



Guidelines for Managing School Refusal Due to Separation Anxiety

School refusal due to separation anxiety is a distressing situation where a child resists attending school due to fear of being away from their caregivers. This type of anxiety can significantly impact a child's academic and social development. The following guidelines are designed to help parents support children dealing with separation anxiety-based school refusal.

Understanding Separation Anxiety

- **Recognize the Symptoms:** Common signs include excessive worry about losing a caregiver, reluctance to sleep away from home, nightmares about separation, and physical complaints when separation occurs.
- **Acknowledge the Anxiety:** Validate the child's feelings by acknowledging their fear without reinforcing it. This can help the child feel understood and supported.

Building a Supportive Environment

- **Create a Routine:** Establish a consistent morning routine that is calm and reassuring. Predictability can help reduce anxiety levels.
- **Practice Separations:** Short, gradual separations can help the child get used to being away from their caregiver. Start with brief periods of separation and gradually increase the time as the child becomes more comfortable.

Strengthening the Child's Independence

- **Encourage Independence:** Promote activities that the child can do on their own, building their confidence and sense of self-efficacy.
- **Teach Coping Strategies:** Simple relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, visualization, or positive self-talk can help the child manage their anxiety.

Collaboration with School

- **Communicate with School Staff:** Inform teachers and school counsellors about the child's separation anxiety. A collaborative approach can ensure that the child receives consistent support across home and school environments.
- **Create a Welcoming School Environment:** Arrange for the child to meet their teacher and visit the classroom before the school year starts, making the school environment more familiar and less intimidating.

Professional Support



- **Consider Professional Help:** If the anxiety is severe or persists, it may be helpful to consult a mental health professional who specializes in anxiety disorders. They can offer tailored strategies and, if necessary, therapy to address the anxiety.

Positive Reinforcement

- **Use Positive Reinforcement:** Praise and reward the child for brave behaviour and for taking steps towards managing their anxiety and attending school.

Keeping the Lines of Communication Open

- **Talk About School Positively:** Focus on the positive aspects of school, such as seeing friends or learning new things, to help shift the child's focus from their fears.
- **Regular Check-ins:** Have regular discussions about how the child is feeling, what they are enjoying about school, and any concerns they may have.

Managing school refusal due to separation anxiety requires patience, understanding, and a consistent approach. By gradually building the child's independence, collaborating with school staff, and possibly seeking professional support, parents and educators can help the child overcome their anxiety and develop a more positive association with school.

Source of Information: This handout written with the aid of OpenAI. (2024). ChatGPT (4) [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com>

This handout is intended for parents. It aims provide a basic guide for addressing school refusal due to separation anxiety. While informative, it is intended as an educational resource and not a substitute for professional diagnosis or treatment.