they anxious because classmates often behave badly in that lesson? Or are they concerned about forgetting the equipment they need?

2

Develop ways to respond to anxiety

Help a student recognise their feelings of anxiety and encourage them to try breathing exercises, moving around or a walk outside to alleviate the symptoms. Some students respond well to grounding techniques such as Five Senses where they acknowledge the sights, feelings, sounds, smells and tastes around them. Physical techniques such as scrunching toes is also effective for regulating emotions. Soon, the student will become more independent and learn to respond to anxiety in the way that works best for them.

3**Encourage helpful self-talk**

Ask the student to reflect on a time when things went well for them. What did they do in that situation and why did it work well? Knowing they can be successful at handling a situation will build a young person's confidence to be able to deal with the challenge next time.

4**Put scaffolding around a situation**

Give a student some control over a situation by helping them see what to expect at each stage. If they are anxious about a school event, take time to run through the agenda with them and explain what they need to bring. It's also a good idea to prepare for things not turning out as expected by helping the student think through a plan B or plan C.

Scenario 1:**Primary school children who are anxious about sports day****The situation**

The children in Year 3 are excited about sports day when they will be taking a coach trip to a local stadium where the event will be held. However, there is a small group of children who are anxious about the event.

Action plan

- Talk through the children's worries – is it the journey, the races or uncertainty about the day?
- Put together a social story – a short visual description of the situation or event.
- Plan out what will happen on the day from arriving at school to coming back afterwards.
- Allow the children to pair up with a buddy for the day.

Scenario 2:**Secondary school children who are anxious about a residential trip****The situation**

The Year 7 residential trip is supposed to be an opportunity for students to try new activities and meet other students in their year group. The students will take a long coach trip to residential centre and stay there for a week.

Action plan

- Discuss the causes of students' anxiety – is it the activities, the instructors or the food?
- Talk through the itinerary for the trip and identify the anxiety points.
- Provide information about the instructors, the eating arrangements and room sharing plans.
- Arrange for an anxious student to be in a group with friends.

SOCIAL ANXIETY AROUND FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

Positive friendships can provide support, companionship and joy throughout the school years, but for some children, worries about friendship issues can spill over into social anxiety.

The causes of social anxiety

For primary school children the causes of anxiety are likely to be focused on day-to-day interactions with friends. These might include:

- Having someone to play with at breaktime
- Being left out of a game
- Unkind behaviour

Secondary school friendships become increasingly complex and can cause anxiety about:

- Fitting in with a social group
- Responding or rejecting peer pressure
- Bullying both online and offline

The impact of social anxiety

Social anxiety around friendship groups can affect how a child behaves and how they see themselves. It can manifest in a range of ways including:

- Self-consciousness
- Fear of criticism
- Reluctance to join in with others
- Lack of concentration on schoolwork
- Anger and frustration

Social anxiety can impact not only a young person's school life but their future too, as it can prevent a student reaching their full potential. In fact social anxiety is one of the key reasons that children and young people seek support from specialist counsellors.



How can schools help?

There has been a big shift in recent years towards a relational approach in schools which aims to build positive relationships and create connections throughout a school community.

There are some simple ways school staff can take this approach:

1

Encourage mutual respect

Give students the opportunity to see each other as team players through small and large group activities, role-play and paired work. Set the ground rules for how students should listen to each other and see things from another's perspective while completing a task together. This will help them to build a sense of self and an appreciation of others.

2

Focus on the positive

Lead by example. Your positive approach sets the tone for the classroom and affects how students behave to one another. When you praise a student for their strengths rather than focusing on what they could do better, they are more likely to do the same with their friends and classmates.

3

Connect with students

Welcome the students as they come into school in the morning and greet them as you pass them in the corridors and playground. A quick question about a young person's hobby or interest reminds them you are interested in them as a person and makes them feel valued. This can reduce social anxiety and give children a sense of belonging.

4

Encourage empathy

Give children the skills to think about how their actions affect others. Ask 'how would you feel if someone said you couldn't sit next to them at lunch? Or if you weren't included in a game? Demonstrate your own empathy too by not playing down a child's feelings. Rather than saying 'it's not the end of the world' when friends fall out, remember that for many children friends are their world.

5

Make restorative conversations work

When friendships break down, encourage everyone involved in an argument or incident to explore the solution and identify where the harm was done. Help the students to think about what steps they could take to fix the harm, and what strategies they could follow to make sure the incident does not happen again.

6

Help students make friends

Talk to colleagues about any students you have noticed having problems making friends. Find an opportunity to chat to the child to find out how they interact with others and whether they are anxious about friendships. Help them make connections by suggesting they attend a lunchtime club or an organised activity as these settings can be easier for children to meet and make friends.



7

Teach students to be good digital citizens

Encourage students to be open about how they behave on social media and to report cases of cyberbullying. Use restorative conversations to show how a student can be harmed by unkind posts or exclusion from group chats. Consider bringing in external training on social media specific topics to fill any knowledge gaps for staff.

Scenario 1:

A primary school child having difficulties making friends

The situation

A Year 4 teacher has noticed one of their pupils is often alone at breaktime and has nobody to sit with at lunch. The child seems quiet and withdrawn and does not actively take part in lessons. In the past few weeks the child has complained of a stomach ache when they arrive at school.

Action plan

- Chat to the child and find out who they are friendly with.
- Find some classmates to be playtime or lunchtime buddies.
- Talk to the whole class about what makes a good friend.
- Check in with the pupil to see how they are getting on.

Scenario 2:

Secondary school friendship group difficulties

The situation

One of the friendship groups in Year 8 has been causing headaches for school staff for some time. This group of students is often involved in arguments and many of these take place on social media as well as at school. Some of the students involved are displaying signs of anxiety.

Action plan

- Set up restorative conversations to help students see how they are harming others.
- Ask students to think about how they can make their friendship more positive.
- Use assemblies to talk about positive engagement in social media and digital citizenship.
- Invite guest speakers to share experiences of positive use of social media.

EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

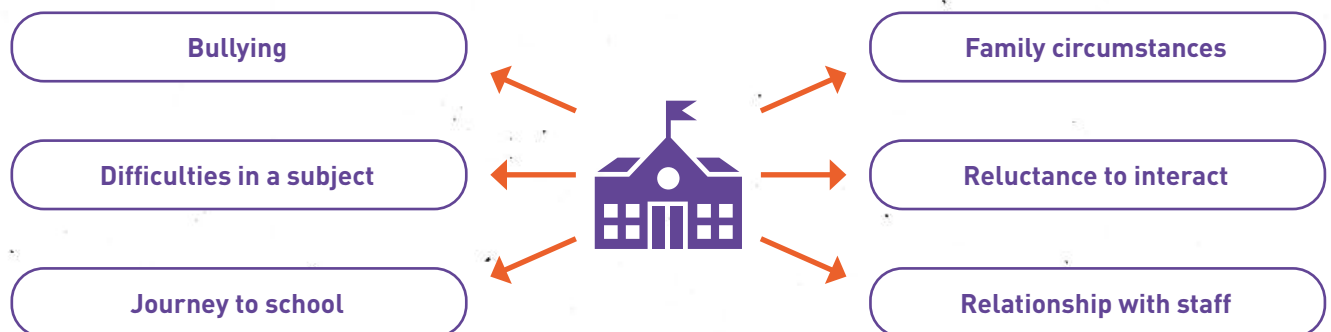
Unlike truanting or poor attendance, Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) refers to a situation where children have severe difficulty attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school.

EBSA is a significant problem for schools which are working hard to raise their attendance levels which have not yet recovered since Covid. The number of children absent more than 50 per cent of the time has doubled since the start of the pandemic according to [Government Explore Education statistics](#).

The causes of EBSA

EBSA is not a choice a student makes. It is a reflection of the emotional distress and anxiety they experience about attending school. The impact on children with EBSA can be extremely damaging to their educational prospects as well as their mental and emotional health.

There are many factors which can predispose a child to EBSA including:



The impact of EBSA

As EBSA becomes more deeply entrenched, a student can become increasingly anxious about the impact of missing learning and being away from friends. They become less comfortable about attending school and more comfortable staying at home. This can spiral into an anxiety cycle from which it is difficult to escape.

How can schools help?

As well as working on whole school approaches to reduce anxiety and promote wellbeing, it's also important for school staff to provide targeted support for children and young people who are experiencing EBSA.

These are some of the steps schools can take:

1

Draw up a return to school plan

Talk to the student about their thoughts and feelings and explore their concerns about returning to school whether it is friendships, schoolwork or a combination of factors. Use this to design a plan which puts the young person at the centre and gives them a sense of control.

2

Provide soft landings

Allow a student to come into a quiet room when they arrive at school, and let them start the day doing their favourite pieces of work with a familiar adult present. You can gradually build their resilience by placing the student in a small group, changing the room and getting them to start with a different subject.

3

Promote trusted relationships

Find out which members of staff the student has a good relationship with. It might be a teacher, teaching assistant or a member of the admin team. Where possible, set aside some time for the staff member to spend with the student as this will help them associate school with a friendly face.

4

Enable flexible days

Explore ways to help a student build up their school attendance by coming in later or earlier to avoid the morning rush, or by coming in just for the morning or the afternoon depending on timetabling. Build this up over time so eventually they succeed in staying at school for longer.

5

Gauge the challenge

Take small but positive steps to better school attendance by giving the child a sense of control over what is happening. Challenge them a little more each time with one early morning start a week, or suggest they attend all the lessons in their favourite subject. Push gently so they don't fall backwards.

6

Work with families

Maintain strong links with families and encourage parents to work closely with you to help their child overcome the anxiety that prevents them attending school. Building relationships with parents on a whole school basis through workshops, information evenings and face-to-face events will help too.

7

Support parents

Identify whether the parents have any support needs themselves. Sometimes parents are anxious about their child attending school, and if parents are working from home it may seem more natural to keep their child at home too. Try to dispel any anxieties parents have around school and show them the benefits of their child getting back to school.

Scenario 1:

Primary school pupil at risk of EBSA

The situation

A pupil in Year 5 has had low school attendance levels since the start of the year, and on the days he attends school he struggles to engage with the school routines and reconnect with his friends. As the pupil gets so upset about attending school in the mornings, his parents keep him off, which they can do because they both work from home several days a week.

Action plan

- Work on a back to school plan with the pupil and parents.
- Arrange for the parents to spend some time in school getting familiar with the routines.
- Give the child a soft landing when they arrive, such as some time in a quiet space.
- Arrange fun, low-pressure activities the pupil can gradually join in with classmates.

Scenario 2:

Secondary school student experiencing EBSA

The situation

One of the Year 9 students has hardly been in school for the past three months. Unlike many of her contemporaries she thrived during the Covid lockdowns and loved learning from home. Her transition from primary to secondary was interrupted by the restrictions and she never really settled at her new school with its noisy corridors, crowded canteen and different teachers for each subject.

Ways to tackle anxiety

- Work with the student to create a back to school plan.
- Allow the student to come into school later to miss the early morning crowds.
- Start by allowing the student to attend lessons in a few subjects at first, then gradually increase their attendance in lessons.
- Set up a buddy system so the student has friends to spend breaks and lunchtimes with.

CONCLUSION

With anxiety levels among young people rising sharply, it's becoming increasingly important to identify anxious students and help them develop the personal resources they need to learn and grow.

Teachers can help students find ways to break their negative thinking patterns and understand that not every difficult situation will result in disaster. This will boost students' confidence and show them they're capable of rising to a challenge.

School staff have long been experts in helping their students navigate friendships. While the proliferation of social media is making this task more complex, there are some whole school strategies teachers can follow to help students be better digital and real-life citizens while tackling social anxiety.

EBSA is not a new problem, but education professionals are developing a greater understanding of the causes, symptoms and effects of school avoidance and how it links to anxiety. There are effective approaches teachers can take to help students re-engage with school.

When it comes to tackling anxiety, it's important to take things at the student's pace so they make gradual but sustained progress. The small steps make a big difference.

If students feel safe and supported, they will gain the resilience they need to tackle their anxiety and embrace all the wonderful opportunities school has to offer.

If you would like to find out more about tackling student anxiety in your school why not consider one of our DfE Quality Assured Senior Mental Health Lead Courses delivered by the Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools. Funding is available for these via the DfE.

For more information contact the Carnegie School of Education at schoolmh@leedsbeckett.ac.uk or phone **0113 8122423**

About Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools

The Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools is focused on evidence-based solutions which address the needs of schools, pupils, parents and carers. We help develop professional communities of school mental health leads and support leading innovation to strengthen the mental health of the next generation at all levels of education across the UK.

We work with schools, organisations and professionals committed to ensuring that mental health difficulties do not limit success at school and beyond.

With thanks to:

- Rachel Bostwick co-author of [Positive Mental Health – A Whole School Approach](#) and senior partnership and enterprise consultant at Carnegie School of Education, part of Leeds Beckett University
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- Kate Greaves, Learning and Development Specialist Coach, Minds Ahead

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR TACKLING STUDENT ANXIETY

Mobile apps

- SAM (Self-help App for the Mind)
- Smiling Minds
- Calm
- Headspace
- Worrytree

Websites

- GoZen
- Cosmic Kids

Activities

- [60 Mindful Minutes - Nurture UK](#)
- [The School Wellbeing Cards - Dr Jerricah Holder](#)

Books

- Think Good Feel Good by Paul Stallard
- Building Positive Thinking Habits by Tina Rae
- My Anxiety Handbook: Getting Back on Track by Sue Knowles, Bridie Gallagher & Phoebe McEwen
- Starving the Anxiety Gremlin: A Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Workbook on Anxiety by Kate Collins-Donnelly
- Have No Fear by Nicole C. Kear
- How Big are your Worries Little Bear? by Jaynee Sanders
- Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside
- Worry Monsters - a child's guide to coping with their feelings by Summersdale Publishers
- What to do when you worry too much: a kids guide to overcoming anxiety by Dawn Hubner



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