



# When Your Teenager is Anxious About School: A Parent's Guide

When your teenager is anxious about school, it can be a very difficult time for the whole family. Your child may refuse to go to school and may seem like they are withdrawing from the world. As a parent, it can be difficult to know what the right steps are to support your teenager during this time. This guide provides practical tips on how to manage the situation, keep your relationship with your teenager positive and help prevent parental overwhelm.

## Supporting Your Teenager

### Listen to understand not fix

As a parent of a child who is struggling with anxiety, the first thing you want to do is fix it for them. Of course, that's a natural response. Unfortunately, anxiety can be complex and that well-meaning piece of parental advice you want to give your teenager is likely to lead to them feeling misunderstood and frustrated.

So the first step to supporting them is to really listen. Your teenager is going through a difficult time, they may be feeling overwhelmed and hopeless.

By listening to them without judgement you're showing you will be supportive and understanding. Try to encourage them to talk about their feelings, and offer reassurance that you are there for them. Let them know that as you are learning more from them about how they feel, it will help you both to determine what the right help for them will be.

### Keep to routines

When school refusal starts to occur it disrupts not only your child's routines but the family's too. Irrespective of whether your teenager is managing to attend school sometimes or is completely absent, having routines will be key to helping them manage their anxiety. This can be as simple as having agreed times for them to get up, shower and dress. Times for exercise or sport. Being part of mealtimes and having a regular bedtime.

It's likely you'll get some resistance from them around this, but explaining that having a routine will help to reduce their anxious feelings should encourage them to give it a try. Get them involved in setting out what that routine could be.



## Set supportive boundaries

During your teens time away from school it can be difficult to know what boundaries to put in place. You might wonder if you are being too lenient or if you should be firmer in making them return to school.

If your child has school-based anxiety or a level of anxiety that means they can't be in school the priority should be helping them get those anxious feelings under control so that they can start to feel better before even discussing the possibility of returning to school.

If you are getting professional help for your teenager then you can ask them to advise you on additional boundaries that might be helpful.

As a parent, you can help best through this time by putting in place supportive boundaries such as:

- Getting them help (typically some form of therapy) and supporting them to stick with it
- Limiting social media and mobile use, especially evenings so they can get a good night's sleep
- Limiting stimulants such as caffeinated drinks or vaping



As a parent of a teenager refusing to go to school, you will need to follow your child's school policies around reporting absence and guidance for managing school refusal. Although approaches may differ from school to school, they all will have a protocol on how to manage school refusal and what support they can provide. Following these steps should help keep the relationship with the school positive and supportive for your teenager.

## Managing the relationship with school

### Keep them informed

It is important to keep the lines of communication open with your child's school. You should let the school know what is going on at the earliest stage and keep them updated on your teenager's progress. This will avoid any misunderstanding as to why they are absent and avoid any unnecessary fines.

### Ask for their help

Although this may be the first time you have had to manage your child's school refusal - it will not be the first case for the school. Ask for their help in supporting your teenager. Find out what their protocol/policy is for supporting school refusal and children with mental health needs. Some schools may have a school counsellor who can support your teenager.

### Agree on a plan

If your teenager is refusing to go to school, at some stage you will need to work with the school to create a plan of action about their education. This may involve coming up with an alternate schedule, working from home, and when appropriate - a phased return to school.

Supporting your teenager with their anxiety and managing them through a period of school refusal is likely to be stressful, worrying and potentially overwhelming. It is important for parents to take care of themselves during this time. This can be a very stressful situation, and it is important to find ways to help yourself get through it. These tips may help:

## Preventing Parental Overwhelm

### Talk to others

Whether it's to family, friends, parental support groups or professional help, talking as you go through this period of time will help you process how you're feeling. Helping you feel more balanced to be able to support your teen.

### Notify work

If you are a working parent managing a teenager refusing to go to school, it's likely that your working day will be impacted. Speak to work as soon as you can to let them know you may need some flexibility and find out what kind of support they can offer. Some workplaces will offer an Employee Assistance Programme which could provide you with advice and support.

### Don't try to do it all alone

Make sure to use the services offered by the school to support your teenager, get professional help where possible, and check out local parent support groups.

### Take action to manage stress

It may feel like the last thing on your mind but getting regular exercise, taking breaks, and getting outside in nature will not only help you manage your own stress levels but is a good way to model well-being behaviours to your teen - where possible get them involved too.

Anxiety can be a very tough time for teenagers and their families. But with support and understanding, it is possible to get through this difficult period. If you need more help, please reach out to:

[www.school-refusal.co.uk](http://www.school-refusal.co.uk)    [sarah@school-refusal.co.uk](mailto:sarah@school-refusal.co.uk)