



Foundations Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy solutions for children and young people aged 4 to 11

www.foundationshypnotherapy.co.uk

The best days of your life?

We like to believe that school days are fun, happy, carefree and exciting. However, for some, school can become a frightening experience where the days are filled with anxiety, panic, feelings of failure and overwhelming distress. Why do some children and young people become afraid of a school where others are thriving and what can we as parents do to help them overcome it? Psychotherapist, hypnotherapist and former primary school headteacher, Dr Sharie Coombes, offers advice on understanding, dealing with and beating this upsetting and difficult experience.

The new school year is well underway and the long, hot summer holiday seems a distant memory as the October half-term break is approaching fast. Children and young people from nursery to university have made that bold leap into the unknown world of the new and, often, larger school or classroom.

To make a success of this transition, they have had to manage their excitement, apprehension and worry about those myths that always accompany the move: scary stories about the new teacher being really strict, the difficulty of the work, the hours of homework, the possibility of bullying and the behaviour of 'bigger' children. Add to this the reality of adapting to new routines, rules and behaviour systems, detentions, the journey to and from school as well as finding your way around a new building, working out who to avoid and making new friends and you begin to see how much we are asking of our children.

Back in September, you probably discussed the opportunities and possibilities a new year brings. Many children will have settled in already but some will still be struggling with the unfamiliarity of their new environment. We all take to change differently and at our own unique pace so how do you know when there's a problem? Frequent headaches, tummy aches, unexplained pains and bugs that your GP has ruled out as medical concerns can all be signs of a child developing anxiety or maybe even a reluctance to attend school. This can be confusing, worrying and difficult for everyone. Questions dominate your thinking: Why is this happening? What should you do? Who can you turn to? For a very small group, this reluctance can lead to school phobia which is debilitating and feels all-consuming. But the good news is that it *is* possible to prevent anxiety and reluctance from becoming a phobia and if a phobia has crept in, it *is* possible to manage this sensitively and effectively to make school an everyday normality again.

What can parents do when children are reluctant to attend school?

It's good to talk

It may sound obvious, but the most important thing to do is to talk. To your child... and to the school. Maintain open and co-operative dialogue with key people at the school such as the class teacher, a learning mentor, classroom assistant, the school secretary, head of year, special needs manager, deputy or head – whoever you think knows your child really well and shows a genuine understanding of the situation. Identify with the school a named 'safe' adult on the staff that your child feels confident to approach whenever they feel worried. Establish your child's reasons for the reluctance and seek to resolve these together with the school. The school will want to help. If bullying is behind the anxiety, let the school know immediately and work with them to implement their anti-bullying policy.

If your child is not sure what is causing feelings of anxiety and is experiencing everyday aspects of school life as frightening, you could talk to a therapist experienced in working with schools and childhood/adolescent anxiety. This will help ensure an emotionally 'safe' school environment, re-establish a sense of control, optimism and resilience and teach effective coping strategies to overcome these feelings.

Avoid blaming

When emotions are high, and particularly if your child is experiencing bullying, there can be natural human tendencies to withdraw from the co-operative relationship with the school and to place blame on a particular person or group. Although very often these happen unconsciously, they are damaging strategies which create unhelpful tension between the family and the school and will almost certainly interfere with getting the problems resolved. If your child senses, sees or hears conflict between you and the school, it will confirm that there is something unsafe about the situation and you will validate the fears you are trying to alleviate. If your child feels blamed, it could affect their self-esteem and mean that recovery takes longer. And don't blame yourself either – it's not your fault!

Seek expert help

The school may have a counselling scheme or they may be able to involve outside agencies. You could consult an experienced therapist who has first-hand experience of working in and training schools and can gently help children and young people with anxiety, reluctance and school phobia. This person can spend time getting to know your child as an individual and work directly with you and the school to provide a nurturing environment, train staff in recognising and managing anxiety, advise on ways to decrease anxiety and re-frame the experiences that cause distress, develop resilience, optimism and coping strategies and ease the reluctance or phobia to return your child to enjoying school for all it has to offer.

Identify triggers

Work with the school and your child to find out what sets off the feelings of anxiety and to find solutions. Anxiety makes learning much more difficult and as your child struggles to concentrate, anxiety increases further. Neuroscience shows us that anxiety causes the thinking brain to shut down in favour of the freeze, fight, flight response as the body floods with cortisol and adrenaline.

Stay positive

Optimism leads to resilience. Remind your child of previous – and current – successes at school; these can range from sporting, academic, artistic or other achievements, being given a responsibility by a teacher or getting a reward for good behaviour or perseverance. Anything that proves your child has coped with difficulty in the past will be reassuring and beneficial. Make sure your child knows that effort is valued as much as high marks. An experienced solution focused therapist can be a great help with this and can train you and the school to help your child (and you) think, feel and act more confidently.

Keep boundaries and routines in place

Your child will feel safer if daily routines are maintained. Bedtimes, mealtimes and family time are all important routines that can provide a structure that brings familiarity and a sense of control. Work with the school to create predictable routines for the beginning and duration of the school day. Your child needs to know what is going to happen and to have a sense of control in the school environment as well as a safe place or person to go to when they are feeling anxious.

Practise social skills

For many children, making new friends takes time and courage. You could role-play different conversation openers that can help them break down awkward barriers. Practising conversation skills around the dinner table is another way for children to become more confident in striking up friendships.