

Transitioning back into School

Transitions are always stressful, and even more so if you have been out of the swing of things for a while. We have been working closely with a clinical psychologist, Dr Mundy, to put information together to give you some ideas about the best ways to support your child with the anxiety that they may be feeling about returning to school.

Dr Sarah Mundy says 'It's not surprising that the pandemic and the restrictions that have resulted from it are having an impact upon all of us. Whilst we are all in very different situations it is far from what any of us are used to and children will be noticing these changes. They are likely to be seeing more worried adults, hearing more stressful news, and will not have been able to see friends. For many, especially the little ones who struggle to talk about what they are feeling, this could be coming out in behaviour'.

She goes on to say that 'Lots of children are showing behaviour that they used to use to cope when things were hard, such as being more clingy, getting their comfort blanket back and sleeping with the lights on. This is a normal response to a stressful time and uncertainty about the future will probably still be around when your child returns to school in September'.

Dr Mundy explains below what anxiety is and how you can notice it in your child, and then she has provided some tips to help your child understand and manage it.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is the body's response to threat. It's worse when things are uncertain as they have been over the last few months. It comes from a part of the brain called the amygdala – which sort of works like a security guard. It's instinctive and aims to keep us safe. When the amygdala senses a threat it releases chemicals including adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormone). These put us into fight or flight mode which is helpful if we need to escape from something but can make us feel confused or frightened.

We have all experienced anxiety, and most of us have probably had times when it has felt overwhelming. Even if we know that what we are worried about probably isn't going to happen, our brain can trick us into thinking it will and that we need to do whatever we can to get away from that threat.

When we are anxious, especially as children, we can show some big feelings – this helps other people notice and keep us safe. It may seem like an over-reaction to us, but for children it is their brain's way of calling in the troops (quite clever really!). Children often need help understanding what is happening, finding ways to calm their bodies, and get back into a state where they can start thinking more clearly again. This works best if they have an adult that they can trust to support them with this.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CHILD IS WORRIED?

Children show anxiety in lots of different ways including becoming irritable, having problems sleeping, going back to behaviours they have shown before, having bad

dreams, finding it hard to concentrate, being restless, having a sore tummy and being demanding and controlling (the list is long!). They can take their worries out on you and can find it hard to understand what is going on.

Anxiety presents itself in many different ways...



WHAT IS SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Separation anxiety is a normal developmental process – you probably experienced it with your children when they were younger. It's normally a sign that your child has started to know that you are available to help and shows you that they feel safer by your side. They need to explore the world to learn, but, when they feel a bit wobbled they return to you as they know you can help them (before they go off on their curious little ambles again!).

Separation anxiety often increases when a child is feeling more worried in general and when they are trying new things – both might be relevant to your child now. They might show this by finding it hard to leave you when they return to school and by saying they don't want to go. There are lots of things we can do to help your child with this (some of which I have outlined in a list of "Top Tips" on the next pages).

Separation anxiety is likely to be even more pronounced at the moment - most children have been in a safe little bubble at home for some time. It must be hard for them to understand how things that were unsafe are now safe and that, if things are safe, why they can't do things that they would have done before (like be close to and play with friends).

TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING ANXIETY ABOUT RETURNING TO SCHOOL

THINK ABOUT YOURSELF

- It's really important that you, as their trusted adult, can **show your child that you can cope**. It's quite normal to feel worried about your child returning to school (we too can have separation anxiety). It's helpful if you can notice this and try to find ways to manage your own feelings.
- **Emotions are catching** and if our children see us as worried this is likely to increase their own anxiety. We regulate our children's nervous systems – our responses can affect their breathing, heart rate etc.
- **Ask yourself what you are feeling worried about**. It might be something you need to check out with teachers so you can have some reassurance about how they will support your child at school. The more information you have the easier it is for you to feel that your child is returning to a safe place where they can learn and have fun (and for you to show them that you believe that!).
- Think about your own anxiety more generally – have you been more preoccupied or less available during the lockdown? Remember that we might be present physically but sometimes more absent emotionally.

FOCUS ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD

- Children are better able to manage stressful situations if they feel safe with you – you are the most influential and important person in their lives. Returning to school will probably mean that your child wants you around more.
- Try to have more **special time** with them outside school. They might need more comfort than usual and to check that you are still available to them. Try to include lots of cuddles as there is so much less physical contact for children anywhere outside of family at the moment.
- **Let them know that you still want to be with them** and will miss them, but that school is exciting and there will be lots of fun things there that you don't do with them.
- It can be helpful for them to **have something that reminds them of you** – it will probably be difficult to bring in belongings to school (due to COVID) but you could draw a little picture on their arm (not on their hand as it will probably wear off due to the amount of handwashing that they need to do at the moment). An alternative is that they wear a wrist band (like those you get at festivals or from charity shops).
- When things are a bit more stressful the fun can go. Try to include **playfulness** in your relationship as much as you can.
- If your child is struggling with their behaviour try to **connect with them before you correct** what they are doing.

- Try to show your child that you **accept** what feelings they have and that you have **empathy** for them. This helps them feel better understood and brings you closer together. Don't just think about what you are communicating through words but with your body too – anxiety registers non-verbal communication much more easily than words.
- Working **with** your child is an important way of overcoming everyday challenges.

HELP YOUR CHILD UNDERSTAND THEIR FEELINGS

- Explain to your child what anxiety is. Tell them how, when our body thinks something is unsafe (even if it isn't) it prepares itself to fight or run away. Let them know that their heart beats faster, their breathing gets quicker, and their muscles might get hard or wobbly. Let them know that sometimes our body gets it wrong and we need to train our brain to calm down so we can think more clearly and feel better.
- Help your child notice how their body feels when they are worried. It can help if you draw a body and show on it where you feel anxiety.
- You can also help them learn ways to calm their bodies by doing some mindfulness, breathing, yoga or relaxation with them. A couple of examples are below:
 - A simple breathing exercise which calms the body is to pretend you have just taken out a baking tray of hot cookies from the oven. Ask them to pretend to smell them, breathing in through their nose, and then blow on them to cool them down.
 - It can also be helpful to ask your child to pretend different parts of their body are like spaghetti – sometimes uncooked (hard) and sometimes cooked (soft). This helps them learn the difference between feeling tense and relaxed in their bodies.
- Let your child know that you have **noticed how they are feeling**. Try to label this for them. Little children often understand having muddles or their body feelings "fizzy". Older children may refer to it as "tingles" or "pins and needles".
- Help them understand that it is **OK to be worried** and that you can help them with this.
- It's so important **not to dismiss their feelings** – they will feel much better if they are understood and you can come up with some ways together to help them.
- Try not to say "don't worry" or "don't be silly". Whilst we want to make things easier for our children by saying this, what they actually **need is to feel understood and learn that you can help them manage their big feelings**. Instead, say something like "*you're probably feeling a bit wobbly...that's not surprising when you are going somewhere you haven't been for a long time without me*".
- Try to help your child learn that their behaviours (however annoying they might be for you!) are likely to relate to a feeling driving them.

PREPARE YOUR CHILD FOR WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN AT SCHOOL

- Children feel more secure when they are appropriately prepared and know what to expect – use the information shared by the school.
- **Start by thinking about what questions you might have** as a parent and what they might want to know.
- **Help them understand what is going to happen at school** and see whether they have any questions about this. It can be useful if this is not just through talking but pictures, videos and play too.
- Try to **get into a routine again** (early bedtime, same time for waking up, eating at school times rather than snacking through the day, putting uniform on etc) that you can carry on when they return to school. You could even practice your journey there before they return – walk past the building and look at the school.
- Don't forget to **tell them about all the fun things** that they will enjoy when they return. Seeing friends, doing art, playing, learning etc.
- Talk about washing hands, being in bubbles etc.

WHAT TO DO BEFORE AND AFTER CHILDCARE

- If you can, have a **calm bedtime with a little extra time together** the night before they return to school.
- **Consider how you will manage drop off** – talk to your child about this. Try not to make the goodbye too prolonged or sneak away without saying goodbye.
- Show them that you **trust the person** you are handing them over to. You can show this through a brief conversation and through non-verbal communication.
- After school **check in with them about how they felt the day was**, find out what they enjoyed and what they found difficult. Make plans with them for what you could do next time to make the difficult times easier. Try to keep in touch with their school about the tricky times so you can come up with ways they can help your child when they are there.

A huge amount of thanks to Dr Sarah Mundy for sharing this information about how to support your child in returning to school in September. Please do contact us at hello@mawgan-in-pydar.org.uk if you have any questions .

