

School Anxiety: What Parents Need to Know

Does your child complain of a headache or tummy ache when it's time to go to school? Does your child have trouble sleeping or become clingy and whiny when it's time to head to the bus stop? Your child may be experiencing school anxiety, which can happen with children of any age. But there are steps you can take to understand what is behind the problem and to help your child get on a more positive track.

I. Underlying issues

- Children today experience high-pressure academics at much earlier ages than they used to; high-stakes testing ramps up the pressure
- Families often are over scheduled and rushed, which can exacerbate anxiety for children and parents alike
- Some children have unidentified learning problems or difficulty attending and organizing, which can contribute to anxiety at school
- Teasing and bullying, especially during unstructured time (e.g. bus, lunchroom, playground) triggers anxiety for many children
- Stressful family events or ongoing tension in the home can make a child worry about leaving home, triggering separation anxiety, even in older children

II. Tips for parents

- Ask and listen
Ask open-ended questions, such as: What did you enjoy at school today? What was hard for you today? Who did you sit with at lunch? What did you do at recess?
- Communicate with teachers
Create a partnership with your child's teacher, working together to figure out what will help your child be a calm, focused, eager learner.
- Role-play and practice how to handle difficult situations and how to reduce stress
Whether your child is anxious about interactions with peers or about doing poorly on a test or assignment, practicing how to handle those situations is empowering.
- Keep your child in school
Although it may be tempting to keep your anxious child at home, research shows that only prolongs and increases most anxiety problems.
- Seek professional help
If symptoms persist for several weeks and interfere with your child's ability to participate and have fun in age-appropriate activities, contact a mental health professional.