

School Anxiety: Supporting children and youth to get to school.

As parents and caregivers, we know that it is important for children and youth to be at school. The school environment is not only important for academic learning, but also social-emotional learning around building and maintaining positive relationships, dealing with difficult emotions and problem solving. The school environment, however, can be hard for kids. Children and youth who are experiencing anxiety have a tougher time in the school environment and may seek to avoid school altogether. When children and youth do not attend school, this leads to further isolation which can exasperate emotional problems.

When children struggle, it impacts the whole family. We know how difficult this can be and the UCDSB is committed to creating welcoming, inclusive classroom environments and building meaningful relationships with students and their families so they feel more confident and connected at school. **Here is what you can do at home to support your anxious child getting to school:**

Focus on your relationship. It is important to build a trusting relationship with your child so they feel comfortable talking to you about the issues contributing to their anxiety and school avoidance so you can tackle the issues as a team. When your child says “I don’t want to go to school” try saying “I know getting to school is hard for you, let’s talk” rather than “I know, but you have to go” or “you’ll be fine.” Your efforts to provide reassurance might be seen as dismissive of their real concerns and could lead to further upset. According to Children’s Mental Health Ontario (2021), it is helpful to “find out what they need or what they feel might make the school experience different. If we focus too much on our child’s refusal, it can create tension and could become a power dynamic.”

Take time to understand the issue. Explore with your child their worries about attending school, if your child states “I don’t know why I don’t want to go,” you may consider wondering aloud. You might say “I wonder if there are any kids at school that aren’t nice to you” or discuss an experience you might have had as a child for example, “I remember feeling really worried that I wouldn’t be able to find my classroom when I was a kid, I wonder if that is something you worry about.” Taking time to explore the issue will help your child to see that you understand they are struggling and that you are there to support them.

Be committed. Staying home is not an option. Getting your child to school is an important strategy for reducing school anxiety, even if it is for short periods. Not attending altogether is not an option, but there may be many things that could change to make attending more manageable. Try to validate your child’s feelings using the strategies listed above before you jump into problem solving and be sure to set limits around what takes place when your child is home during school hours. This is time to do schoolwork or participate in constructive, meaningful activities. Children and youth who use this time to sleep or be on screens will have more difficulty re-entering the structured environment of school.

Try a scaffolding approach. Your child’s journey to attending school consistently for the full day may be slow. It is important to set small manageable goals with your child to begin with. For example, the first step may be to drive to the school or have your child agree to attend their favorite class only.

Connect with the school. It is sometimes difficult to talk with others about the emotional challenges your family is experiencing, but it can be extremely helpful to inform your child's school staff that your child is having anxiety about school. Staff will be able to better understand the situation and can help in many ways.

School can be a challenging environment for many students, but it is our hope that with wrap around support from family members, school staff, friends and, when needed, health or mental health care providers, your child will gain confidence and be able attend and feel more comfortable at school.

The above content was developed from Children's Mental Health Ontario's Family Care Centre website. Visit <https://www.family.cmho.org/school-refusal/> for the full article and more children's mental health resources.

Looking for mental health support in your community? Visit the Mental Health and Wellness pages of the Upper Canada District School Website where you will find a [list of community supports and services](#) by community.

Provided by the Upper Canada District School Board, Student Mental Health and Wellness Department.