

## Tips for School Staff Supporting Pupils Experiencing Separation Anxiety

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It is likely that as a consequence of pupils being off school due to COVID-19, some of them will experience a level of separation anxiety when they return to school. The below tips are for school staff who are supporting pupils that are experiencing separation anxiety in the gradual return to school:

- **Make sure you give a good greeting** - have a member of staff present that the pupil has a good relationship with when they arrive.
- **Hold parents in mind** – It is likely that some parents/carers of pupils that are struggling with the separation will also be struggling themselves with being separated from their child. Voicing and acknowledging the parent/carer's anxieties and letting them know that you have a plan to support their child will help to contain the parent/carer
- **Have a graded return** - Consider allowing pupils to have a gradual return back to school, for example starting with short days.
- **Transitional object** - Suggest that the pupil brings in a small item that reminds them of home or their parent/carer and gives them some comfort, for example a pebble that they have decorated with their parent/carer and can keep in their pocket or a spray of perfume/aftershave on their sleeve.
- **Acknowledge how you think the child is feeling** - It is tempting to try to distract or reassure the pupil but the best way of supporting them is to voice how you think they are feeling, for example, "I wonder if you are feeling really sad that you are back at school and are missing your mum/dad/carer", "You just found it really difficult saying goodbye just now to your mum/dad/carer", "I am wondering if you are feeling angry that you have had to come back to school today and leave your mum/dad/carer/house".
- **Make a plan** – Ask the child what will help in school when they are finding it difficult to cope, for example, it might be that they need an adult identified or a safe place they can go to in school.
- **Teach pupils about anxiety** - Talk about what anxiety feels like (e.g. heart beats faster, tummy feels jumbly, feel hot and tense) and remind them that everyone experiences some anxiety sometimes and it is a completely normal feeling to have when we feel scared, worried or stressed.
- **Teach strategies** - Teach the pupil ways of calming themselves such as deep breathing, counting, muscle relaxation, drawing a picture, writing down their feelings, squeezing an object, thinking of a funny time and self-soothing statements such as, "I will be ok and I will be going home at 3.20pm".

- **Try not to get into a pattern of reassuring** - If a child asks questions like, “will I be okay, is my mum coming back, when am I going home,” try not to reassure them over and over again as this could feed into the anxiety. You could say something like, “I can see that you are feeling really worried about this.” You could create a worry book that they can write in or a worry box or create a time of day where they have ‘worry time’ and can talk to you about their worries.
- **Don’t be tempted to get the parent to leave once the child is happy with the hope they won’t notice** – it is important they can trust what’s going on around them and ultimately they will be comforted by knowing when it’s time to say goodbye and that it will be OK
- **Discourage long goodbyes** – encourage parents to say goodbye to their child and leave as soon as possible.
- **Circle time** – Create a time where your whole class has chance to talk about what it feels like to be back at school. It is likely that lots of pupils are finding it difficult being away from their family and house.
- **Contain pupils by giving them structure** – let pupils know when you are going to be moving on to a different activity in advance and give them a plan of what you are going to be doing that day.
- **Find activities the child or young person enjoys doing and which they can become absorbed in to psychologically extract themselves from their worries.**
- **Structure activities so they can experience having fun and getting on with their peers**
- **Remember the Healthy Minds triangle** – pupils (and parents/carers) need a good balance of attunement, structure and emotional regulation in order to support their well-being at a time of change and uncertainty

## When a pupil may need extra support

For most pupils that have developed separation anxiety, this anxiety will pass as they get back into the routine of being in school. For some pupils, you may notice that their anxiety does not reduce and is starting to impact many activities. If a pupil is refusing to go to school, has an excessive fear of leaving the house, has withdrawn from friends and family and is experiencing prolonged high levels of distress in relation to leaving their parent/carer or house, it may be cause for concern. If you have concerns that a pupil is struggling to this extent, please speak to the Safeguarding Lead or Designated Mental Health Lead in your school who can advise and make contact with the family and then follow usual processes for support.