

Knowing what to say to our children when they are emotionally distressed can feel like a mine field!

How do you know if you're getting it right?

Well, here is a helpful guide that provides you with ACTUAL QUESTIONS! Scripts, and principles.

What's covered?

Latency aged children aged 6-12 years

Adolescents aged 13-18 years.

You'll find:

100 Questions you can ask your child using a psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic approach.

The questions will encourage self reflection, explore unconscious thoughts and feelings and foster emotional expression in a non-judgemental and exploratory way.

The questions will address:

- Understanding emotions and feelings
- Exploring the Unconscious mind
- Relationships and attachments
- Attachment and early memories
- Identity and self-perception
- Play, fantasy and Imagination
- Understanding anxiety and fear
- Family and relationships
- Moral and ethical development
- Existential and deep thinking

Additionally there are 50 questions specifically directed towards latency aged children 6-12 years.

40 questions directed towards adolescents 13-18 years.

Specific questions around anxiety, loss and grief, and self-esteem.

There are then principles for using these questions, so you won't feel that you're still left fumbling and don't know when to use them.

Examples of how to use the questions in a step by step approach

Follow up plans

Specific scripts and exercises to provide ideas.

Here are 100 questions you can ask your child using a **psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic approach**. These questions are designed to encourage self-reflection, explore unconscious thoughts and feelings, and foster emotional expression in a non-judgmental and exploratory way.

Understanding Emotions and Feelings

1. Can you tell me about a time you felt really happy?
2. What do you think makes you feel sad?
3. How does your body feel when you're angry?
4. Do you ever feel scared without knowing why?
5. What do you think your feelings are trying to tell you?
6. Can you describe what feeling safe feels like?
7. If your sadness had a shape or colour, what would it be?
8. What does loneliness feel like for you?
9. When was the last time you felt really proud of yourself?
10. If you could change one feeling you have, what would it be?

Exploring the Unconscious Mind

11. Have you ever had a dream that felt really important to you?
12. Do you ever have thoughts that surprise you?
13. If your mind was a house, what would each room look like?
14. What do you think your biggest secret is?
15. Do you ever feel things but not know why?
16. Have you ever had a feeling that seemed to come from nowhere?
17. What do you think your heart and mind argue about the most?
18. If your worries could talk, what would they say?
19. What kind of thoughts do you have when you're by yourself?
20. If your brain was a story, what title would it have?

Relationships and Attachments

21. Who do you feel most safe with?
22. What do you think makes a person kind?
23. Do you feel like you can be yourself around your friends?
24. What do you think makes a family close?
25. Have you ever felt like someone didn't understand you?
26. What do you wish people knew about you?
27. Have you ever felt like you had to pretend to be someone else?
28. If you could change one thing about the way people treat you, what would it be?
29. Do you feel like people listen to you?
30. Who do you feel most comfortable talking to when something is wrong?

Attachment and Early Memories

31. What is your earliest memory?
32. Do you remember what it felt like to be a little child?

33. What do you think babies feel before they can talk?
34. Do you think you are the same person you were when you were little?
35. What is something from your childhood that still affects you now?
36. Do you ever miss being younger?
37. If you could talk to yourself as a baby, what would you say?
38. What do you think love means to a child?
39. If your childhood had a theme song, what would it be?
40. How do you think your parents felt when you were born?

Identity and Self-Perception

41. What do you like most about yourself?
42. Is there something about yourself that you don't understand?
43. If you could be any animal, what would you be and why?
44. Do you ever feel like two different people inside?
45. What is something about yourself that no one knows?
46. How do you think people see you?
47. Do you ever feel like you have to hide parts of yourself?
48. What does being 'good' mean to you?
49. What does being 'bad' mean to you?
50. If you could give yourself a new name, what would it be?

Play, Fantasy, and Imagination

51. If your feelings were a story, what would happen in it?
52. Do you ever imagine being someone else?
53. What kind of world would you build if you could?
54. If you had a magical power, what would it be?
55. If you could talk to animals, what do you think they would say?
56. Do you ever feel like toys or objects have feelings?
57. If you had a secret world inside your head, what would it look like?
58. What do you think happens in a dream world when you're awake?
59. Do you ever feel like there's a part of you that no one understands?
60. What would happen if you met your own shadow?

Understanding Anxiety and Fear

61. What do you worry about the most?
62. Have you ever felt scared but not known why?
63. If fear was a monster, what would it look like?
64. What do you think happens when you're asleep?
65. Do you ever feel like you can't control your thoughts?
66. How do you know when a worry is real or just a thought?
67. What do you do when you feel nervous?
68. What would you say to someone who was scared all the time?
69. Do you ever feel like your worries take over?
70. If your anxiety could talk to you, what would it say?

Family and Relationships

71. What is something you wish you could say to your family?
72. If you could change one rule in your house, what would it be?
73. How do you feel when you argue with someone you love?
74. What is the hardest part about being in a family?
75. What do you think makes a home feel like a home?
76. What is the best memory you have with your family?
77. If your family were a team, what would each person's role be?
78. Do you ever feel like you don't belong?
79. If you could rewrite your family story, how would it go?
80. What do you think love looks like?

Moral and Ethical Development

81. What do you think makes someone a good person?
82. Have you ever felt guilty about something?
83. What do you think is more important: being kind or being honest?
84. If you found something that didn't belong to you, what would you do?
85. Have you ever felt bad about something you didn't do?
86. What do you think fairness means?
87. Can people change who they are?
88. Do you believe people are born good or bad?
89. What would you do if you saw someone being treated unfairly?
90. Have you ever done something you regret?

Existential and Deep Thinking Questions

91. What do you think happens after we die?
92. Do you think dreams mean anything?
93. Have you ever thought about why we exist?
94. If you could ask the universe one question, what would it be?
95. Do you think everything happens for a reason?
96. What do you think makes life meaningful?
97. Have you ever felt like the world was too big?
98. If you could talk to your future self, what would you ask?
99. Do you ever wonder what other people are thinking?
100. If life was a puzzle, what piece do you think you're holding?

These questions can be used to **open up conversations, deepen emotional insight, and explore the unconscious** in a way that feels safe and containing for the child.

Latency-Aged Children (6–12 years old)

At this stage, children are developing a stronger sense of self, expanding their social world, and using play and imagination to process emotions. Questions should be engaging, metaphorical, and playful, making it easier for them to access unconscious feelings.

Understanding Feelings

1. What does being happy feel like in your body?
2. If sadness were a colour, what colour would it be?
3. Can you think of a time when you felt really proud? What happened?
4. What kinds of things make you feel worried?
5. If anger were an animal, what kind of animal would it be?
6. What helps you feel safe when you're scared?
7. Do you ever have a feeling but don't know what it is?
8. If your heart could talk, what would it say right now?
9. What do you do when you're feeling really big feelings?
10. What is the best thing about being you?

Dreams and Imagination

11. Have you ever had a dream that felt very real?
12. If you could live inside a storybook, which one would it be?
13. Do you ever make up stories in your head? What are they about?
14. If your feelings turned into a cartoon character, what would they look like?
15. If you had a magic wand, what would you use it for?
16. Can you draw a picture of a safe and happy place?
17. If you were a superhero, what would your special power be?
18. If your worries were a monster, what would it look like?
19. What do you think dreams mean?
20. If you had an invisible friend, what would they be like?

Friendships and Social World

21. What makes a good friend?
22. Have you ever felt left out? What was that like?
23. What do you do when someone hurts your feelings?
24. If you could invent a perfect friend, what would they be like?
25. What is the best game to play with others?
26. What makes you feel brave around other people?
27. Do you ever feel like people don't understand you?
28. What is something you wish people knew about you?
29. If you could change one thing about friendships, what would it be?
30. What makes you feel included in a group?

Family and Home Life

31. What do you like best about your family?
32. If you could change one rule at home, what would it be?
33. How do you feel when your family argues?

34. If your family were a team, what would everyone's job be?
35. What do you like to do when you're alone?
36. If you had a secret hiding place, what would it look like?
37. What is the funniest thing that has happened in your family?
38. Do you ever feel like people don't listen to you at home?
39. What is your happiest family memory?
40. If you could go on an adventure with your family, where would you go?

Exploring Worries and Fears

41. What do you do when you feel nervous?
42. What helps you feel better when you're sad?
43. If you could talk to your fear, what would you say?
44. What is the scariest thing about growing up?
45. If you could build a machine to get rid of worries, how would it work?
46. What do you think happens when people have nightmares?
47. What do you do when you feel overwhelmed?
48. How do you know when a feeling is too big to handle alone?
49. If you had a 'bravery' potion, when would you use it?
50. Have you ever felt scared but didn't know why?

Adolescents (13–18 years old)

Adolescents experience **rapid identity formation, deep emotional conflicts, and an increasing need for autonomy**. These questions allow for **self-reflection, unconscious exploration, and insight** into their emotions, relationships, and sense of self.

Identity and Self-Reflection

1. What are three words you'd use to describe yourself?
2. Do you ever feel like you're different around different people? Why?
3. What do you think makes you unique?
4. What is something about yourself you wish you understood better?
5. Do you ever feel pressure to be a certain way? From who?
6. What do you think the most misunderstood thing about you is?
7. How do you think your younger self would see you now?
8. If you could write a letter to your future self, what would you say?
9. What is something you're struggling with that no one knows about?
10. What scares you most about the future?

Emotions and Mental Health

11. How do you know when you're feeling anxious?
12. What do you do when you feel overwhelmed?
13. Do you ever feel like you have to hide your emotions?

14. What do you think your strongest emotion is?
15. Do you feel comfortable asking for help when you need it?
16. What do you think sadness is trying to tell you?
17. What makes you feel truly at peace?
18. How do you feel about being alone?
19. Have you ever felt a big emotion and not known why?
20. What do you do when you feel completely lost?

Relationships and Social Pressures

21. Who do you feel safest talking to?
22. Have you ever felt like you didn't belong?
23. Do you think social media changes the way people feel about themselves?
24. Have you ever pretended to be okay when you weren't?
25. What does a healthy relationship look like to you?
26. How do you know if someone is truly listening to you?
27. Have you ever felt invisible?
28. What is something you wish people understood about teenagers?
29. What makes you feel truly connected to someone?
30. If you could change one thing about friendships, what would it be?

Fears, Dreams, and the Unconscious

31. What is a fear you don't like talking about?
32. Do you think dreams have meanings?
33. Have you ever felt like your mind was working against you?
34. What do you think your subconscious would tell you if it could speak?
35. Do you believe that people can change?
36. Have you ever had a dream that stayed with you for a long time?
37. What do you think happens after we die?
38. What do you think makes life meaningful?
39. Have you ever had a feeling that you couldn't explain?
40. If your life were a book, what would the title be?

These **age-appropriate** questions can be used in **therapy, reflective parenting, or casual conversations** to **deepen emotional understanding**.

Latency-Aged Children (6–12 years old)

Anxiety

1. If your worry had a name, what would it be?
2. Where do you feel worry in your body?
3. What do you think happens when you feel scared?

4. Can you draw a picture of what your worry looks like?
5. If your worry could talk, what would it say?
6. What do you do when you feel nervous about something?
7. What makes you feel safe when you're scared?
8. If your worry was a tiny creature, how would you take care of it?
9. Do you ever feel worried without knowing why?
10. What is one thing that helps you feel calm when you're nervous?

Loss & Grief

11. Have you ever lost something or someone special to you?
12. What do you think happens when someone dies?
13. If you could talk to someone you've lost, what would you say?
14. Do you ever feel like you miss someone but can't explain why?
15. Where do you think love goes when someone is gone?
16. What do you think memories are made of?
17. What helps you feel close to someone who isn't here anymore?
18. If sadness were a shape, what would it be?
19. Can you think of a time when something changed and you didn't like it?
20. What do you think people need when they feel sad?

Self-Esteem

21. What is something you're really good at?
22. If you could give yourself a superpower, what would it be?
23. What do you like most about yourself?
24. If you had to describe yourself using three words, what would they be?
25. What is something you wish other people knew about you?
26. Have you ever felt like you weren't good enough? What was that like?
27. What is something you've done that made you proud?
28. If you could write a letter to yourself, what would it say?
29. Do you ever compare yourself to other people? How does that feel?
30. What makes you feel confident?

Adolescents (13–18 years old)

Anxiety

1. What's the first sign that you're feeling anxious?
2. Do you ever feel like your thoughts are racing too fast?
3. What's one situation that always makes you nervous?
4. What do you think your anxiety is trying to protect you from?
5. How do you usually deal with anxious feelings?
6. If anxiety were a person, what kind of advice would they give you?

7. Do you ever try to ignore your anxiety? What happens?
8. What do you think makes some people more anxious than others?
9. Have you ever felt anxious but didn't know why?
10. What would life be like if you didn't have to worry about anything?

Loss & Grief

11. How do you think loss changes a person?
12. Do you believe people ever really 'go away' when they die?
13. What do you do with feelings that feel too big to handle?
14. Have you ever lost something important that wasn't a person? How did that feel?
15. Do you think grief ever really goes away?
16. If you could ask someone you've lost one more question, what would it be?
17. What do you think is the hardest part about losing someone or something?
18. How do you feel when other people talk about loss?
19. Do you ever feel like you have to be 'strong' for others?
20. What's one thing that helps you when you're grieving?

Self-Esteem

21. When do you feel most like yourself?
22. Do you ever feel like you're not good enough? Where do you think that feeling comes from?
23. How do you think social media affects the way people feel about themselves?
24. What do you think makes a person valuable?
25. Have you ever felt like you had to change yourself to fit in?
26. What do you wish you could tell your younger self about self-worth?
27. Do you think self-confidence comes from within or from others?
28. What is something you've done that made you feel really proud?
29. How do you usually talk to yourself in your head? Is it kind or critical?
30. What is something about yourself that you don't give yourself enough credit for?

These questions can be used in **therapy, reflective parenting, journaling, or conversations** to help children and teenagers **process their emotions and gain insight into their inner world.**

Using These Questions in a Parenting Context

When using **psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic** questions with latency-aged children and adolescents, the **goal is not just to get answers but to open up space for emotional exploration and unconscious processing.** The way you approach these conversations will

significantly shape the child's or teen's ability to engage, reflect, and feel safe enough to explore their inner world.

General Principles for Using These Questions

1. Create a Safe and Containing Space

Children and teenagers need to **feel emotionally held and safe** before they can engage in deep reflection.

- Use a **calm, non-judgmental** tone.
- Avoid **rushing** or pressuring them to answer.
- Validate all responses, even if they seem trivial or unexpected.
- Pay attention to **non-verbal cues** (fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, changes in tone).

2. Follow Their Lead

- Let the child or teen guide the depth of the conversation.
- If they give short answers, gently **reflect or expand** rather than demanding more detail.
- Be **curious, not interrogative**. Instead of "Why do you feel that way?" try "I wonder what makes that feeling so strong."

3. Encourage Symbolic Exploration (Especially for Younger Children)

Latency-aged children (6–12) may not **directly articulate** their emotions but often express them through:

- **Play, drawing, metaphors, and storytelling.**
- If they describe a worry as a monster, you might ask, "**What helps this monster get smaller?**"
- For grief, "**If your sadness were a picture, what would it look like?**"

Adolescents, on the other hand, **may resist direct questioning but engage through abstract reflection** or storytelling.

4. Use Silence and Reflection Thoughtfully

- **Silence is powerful.** If a child or teen pauses after a question, **let them sit with it.**
 - Reflect back what they say: "**It sounds like you feel anxious when things are unpredictable.**"
 - Encourage deeper thought: "**That sounds really difficult. Have you felt that way before?**"
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Using the Questions for Anxiety

💬 Latency-Aged Example (6–12 years old)

- **You:** “If your worry had a name, what would it be?”
- **Child:** “It would be called Mr. Rushing.”
- **You:** “That’s an interesting name. I wonder what Mr. Rushing does when he shows up?”
- **Child:** “He makes my heart go really fast.”
- **You:** “That sounds uncomfortable. What helps when Mr. Rushing is around?”

This **externalization** helps children **see their anxiety as separate from themselves, making it feel more manageable.**

💬 Adolescent Example (13–18 years old)

- **You:** “What do you think your anxiety is trying to protect you from?”
- **Teen:** “I guess... messing up? I always feel like I’ll fail.”
- **You:** “That makes sense. It sounds like anxiety is trying to keep you safe, but sometimes it feels too big?”
- **Teen:** “Yeah, it’s exhausting.”
- **You:** “What do you think would happen if anxiety wasn’t there all the time?”

This **validates their feelings while encouraging insight into the function of anxiety.**

Using the Questions for Loss & Grief

💬 Latency-Aged Example (6–12 years old)

- **You:** “If you could talk to someone you’ve lost, what would you say?”
- **Child:** “I’d tell Grandma I miss her.”
- **You:** “That’s a really special thing to say. Do you ever feel like she’s still close to you?”
- **Child:** “Yeah... when I smell her perfume.”
- **You:** “That’s really lovely. Smells can hold memories, like little invisible reminders. What else makes you feel close to her?”

This **helps children make sense of grief and maintain emotional connections** in a way that feels natural.

💬 Adolescent Example (13–18 years old)

- **You:** “Do you think grief ever really goes away?”
- **Teen:** “No. I think it just changes.”
- **You:** “That’s a really insightful way of thinking about it. How do you feel your grief has changed over time?”

- **Teen:** “At first, I felt like I couldn’t think about anything else. Now, it comes in waves.”
- **You:** “That makes a lot of sense. I wonder if those waves ever bring memories that feel comforting, too?”

Psychoanalytic therapy sees grief as a process of integration rather than “moving on.” Encouraging **symbolism, memories, and meaning-making** can help adolescents process loss.

Using the Questions for Self-Esteem

Latency-Aged Example (6–12 years old)

- **You:** “What is something you’re really good at?”
- **Child:** “Drawing.”
- **You:** “I love that. What do you feel when you’re drawing?”
- **Child:** “Happy and calm.”
- **You:** “It sounds like drawing is a special thing for you. What would you tell someone who thinks they’re not good at drawing?”

This **helps the child connect with their strengths and develop self-compassion.**

Adolescent Example (13–18 years old)

- **You:** “How do you usually talk to yourself in your head? Is it kind or critical?”
- **Teen:** “Mostly critical.”
- **You:** “That must be really exhausting. Where do you think that critical voice comes from?”
- **Teen:** “I don’t know... I guess comparing myself to others.”
- **You:** “That makes a lot of sense. If you could replace that voice with a kinder one, what would it say?”

This **gently explores unconscious self-criticism** while offering a **corrective emotional experience** by imagining self-kindness.

For Parents

- Make these questions part of casual, **low-pressure** conversations.
 - Use play, art, and storytelling with younger children.
 - Normalize emotions by sharing personal (age-appropriate) reflections.
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Final Thoughts

Anxiety, loss, and self-esteem are deeply intertwined with a child's inner world. Using psychoanalytic questions in a **gentle, reflective, and creative way** allows children and adolescents to **process their emotions safely**.

Examples

Here's an approach to specific **case example**

This is a **complex case** where the teen is struggling with **school avoidance, bullying-related anxiety, and likely self-esteem issues**. Below is a **tailored psychoanalytic approach** to help a **parent** support the teen.

Understanding the Anxiety

The **fear of bullying** is likely activating deeper anxieties—such as **feeling powerless, rejected, or unsafe**. Avoiding school is not just about avoiding peers but also about avoiding those painful feelings.

From a **psychoanalytic perspective**, anxiety is often a **defence against unconscious fears or conflicts**. The goal is to **help the teen explore their fears in a safe way** while offering **containment and emotional support**.

Parent-Teen Conversation Strategy

Step 1: Validate Their Feelings Without Dismissing Them

A common **parental instinct** is to **reassure** (“It’s not that bad”) or **push for solutions** (“**Just ignore them**”). However, this can make the teen feel **unheard**. Instead, focus on **validation and curiosity**.

💬 **Example:**

Parent: “I can see that going to school feels really hard for you right now. It makes sense that you’re anxious—being around people who make you feel uncomfortable is really tough.”

Teen: “Yeah. I just don’t want to deal with them.”

Parent: “That makes a lot of sense. I wonder what feels the hardest—seeing them, worrying about what they might say, or just the thought of it all?”

👉 **Why This Helps:**

- Instead of **minimizing their fear**, you acknowledge it.
 - By **breaking it down**, you **help them process it rather than avoid it**.
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Step 2: Externalizing the Anxiety

Anxiety can feel **all-consuming**, so **giving it shape** can help make it more manageable.

💬 **Example:**

Parent: *“If your anxiety was a person or creature, what would it look like?”*

Teen: *“Probably a massive grey cloud.”*

Parent: *“That makes sense. When does the cloud feel the biggest?”*

Teen: *“At night, when I’m thinking about school tomorrow.”*

Parent: *“And if the cloud could talk, what do you think it would say?”*

Teen: *“That I’ll never fit in.”*

👉 **Why This Helps:**

- **Externalizing** the anxiety **separates it from the teen’s identity**.
 - It allows them to **express fears indirectly** rather than feeling interrogated.
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Step 3: Exploring the Underlying Feelings

Often, anxiety about bullying is tied to **deeper feelings of worthlessness, rejection, or shame**. Gently exploring these emotions can **bring them to the surface** in a way that helps the teen process them.

💬 **Example:**

Parent: *“It sounds like there’s a worry that you’ll never fit in. When did that feeling start?”*

Teen: *“I don’t know... maybe when my old friends started ignoring me.”*

Parent: *“That must have been really painful. Did it feel like something changed in how they saw you?”*

Teen: *“Yeah. Like I wasn’t good enough anymore.”*

👉 **Why This Helps:**

- This **connects current anxiety to past experiences**, helping them make sense of it.
 - Instead of focusing just on **fixing school attendance**, it **addresses self-esteem wounds**.
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Step 4: Strengthening Their Sense of Power & Choice

Teens struggling with **bullying and anxiety** often feel **powerless**. Helping them **reclaim a sense of control** can **reduce their anxiety**.

💬 **Example:**

Parent: “What would help you feel even a little bit more in control at school?”

Teen: “I don’t know. Maybe avoiding them as much as possible.”

Parent: “That makes sense. Is there anywhere in school that feels safer?”

Teen: “Yeah... the library is okay.”

Parent: “That’s great. Maybe we can think about how to make that your ‘safe zone’ when you need a break.”

👉 **Why This Helps:**

- The teen **starts to see choices rather than feeling trapped.**
 - This moves the focus from **complete avoidance** to **small, manageable steps.**
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Step 5: Gradual Exposure & Safety Planning

Instead of forcing **full school attendance immediately**, use **gradual steps** to rebuild confidence.

✅ **Example of a Gradual Approach:**

- **Step 1:** Visit school after hours or on weekends to **rebuild comfort in the environment.**
 - **Step 2:** Attend part of the day (e.g., first two lessons).
 - **Step 3:** Identify **trusted teachers or staff** as support.
 - **Step 4:** Develop **response strategies** if bullying happens (role-playing responses, knowing where to go for help).
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Step 6: Encouraging Self-Compassion

Teens often **blame themselves** when they are bullied, which impacts self-worth.

💬 **Example:**

Parent: “If your best friend was going through this, what would you say to them?”

Teen: “That they don’t deserve it.”

Parent: “That’s so true. You don’t deserve it either.”

👉 **Why This Helps:**

- It **creates distance** from self-criticism.
 - It builds **self-compassion, a key factor in resilience.**
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Step 7: Seeking External Support If Needed

If anxiety is severe, consider:

- ✓ **School involvement** (pastoral care, changing routes to avoid bullying).
 - ✓ **Therapy** (if avoidance becomes chronic or anxiety escalates).
 - ✓ **Social confidence-building activities** (clubs, hobbies, new social circles).
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Final Thoughts

- **Don't rush the process**—help the teen **feel safe first, then take small steps**.
- **Validate before problem-solving**—teens need to feel **understood before they can take action**.
- **Focus on strengthening inner confidence**, not just managing external situations.

Follow-Up Plan for a Teen Struggling with Anxiety, Bullying & School Avoidance

This **four-week plan** offers a **structured yet flexible approach** to supporting your teen in **gradually overcoming school anxiety** while addressing the **underlying emotional impact of bullying**.



Week 1: Rebuilding Emotional Safety & Trust

Goal: Help the teen feel heard, validated, and supported before pushing for action.

Key Focus Areas:

✓ Create a Safe Space for Conversations

- **Daily 5-minute check-ins** (e.g., “I’m here to listen if you want to talk”).
- **No pressure to talk about school**—focus on **feelings instead of fixing**.

✓ Acknowledge Their Anxiety as Real

💬 *“Your anxiety isn’t something to ‘just get over’—it’s telling us something important. Let’s figure it out together.”*

✓ Externalize & Name the Anxiety

- *Ask: “If your anxiety had a voice, what would it say?”*
- *Use analogies:* (e.g., “Is it like a wave that crashes suddenly or a slow-rising fog?”)

✓ Explore Small Comfort Strategies

- Help them **identify at least one “safe space” at school** (library, certain teachers, specific routes).
- Try **calming techniques** (breathing exercises, music, journaling).

✓ **Agree on a School Plan (Without Pressure to Attend Yet)**

- Offer **alternative options**, such as **part-time attendance or remote learning** while planning a return.



Week 2: Taking Small Steps Towards School Reconnection

Goal: Reduce avoidance without overwhelming the teen.

Key Focus Areas:

✓ **Gentle Exposure to School (Gradual Steps)**

- Visit **school after hours** (e.g., walk around the building).
- Meet with a **trusted teacher or pastoral staff** to discuss a plan.
- Try a **shortened school day** (e.g., arriving later, leaving earlier).

✓ **Empower the Teen with Coping Strategies**

- **Role-play bullying scenarios** (“If they say X, what might help you respond?”).
- Identify **“exit strategies”** (“If things get overwhelming, what can you do?”).

✓ **Encourage Small Social Wins**

- Suggest **connecting with a safe friend outside of school** (even online).
- Look for **hobbies or clubs** where they can build confidence in a different setting.



Week 3: Strengthening Self-Worth & Confidence

Goal: Shift the focus from fear to **inner resilience**.

Key Focus Areas:

✓ **Challenge Negative Self-Beliefs**

- When they express **self-doubt** (e.g., “I’m not good enough”), ask:
 - ☞ “Where do you think that belief came from?”
 - ☞ “Would you say that about a friend?”

✓ Introduce “Strength-Based” Thinking

- Have them **list qualities that make them unique**.
- Find **one small thing** they’ve done well each day.

✓ Help Them Take Control

- Ask: *“What’s one thing that would make school feel even a tiny bit easier?”*
 - Support them in **advocating for small changes** (e.g., sitting in a different area, using quiet spaces).
-



Week 4: Moving Forward with Independence

Goal: Build long-term strategies for **resilience** and **self-advocacy**.

Key Focus Areas:

✓ Encourage Self-Reflection

💬 *“Looking back, what’s something that helped you feel even a little more in control?”*

💬 *“What advice would you give to someone else going through this?”*

✓ Support Self-Advocacy

- Guide them in **communicating their needs to teachers** (e.g., writing an email about needing breaks).
- Encourage **small acts of independence** (e.g., choosing their morning routine, setting personal goals).

✓ Plan for Setbacks

- Normalize **bad days** as part of progress:

💬 *“What will we do if you have a tough day again? How can we handle it together?”*

✓ Celebrate Progress

- Recognize **all steps forward, big or small**.

💬 *“I’m really proud of how you faced your fear today.”*

Final Notes:

- **If severe anxiety persists**, consider **therapy or school-based support**.
- **Flexibility is key**—some teens may need longer for each step.
- The goal isn’t **forcing school attendance** but **helping the teen rebuild confidence and emotional safety**.

Specific Scripts & Exercises for Supporting a Teen with School Anxiety & Bullying

This plan includes **scripts for parent-teen conversations** and **practical exercises** to help a teenager gradually face their school-related anxiety while addressing underlying emotional challenges.



Week 1: Rebuilding Emotional Safety & Trust

Goal: Make the teen feel heard and emotionally safe before pushing for solutions.

1. Conversation Starter: Validating Their Anxiety

Parent: *"I can see that going to school feels really overwhelming right now. You don't have to 'just get over it.' I want to understand what feels hardest for you."*

Teen: *"Everything. I hate it."*

Parent: *"That makes sense. Is it the people, the lessons, the teachers, or something else?"*

Why It Works:

- This **names** the anxiety instead of dismissing it.
 - It **breaks down** the overwhelming fear into smaller, manageable pieces.
-

2. Exercise: Externalizing the Anxiety ("Giving It a Form")

Purpose: This exercise helps the teen separate anxiety from their identity.

Instructions:

- Ask: *"If your anxiety were a creature, what would it look like?"*
- Have them **draw it, describe it, or write a story about it.**
- Ask: *"When does it grow bigger? When does it shrink?"*

Example Conversation:

Teen: *"It's like a dark cloud that gets bigger at night."*

Parent: *"That makes sense. What makes it feel smaller?"*

Teen: *"When I listen to music or watch something funny."*


Parent: *"That's really helpful to know. Maybe we can use that when it feels overwhelming."*

Why It Works:


- The teen sees their **anxiety as separate from themselves.**

- It provides a **visual way to talk about feelings**.
-


Week 2: Taking Small Steps Toward School Reconnection

 **Goal:** Gradually reduce avoidance by introducing **safe, low-pressure exposure to school**.

3. Script: First Steps to Reconnect with School

 **Parent:** *“I know school feels really hard right now. Instead of jumping straight back in, let’s find a way to make it feel safer. What’s one small step we could take together?”*

 **Teen:** *“I don’t want to go.”*

 **Parent:** *“That’s okay. What if we just drive past the school one evening, so it feels more familiar again?”*

Exercise: Creating a “Comfort Zone” Map

 **Purpose:** Helps the teen identify **safe places** at school to reduce feelings of helplessness.

Step 1: Ask them to **draw a simple map of their school**.

Step 2: Mark areas where they feel:

✓ **Safe** (e.g., library, certain teacher’s classroom)

⚠ **Neutral** (e.g., hallways, lunchroom)

✗ **Unsafe** (e.g., where the bullying happens)

 **Parent:** *“I see the library feels safer. What could help make other areas feel a little better?”*


Why It Works:


- Gives the teen a **sense of control over their environment**.
 - Helps them **plan coping strategies for challenging spaces**.
-

Week 3: Strengthening Self-Worth & Confidence

 **Goal:** Address self-esteem wounds caused by bullying.

4. Script: Challenging Negative Self-Beliefs

 **Teen:** *“I’m just not good enough. That’s why they target me.”*

 **Parent:** *“It sounds like you’ve started believing their words. But let’s look at this another way—if your best friend was feeling this way, what would you tell them?”*

💬 **Teen:** “That it’s not their fault.”

💬 **Parent:** “Exactly. Can we try saying that to yourself too?”

📝 **Exercise: “Evidence List” for Self-Worth**

💡 **Purpose:** Helps the teen recognize their **own strengths outside of bullying.**

Step 1: Write down **three things** the teen likes about themselves.
(If they struggle, remind them of strengths they’ve shown before.)

Step 2: Write **three small achievements this week** (even small ones like “got out of bed” or “answered a text”).

💬 **Parent:** “See? *These things prove you are so much more than how others treat you.*”

👉 **Why It Works:**

- Reframes their self-perception **from victim to survivor.**
- Encourages **positive self-recognition.**

📅 **Week 4: Moving Forward & Handling Setbacks**

🎯 **Goal:** Help the teen **develop long-term coping skills** and a **plan for setbacks.**

5. Script: Planning for “Bad Days”

💬 **Parent:** “Some days will be easier, and some will be really tough. What can we do if you wake up feeling like you can’t go to school?”

💬 **Teen:** “Stay home?”

💬 **Parent:** “Maybe. But what if we plan a ‘halfway option’—like just going for one class or checking in with a teacher you trust?”

📝 **Exercise: Creating a “Coping Toolbox”**

💡 **Purpose:** Helps the teen have **go-to strategies** when anxiety spikes.

Ask them to **list 5 things that help when they feel anxious.**

Examples:

- ✓ Listening to music 🎧
- ✓ Texting a friend 📱
- ✓ Deep breathing exercises 🧘
- ✓ Watching a comfort show 📺
- ✓ Spending time in a quiet space 🏠

💬 **Parent:** “Next time anxiety gets strong, let’s try picking one thing from this list.”

👉 **Why It Works:**

- Gives **practical, familiar ways to self-soothe.**

- Helps them **feel prepared** rather than overwhelmed.
-



Final Thoughts: Adjusting for Individual Needs

Every teen is different. If they:

- **Resist talking**, try **indirect approaches** (e.g., writing, drawing, or texting instead of face-to-face conversations).
 - **Shut down completely**, focus on **small non-verbal actions** (e.g., spending quiet time together, offering their favorite food, letting them know you're there).
 - **Need extra support**, consider **counseling or school-based interventions**.
-

Guidance for Using Psychoanalytic Questions with Latency-Aged Children (Ages 6-12) in a Therapeutic Setting

Latency-aged children (6-12) often **struggle to verbalize emotions directly** and may **express anxiety, loss, and self-esteem concerns through play, behavior, or physical symptoms** (e.g., tummy aches, sleep issues). A psychoanalytic approach encourages **symbolic expression, emotional containment, and gradual insight** through carefully framed questions.

Below is a **structured approach** to using **psychoanalytic questions** therapeutically with this age group.

1 Creating a Safe and Playful Therapeutic Space

Why?

Children in this stage **process emotions indirectly**—through **stories, drawings, and play**. Direct questioning can feel overwhelming, so **creating a non-threatening environment** is key.

How?

- Use **toys, puppets, or drawings** to explore emotions symbolically.
- Sit at the child's level and use a **soft, slow-paced tone**.
- **Mirror their emotions** ("It looks like that made you sad") rather than rushing to interpret.

💬 **Example:**

Instead of: "Why are you scared of school?"

✅ **Try:** "If school were an animal, what would it be? A friendly one or a scary one?"

2 Using Projective Play to Explore Anxiety

Why?

Latency-aged children **often struggle with abstract emotions** but can project their worries onto external objects.

Play-Based Questions & Techniques:

🎭 Puppet or Doll Play (Projecting Anxiety)

- "Let's pretend this doll is feeling nervous about something. What do you think she's worried about?"
- "If she could talk, what would she say?"
- "What would help her feel a bit better?"

💡 Why It Works:

- Allows **safe projection** of feelings onto an external character.
 - Gives insight into **how the child experiences their own anxiety**.
-

✏️ Drawing Feelings (Externalizing Anxiety)

Ask the child to draw:

- "What your worry looks like."
- "A place where you feel safe."
- "A superhero that protects you from scary thoughts."

💬 Follow-up Questions:

- "What does your worry say to you?"
- "How big is it today?"
- "What makes it grow smaller?"

💡 Why It Works:

- Helps **externalize anxiety** into something manageable.
 - Encourages **problem-solving** without directly confronting fears.
-


3 Exploring Loss and Grief Through Stories

Why?

Children understand **loss in a fragmented way** and often express grief through **regression, play, or repetitive questioning.**

Storytelling & Questions for Grief Processing

 **Use books or made-up stories about loss.**

 **Example:** “This is a story about a boy who lost his dog. He sometimes feels angry, sometimes sad, and sometimes okay. What do you think helps him?”

Follow-up questions:

- *“If he could say one thing to his dog, what would it be?”*
- *“Where do you think his dog is now?”*
- *“What do you think he misses most?”*



Why It Works:

- Allows children to **process grief in a step-by-step way** without direct confrontation.
 - Helps them **find words** for complex feelings.
-

4 Strengthening Self-Esteem Through Symbolic Play

Why?

Children in latency **internalize praise and criticism deeply** but may struggle with direct self-reflection.

Mirror Play (Building Positive Identity)

 **Activity:** Ask the child to **pretend their reflection is a friend** and describe themselves.

Questions to Ask:

- *“What would your friend say is really special about you?”*
- *“If you had a superpower, what would it be?”*
- *“What’s something you’re proud of doing?”*



Why It Works:

- Helps **externalize self-view** in a non-threatening way.
 - Strengthens **positive self-perception.**
-

5 Encouraging Emotional Expression Without Pressure

Why?

Latency-aged children often **resist direct discussions about feelings** but **respond well to indirect prompts**.

"Feelings Check-In" Chart

- Draw **faces with different emotions** and ask:
"Which one feels like you today?"
- Follow up with:
"What made today a (happy/sad/nervous) kind of day?"

"Worry Jar" Activity

Instructions:

- Have the child **write or draw worries** and place them in a jar.
- Each session, **pick one worry** and gently explore it.

Why It Works:

- Separates the child **from their worry**, making it feel more manageable.
- Encourages **self-expression in a low-pressure way**.

◆ Final Tips for Using Psychoanalytic Questions in Therapy

Observe Play First, Then Ask

- Instead of rushing to question, **watch how the child interacts with toys or drawings**.
- Comment on patterns ("I notice your character always hides. Do you think he's scared of something?").

Allow Silences

- Don't rush to fill gaps—**sometimes children need space to process**.

Rephrase If They Struggle to Answer

- If a child says, "I don't know," offer options:
"Sometimes kids feel nervous about friends, lessons, or teachers. Does any of that sound right?"

✔ Let the Child Lead

- If they **resist a question**, don't force it—return to play and **try again later in a different form**.
-

Guidance for Using Psychoanalytic Questions for Specific Issues

(Latency-Aged Children, 6-12)

This section provides **structured approaches** to help children struggling with:

- 1 **School Refusal & Anxiety**
- 2 **Loss & Grief (including sibling loss)**
- 3 **Low Self-Esteem & Identity Struggles**

Each includes **therapeutic techniques, projective play strategies, and psychoanalytic questions** to facilitate emotional expression.

1 **School Refusal & Anxiety**

Underlying Dynamics:

- Fear of separation from a parent.
- Anxiety about social interactions, bullying, or academic failure.
- Unconscious fear linked to an earlier life event (e.g., illness, parental conflict).

Therapeutic Techniques

Puppet Play: "The School Adventure"

Use puppets/dolls to **enact a school day**. The child directs the story.

Questions to Encourage Expression:

- *"What happens to the puppet at school?"*
- *"Does anyone make him nervous?"*
- *"What does he wish would change?"*
- *"If he had a magic wand, what would school look like?"*

Why It Works:

- Children **project fears onto the puppet**, making them easier to discuss.
 - Allows **symbolic mastery** of anxiety.
-

Drawing Exercise: "The School Monster vs. The School Friend"

Ask the child to **draw two characters**:

1. **The School Monster** (representing what makes school scary).
2. **The School Friend** (someone or something that makes school feel safer).

Questions to Explore the Drawings:

- "What does the monster say to you?"
- "Where is the friend when the monster comes?"
- "What helps the friend get stronger?"

Why It Works:

- Externalizes school fears into a **concrete, manageable form**.
 - Introduces **problem-solving and coping strategies**.
-

Gradual Exposure Plan: "Small Steps to School"

Create a **graded plan** to slowly reintroduce school.

 Write down steps like:

- ✓ **Step 1:** Visit the school on a weekend.
- ✓ **Step 2:** Meet a teacher after hours.
- ✓ **Step 3:** Attend a half-day.

Reassuring Script for the Child:

"You don't have to jump in all at once. We'll take it one step at a time, and you're not alone."

2 Loss & Grief (Including Sibling Loss)

Underlying Dynamics:

- Young children may **not fully grasp permanence** and expect the person to return.
- Some children **avoid expressing sadness** to "protect" adults.
- Guilt and magical thinking (e.g., *"Did I cause this?"*).

Therapeutic Techniques

Storytelling: "The Invisible String"

Read or create a **story about a child who has lost someone** but is still connected by an "invisible string" (symbolizing love).


Questions to Process Loss:

- *"What would the string say if it could talk?"*
- *"If you could send a message to [lost person], what would it be?"*
- *"What's one happy memory you have with them?"*

 **Why It Works:**

- Allows **symbolic connection** to the lost loved one.
 - Reduces **separation anxiety** around death.
-

 **Memory Box Activity**

 Have the child create a **box filled with items representing the lost person** (drawings, photos, objects).

 **Guiding Questions:**

- *"What do these objects remind you of?"*
- *"If [person] could leave you one piece of advice, what would it be?"*
- *"What do you wish people understood about how you feel?"*

 **Why It Works:**

- Gives a **tangible way to process emotions**.
 - Helps child **retain a connection to the lost person**.
-

 **Role-Play: "Talking to a Star"**

Ask the child to imagine **their lost loved one as a star in the sky**.

 **Questions:**

- *"If you could talk to the star, what would you ask?"*
- *"What do you think the star would say back?"*

 **Why It Works:**

- Provides a **comforting, child-friendly way** to maintain an emotional bond.
 - Encourages **symbolic communication**.
-

3 Low Self-Esteem & Identity Struggles

Underlying Dynamics:

- Children with low self-esteem often **internalize negative experiences** (bullying, academic struggles).
- They may use **perfectionism or avoidance** to cope.
- Feelings of **"not being enough"** can be tied to early relational patterns.

Therapeutic Techniques

"The Strength Shield" Activity

 **Step 1:** Have the child draw a "shield" divided into **four sections**.

 Each section represents:

1. **A strength** they have.
2. **Something they've overcome**.
3. **Something they love about themselves**.
4. **A time they felt proud**.

 **Guiding Questions:**

- *"When have you been brave?"*
- *"What do people say they like about you?"*
- *"What would your best friend say is your superpower?"*

 **Why It Works:**

- Helps **restructure self-narrative** around strengths.
- Encourages **positive self-recognition**.

Drawing Exercise: "Your Future Self"

Ask the child to **draw themselves in the future**.

 **Questions:**

- *"What is Future You doing?"*
- *"What makes them happy?"*
- *"What steps will help you get there?"*

 **Why It Works:**

- Shifts focus from **self-doubt to possibility**.
- Encourages **goal-setting and agency**.

Puppet Play: "The Encouraging Friend"

Have two puppets:

- **One puppet (self-doubt):** "I'm not good at anything."
- **One puppet (encouraging friend):** Helps challenge negative thoughts.

 **Encouraging Questions:**

- "What would you tell a friend who felt this way?"
- "Can we let the encouraging puppet help you today?"

 **Why It Works:**

- Teaches **self-compassion through externalization.**
 - Builds a **stronger inner voice.**
-

Final Thoughts & Adjustments

- ◆ **Tailor the Approach:** Some children **need more indirect exploration** (e.g., drawing), while others can engage in **verbal discussion.**
 - ◆ **Go at Their Pace:** If resistance appears, **return to play and storytelling.**
 - ◆ **Revisit Themes Gently:** Questions can be **revisited across sessions** as the child becomes more open.
-

Structured Session Plan for Working with a Child (6-12) on School Anxiety & Refusal

(Using a Psychoanalytic & Play-Based Approach)

This plan is designed for a **45-60 minute session** to explore **school anxiety** through play, projection, and gentle interpretation. The goal is to help the child **express their fears symbolically**, identify **underlying worries**, and **introduce coping strategies** in a non-threatening way.

Session Goals:

- ✓ Help the child externalize and explore **school-related anxiety** safely.
 - ✓ Identify **hidden fears** (e.g., bullying, separation, academic stress).
 - ✓ Strengthen a **sense of control** over school experiences.
 - ✓ Introduce **gradual exposure techniques** in a child-led way.
-

Session Breakdown (45-60 min)

◆ 1. Warm-Up & Emotional Check-In (5-10 min)

(Helps establish rapport and assess the child's current emotional state.)

Activity: "Feelings Chart"

- Show the child a **chart of different emotions** (faces or colors).
- Ask: *"Which one feels like you today?"*
- Follow up: *"What made today a [chosen emotion] kind of day?"*

Why It Works:

- Provides a **gentle start** without direct pressure to talk about school.
 - Gives a **quick insight** into the child's current mood.
-

◆ 2. Projective Play: Externalizing the Fear (15-20 min)

(Encourages the child to express school worries symbolically.)

Activity: "The School Adventure" (Puppet Play)

- Introduce **two puppets or dolls**:
 - One represents **the child** (e.g., a small animal, friendly character).
 - One represents **school worries** (e.g., a grumpy monster, a strict teacher).
- Say:
"This puppet is feeling nervous about school. What do you think is making him worried?"

Guiding Questions:

- *"What happens when the puppet goes to school?"*
- *"Is there anything that makes school scary?"*
- *"Who at school makes the puppet feel safe?"*

If the child struggles to verbalize, reframe with choices:

- *"Some kids feel nervous about friends, others about teachers or lessons. What about this puppet?"*

Why It Works:

- The puppet acts as a **safe projection**, making it easier for the child to share.
 - Allows **hidden anxieties** (bullying, teacher fear, social worries) to emerge.
-

◆ 3. Symbolic Drawing: Making the Anxiety Visible (10-15 min)

(Gives form to anxiety so the child can interact with it.)

Activity: "Draw Your School Worry Monster"

- Ask: "If your school worries were a monster, what would it look like?"
- Encourage details: "Is it big or small? Loud or quiet? Where does it live?"
- Follow up:
 - "What makes the monster stronger?"
 - "What makes it shrink?"

Role-Play with the Monster

- "Let's pretend we can talk to the monster. What would you say to it?"
- "What would it say back?"

Why It Works:

- Turns **abstract fear into something concrete** that can be controlled.
- Provides insight into **specific fears** (e.g., "The monster gets bigger when I'm alone at break time").

◆ **4. Coping Strategies & Gradual Exposure Plan (10 min)**

(Introduces ways to feel safer at school.)

Activity: "Magic School Kit"

- Ask: "If we could make a special kit to help you at school, what would we put inside?"
- Let the child **draw or list** comforting things (e.g., "a brave potion," "a superhero friend," "a tiny invisible mum").

Reframing Anxiety:

- "Lots of kids feel nervous about school. That doesn't mean school is bad—it just means we need to find what helps you feel strong."
- Introduce a **small, achievable goal**:
 - "If today you feel too worried to go all day, what if we try one lesson?"
 - "How would you feel about visiting the school when no one is there?"

Why It Works:

- Helps the child **build a toolkit for managing anxiety**.
- Encourages **gradual exposure** without overwhelming them.

◆ **5. Closing & Reassurance (5 min)**

(Ends with a sense of achievement and control.)

♥ Reflection Questions:

- "What's one thing that helped today?"
- "If you could tell another child who feels scared about school one thing, what would it be?"

✓ Give the Child a Takeaway:

- "Next time, we'll check in on the School Monster—maybe we'll make him shrink a little!"
 - Reinforce progress: "Even talking about worries today was really brave."
-

◆ Adjustments for Different Children:

🚀 For More Resistant Children:

- Use **indirect questions** ("What do *OTHER* kids worry about at school?").
- Let them **lead the play** more.

💡 For Children with Social Anxiety:

- Focus on **friendship-building stories** (e.g., "How does someone make a new friend?").

🕒 If the Child Becomes Overwhelmed:

- Shift to a **grounding activity** (e.g., "Let's count five things in the room.").
-

Follow-Up Session Plan: Supporting a Child Returning to School After Avoidance

(Latency-Aged Children, 6-12)

This **structured session** builds on the child's progress by reinforcing **confidence, coping skills, and a gradual return plan**. The session remains **play-based** to ensure engagement while addressing underlying **separation anxiety, social fears, or academic stress**.

● Session Goals:




- ✓ Reduce **avoidance behaviors** by making school feel more manageable.
 - ✓ Strengthen **sense of control** over the return process.
 - ✓ Address **lingering fears** and reinforce **coping strategies**.
-

Session Breakdown (45-60 min)

◆ 1. Warm-Up & Emotional Check-In (5-10 min)

(Helps assess current anxieties and progress.)

Activity: "Weather Check-In"

- Ask the child to describe their feelings as a **weather report**:
 -  "Sunny" (*I feel good about school today.*)
 -  "Cloudy" (*I feel unsure.*)
 -  "Stormy" (*I feel really worried.*)

Follow-Up Questions:

- "What's making today feel [chosen weather]?"
- "What do you think could help change the weather?"

Why It Works:

- Gives a **non-intimidating way** to describe emotions.
 - Helps **track changes** in anxiety levels.
-

◆ 2. Revisiting School Worries (15-20 min)

(Allows child to externalize fears before introducing solutions.)

Activity: "School Worry Detective"

- Say: "Today, we're detectives. We're going to uncover some of the tricky things about school and see if we can solve them!"
- **Use magnifying glasses** (real or pretend) to "investigate" school worries.
- Ask:
 - "What's one mystery we need to solve about school?"
 - "If we could make school a little easier, what would we change?"
 - "What part of the day feels hardest?"

 **Alternative:** If the child struggles to talk directly, draw a "School Map" with safe and hard places.

Why It Works:

- **Externalizes** worry in a fun way.
 - **Narrows down** specific triggers for school avoidance.
-

◆ 3. Exposure Plan: "The School Ladder" (10 min)

(Breaks return-to-school into small, achievable steps.)

Activity: "Step-by-Step School Plan"

- **Draw a ladder** with the child. Each step is a **small goal** leading to full return.
- **Example Steps:**
 - ① Visit the school after hours.
 - ② Walk into the schoolyard.
 - ③ Go inside for a short visit.
 - ④ Stay for a lesson.
 - ⑤ Attend a half-day.
 - ⑥ Return for a full day.

Questions to Build the Ladder:

- *"Which step feels hardest?"*
- *"Who could help you at each step?"*
- *"What reward would make this feel easier?"*





Why It Works:

- **Breaks down the overwhelming task** of going back to school.
 - Allows **child-led pacing** for return.
-

◆ 4. Coping Toolbox: "What Helps Me Feel Brave?" (10-15 min)

(Encourages emotional regulation strategies.)

Activity: "My School Survival Kit"

- Ask the child to **create (draw or list)** a "**Bravery Kit**" with tools that help at school.
- Examples:
 -  **Listening to a calming song** before school.
 -  **Carrying a small comfort item** (wristband, worry stone).
 -  **Using a grounding exercise** (e.g., "5 things I see").
 -  **Having a special book** to read at break time.

Guiding Questions:

- *"What helps when you feel nervous?"*
- *"If you had a magic school helper, what would they do?"*

- "What's one thing we can try next time you feel worried?"

Why It Works:

- Helps **identify self-soothing strategies** in advance.
 - Provides **concrete tools** the child can use independently.
-

◆ 5. Closing & Reinforcement (5 min)

(Ends with a sense of success and agency.)

Reflection Questions:

- "What's one thing you learned today about school?"
- "What's the first small step you want to try this week?"
- "Who can help you if things feel hard?"

Give the Child a Takeaway:

- Draw/write **one positive message** (e.g., "I am brave. I can do hard things.").
 - Let them **choose a reward** for reaching the first step of the plan.
-

◆ Adjustments for Different Children:

For Highly Anxious Children:

- Keep sessions **shorter and more playful**.
- Focus on **puppet play** instead of direct talking.

For Children with Bullying Fears:

- Use **social stories** on standing up to bullies or seeking help.

If the Child Becomes Overwhelmed:

- Shift to **deep breathing** or a **calming activity** (e.g., sensory play).
-

At-Home Support Plan: Helping Your Child Return to School After Avoidance

(Latency-Aged Children, 6-12)

This **structured at-home approach** helps parents support a child struggling with school anxiety, ensuring they feel **safe, empowered, and prepared** for the return to school. The plan is based on **gradual exposure, emotional validation, and practical coping strategies**.

● Goals for Parents:

- ✓ **Reduce fear** by breaking down school return into small, manageable steps.
 - ✓ **Validate emotions** while keeping expectations clear and consistent.
 - ✓ **Build confidence** through routine, problem-solving, and emotional support.
 - ✓ **Encourage independence** while providing safety nets.
-

1 Creating a Safe Space for Conversations

How to Start Conversations About School Anxiety:

- Choose a **calm, relaxed moment** (not at drop-off time).
- Keep the tone **curious and non-judgmental**.
- Use **open-ended, non-pressuring prompts** like:
 - "What's the hardest part about school right now?"
 - "If school could feel easier, what would change?"
 - "What's one thing that feels safe or okay about school?"

What to Avoid:

- ✗ **Pushing them too quickly** ("You have to go—no choice!").
- ✗ **Minimizing their feelings** ("There's nothing to worry about.").
- ✗ **Over-reassurance** ("Everything will be fine!") → Instead, help them build their own strategies.

Example Response:

✓ *"I can see school feels really hard right now. Let's figure out together what can make it easier, one small step at a time."*

2 Gradual Exposure: The Step-by-Step Return Plan

(Breaks school return into small, achievable goals.)

Activity: "School Ladder Plan"

- **Draw a ladder or staircase** together. Each step represents a small goal toward full school return.
- Let your child **help decide the steps** to increase their sense of control.

◆ **Example Steps for Gradual Return:**

- 1 Walk by the school after hours.
- 2 Visit the playground or go inside when it's quiet.
- 3 Stay for a short session (e.g., morning only).
- 4 Attend a full day but have a safety plan (e.g., text check-in with a parent).
- 5 Attend full days independently.

💡 **How Parents Can Help:**

- **Praise effort** at every step ("*That was really brave! Next time will feel even easier.*").
 - **Give small rewards** for progress (sticker chart, extra storytime).
 - **Avoid punishments** for fear-based refusals.
-

3 **Building a Morning Routine to Reduce Anxiety**

(Structure reduces uncertainty and increases predictability.)

🌞 **Steps for a Calming School Morning:**

- 🕒 **1. Predictability:** Stick to the **same wake-up and getting-ready routine** each day.
- 💬 **2. "Today's Plan" Check-In:** Briefly **talk through the school day** so your child knows what to expect.
- 🎵 **3. Distraction Tools:** Play **calming music**, listen to an audiobook, or talk about a fun topic (**not school-related!**) on the way to school.
- 📦 **4. Comfort Object:** Let them bring a small, discreet comfort item (e.g., a keychain, note in pocket).

🚫 **What to Avoid in the Morning:**

- ❌ **Rushing or pressuring** → Anxiety thrives in chaos.
 - ❌ **Over-negotiation** → Keep calm but firm: "*I know it feels scary, but we're going to take it step by step.*"
-

4 **Teaching Coping Tools for Anxiety**

(Helps them manage school fears independently.)

🧩 **Activity: "The Worry Shrinker"**

- **Draw their school worry as a monster** or shape.
- Ask: "*What makes it grow?*" and "*What shrinks it?*"
- Teach: "*Worries get bigger when we avoid things. They shrink when we face them, even in small steps.*"

🔧 **Calming Techniques for School Anxiety:**

👉 **"5-4-3-2-1" Grounding Game:**

- Name **5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, 1 thing you like about yourself.**

Turtle Breath:

- Take a **slow breath in for 4 seconds**, hold, and breathe out slowly.

Reframing Thoughts:

- Instead of *"I can't do this,"* help them say *"This is hard, but I can try one step."*
-

5 Creating a Safety Plan for Tough Moments at School

(Gives the child reassurance that help is available.)

Collaborate with the School:

- Arrange a **safe person** (teacher, school counselor) they can go to.
- Allow **short breaks** if needed (e.g., quiet space for 5 minutes).
- Have a **simple check-in system** (e.g., thumbs-up signal with a teacher).

At-Home Safety Plan Example:

- If your child **panics before school**, let them use a **calming tool first** (e.g., deep breaths, fidget).
 - If they **call home from school**, script a **short reassurance**:
 - *"I know you're feeling worried, but you are safe. Take one deep breath, and I'll see you at home after school."*
-

6 Encouraging Social Confidence

(If school anxiety is linked to peer issues, help them feel more connected.)

Ways to Help Build Friendships at School:

 **17** Arrange **playdates or meetups** outside of school.

Role-play how to start conversations:

- *"Can I play with you?"*
- *"That game looks fun—how do you play?"*

If Bullying is a Concern:

- Teach **assertive responses**: *"Stop. I don't like that."*
 - Encourage **seeking help from an adult** rather than avoidance.
-

7 Keeping Track of Progress & Celebrating Wins

(Helps reinforce resilience and motivation.)

Activity: "Bravery Jar"

- Each time they **take a step toward school**, add a bead or coin to a jar.
- Once the jar is full, celebrate (e.g., **special family time, small treat**).

Daily Reflection Questions:

- "What was one good thing about today?"
- "What helped when you felt nervous?"
- "What's one small step you want to try tomorrow?"

Final Encouragement for Parents:

- Stay **calm and patient** – progress may be slow, but every step counts.
- Trust that **anxiety improves with consistency** – avoiding school makes it worse long-term.
- Focus on **progress, not perfection** – even small wins are big victories!

Would you like a **scripted guide for handling school refusal moments at home** (e.g., "I don't want to go!")? 😊

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Scripted Guide for Handling School Refusal at Home

(Latency-Aged Children, 6-12)

When a child refuses school due to anxiety, the key is to **validate their feelings while maintaining firm but compassionate boundaries**. Below are specific **scripts for different school refusal scenarios** and guidance on how to respond effectively.

1 Morning School Refusal: "I don't want to go to school!"

Common Parent Reactions to Avoid:

-  "You have to go. No choice." → (This increases anxiety.)
-  "Stop being silly, there's nothing to worry about." → (Minimizes feelings.)
-  "Fine, you can stay home today." → (Reinforces avoidance.)

Effective Response (Calm, Firm, and Supportive)

Validation & Understanding

"I can see school feels really hard right now. I know it's not easy, and it's okay to feel worried."

Encourage a Small Step

"Instead of thinking about the whole day, let's just focus on getting dressed first. We'll take it one step at a time."

Give a Choice (Increases a Sense of Control)

"Do you want to walk in with me today or go in with your teacher?"



Reassure, But Keep the Boundary Firm

"You don't have to love school, but you do need to go. I believe in you, and I know you can do this."

2 If They Cry or Panic: "I feel sick. I can't go!"

(Some children express school anxiety as physical symptoms like stomachaches.)

Common Parent Reactions to Avoid:

-  "You're not sick, stop pretending."
-  "If you don't go, you won't be allowed any screen time."

Effective Response

Acknowledge Their Feelings Without Reinforcing Avoidance

"I believe you feel unwell. Anxiety can make our tummies feel funny, but I know you are safe."

Normalize the Feeling & Offer Comfort

"Let's take a few deep breaths and have some water. We can check in again in 5 minutes."

Encourage School Attendance With a Safety Net



"Let's try going for the first lesson. If you're still feeling bad, we can talk to your teacher and make a plan."

If Physical Symptoms Continue

- If they're genuinely unwell (fever, vomiting), allow rest.
 - If symptoms **disappear after avoiding school**, continue with normal activities (no extra TV/resting).
-

3 If They Won't Leave the House: "I'm not getting in the car!"

 **Common Parent Reactions to Avoid:**

-  "Get in the car now!" (Escalates conflict.)
-  "Fine, you can stay home." (Reinforces avoidance.)


 **Effective Response**

 **Stay Calm & Acknowledge Their Anxiety**

"I can see something about school feels really scary today. You're not alone—I'm here to help you through it."

 **Break the Task Down**

"You don't have to think about the whole day—let's just put our shoes on first."

 **Use Distraction** (Play music, audiobook, or talk about a fun topic)



"Let's listen to your favorite song on the way."

 **Give a Safety Net, But Keep Moving Forward**

"I'll walk with you to the gate, and we can check in with your teacher together."

4 At School Drop-Off: "Please don't leave me!"


 **Common Parent Reactions to Avoid:**

-  "You'll be fine!" (Over-reassurance can feel dismissive.)
-  Linger too long or showing hesitation (Makes the goodbye harder.)

 **Effective Response**

 **Reassure, But Keep It Short**

"I love you, and I'll see you after school. You are safe."

 **Use a Goodbye Ritual** (E.g., secret handshake, hug, wave at the window.)

 **Give Them a Small Goal**



"I want you to tell me one good thing about your day when I pick you up!"

 **Leave Confidently**

- If you linger or hesitate, it signals doubt.
 - Walk away calmly, even if they cry (teachers are trained to support them).
-

5 After School: "I hate school!"

 **Common Parent Reactions to Avoid:**

-  "You have to go, so stop complaining."
-  "See? I told you it was fine!"

✔ **Effective Response**

💬 **Validate & Show Curiosity**

"It sounds like today was really tough. Tell me what felt the hardest."

🔄 **Encourage Processing Without Fixing**

"What's one thing that helped a little today?"

❤️ **Reinforce Strengths**

"Even though today was hard, you got through it. That shows how strong you are."

6 Night-Time Worries: "What if something bad happens at school?"

🚫 **Common Parent Reactions to Avoid:**

✗ *"Nothing bad will happen, stop worrying."*

✗ *Letting them stay up late to avoid thinking about school.*

✔ **Effective Response**

💬 **Acknowledge & Externalize the Worry**

"Your brain is trying to protect you, but sometimes worries tell us stories that aren't true."

🧠 **Activity: "Talk Back to Worries"**

"Let's name your worry. What should we call it?" (e.g., "Mr. What-If")

"What would you say to Mr. What-If if he keeps bothering you?"

🚀 **Create a "Worry Plan"**

"If you feel anxious at school, what's something you can do to feel better?" (Use breathing, grounding, safe person.)

Final Parent Tips for School Refusal

✔ **Stay Calm & Consistent:**

- Anxiety thrives on **uncertainty**. Your confidence helps them feel safe.

✔ **Use a Gradual Approach:**

- Even small steps forward are **progress**.

✔ **Collaborate With the School:**

- Let teachers know about **specific fears** so they can support your child.

✔ **Praise Effort, Not Just Attendance:**

- "You were really brave putting on your uniform today!"

✔ Avoid Giving In to Avoidance:

- Each time a child **stays home**, anxiety wins. The goal is to **build tolerance**, not remove discomfort.
-

Printable checklist for parents to use at home? 😊

School Anxiety & Refusal: Parent Checklist

Morning Routine Support

✔ Validate feelings: "I can see school feels hard today. It's okay to feel worried." ✔ Break it into small steps: "Let's just focus on getting dressed first." ✔ Offer a choice to increase control: "Would you like to walk in with me or your teacher?" ✔ Set a firm but compassionate boundary: "You don't have to love school, but you do have to go." ✔ Use a transition strategy: Play music, talk about a fun topic, or do deep breathing exercises together.

Handling Physical Symptoms

✔ Acknowledge the discomfort: "I believe you feel unwell. Anxiety can make our bodies feel strange." ✔ Encourage a calming activity: Sip water, take deep breaths, or hold a comfort object. ✔ Set a safety net: "Let's try going for one lesson. If it's still too much, we can talk to your teacher." ✔ If symptoms persist, continue the day as usual (no extra TV or special treatment for staying home).

If They Refuse to Leave the House

✔ Stay calm and acknowledge the fear: "Something about today feels really scary. I'm here to help." ✔ Break the task down: "You don't have to think about the whole day—let's just put on shoes first." ✔ Offer a small incentive: "After school, we can have a special snack together." ✔ Keep moving forward: Walk them to the car/bus stop calmly and confidently.

At School Drop-Off

✔ Keep goodbyes short and confident: "I love you, and I'll see you after school." ✔ Use a goodbye ritual: High-five, hug, or a secret handshake. ✔ Give a small goal: "Tell me one good thing about your day when I pick you up!" ✔ Walk away confidently—even if they cry (teachers are trained to support them).

After School Check-In

✓ Validate struggles: *"It sounds like today was really tough. What felt hardest?"* ✓
Encourage processing: *"What's one thing that helped you today?"* ✓ Reinforce their
resilience: *"Even though today was hard, you did it! That's really brave."*

Night-Time Worries About School

✓ Acknowledge the worry: *"Your brain is trying to protect you, but sometimes worries tell us stories that aren't true."* ✓ Externalize the worry: Name it (e.g., "Mr. What-If") and talk back to it. ✓ Create a "Worry Plan": Identify a calming strategy they can use at school. ✓ Use relaxation techniques: Deep breathing, a warm bath, or reading together before bed.

Parent Self-Check

✓ Am I staying calm and consistent? ✓ Am I encouraging progress, even in small steps?
✓ Am I working with the school for extra support? ✓ Am I praising my child's effort, not just attendance? ✓ Am I avoiding reinforcing avoidance behaviors?

Remember: Every small step forward is progress. You and your child are working through this together! ❤️

I hope you have found this guide helpful!

If you would like to work with me on a 1:1 you can email me at:

charlotte@thethinkingpod.com

Additionally if you would feel that your child would benefit from psychotherapy sessions we can discuss this.

There are lots of other resources on my website:

<https://www.thethinkingpod.com>

You can also follow me on social media

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/the.thinking.pod>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61558357432470>

Our Facebook support group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/parentsandcarerssupportpod>

