

## 1. Anxiety about going to school

At any age, children and young people can find going to school difficult. Young Minds identified that 1 in 6 young people will have significant anxiety at some point during their school life. Anxiety is a natural response to something that is perceived as threatening and is a normal emotion around new, different, stressful or changing situations. It is therefore very common for children and young people to experience anxiety around school at some point in their education, particularly during periods of significant change or uncertainty.

For most young people, this anxiety is usually short lived. However, for others the prolonged anxiety can lead to a period of non-attendance at school. In Nottinghamshire we refer to this as Anxiety Related Non-attendance (ARNA).

Regular attendance at school is crucial for social, emotional and academic development. Not attending school over a period of time can impact social interactions with peers, self-esteem and mental health and emotional wellbeing, in both the short and longer term.

How ARNA presents, differs from individual to individual. However as a parent/carer you may have noticed some of the following signs:

- ✚ *Reluctance or refusal to attend school;*
- ✚ *Physical responses to anxiety: headaches, sickness, stomach ache;*

- ✚ *Emotional responses: tearful, anger directed at others or objects or withdrawn;*
- ✚ *Behaviour: difficulty separating from you, refusal to leave the home or bedroom;*
- ✚ *Worrying about school which may increase on Sunday evening or following a school holiday;*
- ✚ *Difficulties with sleeping.*

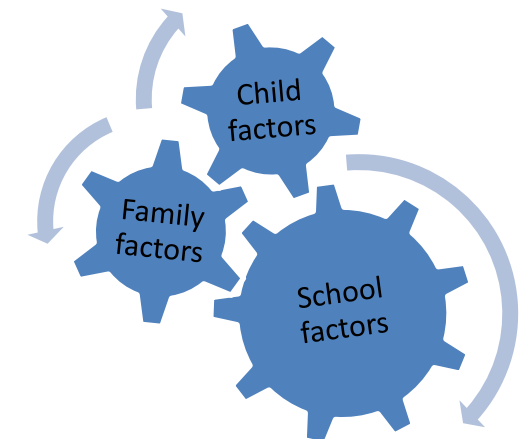
You may notice a reduction in these difficulties when your child is not in school, for instance during the holidays. Likewise if he/she is allowed to stay at home on a school day then they may report a temporary relief from such feelings. This is because the source of anxiety has been removed. However, missing school is not a solution to the emotional difficulties your child is experiencing and actually is a short-term fix with potentially long-term problems associated with it; so supporting them to maintain their school attendance is crucial.

## 2. How you can help

When trying to support an anxious young person it can sometimes feel overwhelming and isolating. It is, therefore, important to:

- ✓ seek support from family, friends and school staff as **soon** as there is a cause for concern. Act early! Tell school staff that there is a problem as soon as possible; working in partnership with a no blame approach.

- ✓ Listen to your child's worries – don't dismiss what might seem irrational or trivial to you. If it is provoking feelings of anxiety then it needs addressing.
- ✓ Stay calm and remain positive! Reassure them that they are not the only ones who have ever felt this way and that there is help available.
- ✓ Be open with school staff about any home-based issues you are experiencing, e.g. separation, housing problems or any loss.



- ✓ ARNA is often an inter-play of child, family and school-based factors. Therefore, all three will need to be considered in order to find a positive way forward.
- ✓ Stay connected with the school. Keep in regular contact with the named member of staff involved.

### 3. How the school can help

The EPS have delivered training around ARNA and there is an established graduated response within the local authority. This will include:

- ✚ An initial conversation with you about the difficulties you are experiencing - listening to both yours and your child's view
- ✚ Work with you to plan a way forward
- ✚ Make constructive suggestions, for example changes to the timetable
- ✚ Identify a key person in school to be the point of contact for you and your child
- ✚ Continue to monitor your child's attendance
- ✚ Continue to communicate with you regarding your child's progress and well-being

There are specialist services for young people with the most significant needs – schools can tell you about these if appropriate to your situation.

### 4. Points to remember

- ✚ If your child has been out of school for a period of time, be aware that progress may be slow. Plan small steps and anticipate potential setbacks, but these can be overcome!
- ✚ Establish a positive routine and an optimistic script to use with your child, whilst acknowledging their feelings are genuine
- ✚ Be consistent and remain positive about education in front of your child – remember the no blame approach works best.

- ✚ Empathetic and nurturing relationships are a key protective factor in supporting your child's emotional wellbeing and resilience
- ✚ Be aware and plan/prepare for potential setbacks, for instance after school holidays or an illness. Think ahead as to how to try to plan for such risks to the sustained attendance
- ✚ Encourage your child to maintain their friendships and outside interests
- ✚ Keep your child connected with the school and peers through emails, letters and links with a key person who the child is comfortable with
- ✚ Stick to the agreed plan as far as possible and let your child know that everyone is working together
- ✚ Review the plan regularly and amend as needed
- ✚ Work together with school with the aim of maintaining the school placement – this may involve an adapted timetable which should be reviewed regularly

### Need more advice?

#### Young Minds Parental Helpline

0808 802 5544

Mon-Fri 9:30-4:00 p.m.

## Finding It Hard To Get Your Child To School?



### A Parent/Carer Guide to Anxiety Related Non-Attendance (ARNA)

#### Nottinghamshire Educational Psychology Service

With grateful thanks to Derbyshire EPS