THE MORNING MELTDOWN Guide

What to Say (and What Not to Say) When Your Child Refuses to Go to School or is having a morning filled with anxiety

A free guide for parents of anxious children,
from Charlotte Cook - Child Psychoanalyst



You're not failing.

Let's start there.

Because if you've downloaded this guide, chances are you've spent a significant chunk of your morning - maybe your whole morning - trying to get your child through a school door they simply will not walk through.

The tears. The stomach aches that appear out of nowhere.

The 'I can't' and the 'please don't make me' and the shaking hands and the pale face and the absolute, immovable refusal.

And you - standing in the hallway, bag on your shoulder, already running late, not knowing whether to push or back off or just sit on the floor with them and cry.

It's exhausting. It's heartbreaking.
And it can feel very, very lonely.

I want you to know: this is not a parenting failure.
This is anxiety. And anxiety, when we understand it better, becomes something we can actually work with.

That's what this guide is for.

I'm Charlotte - a psychoanalyst specialising in childhood anxiety.

I've spent years working with children who couldn't find the words to tell their parents what was happening for them on the inside.

This guide is my attempt to give you some of those words — and some practical things you can try, starting tonight.

Take what's useful. Leave what isn't. And be kind to yourself as you read it.

Charlotte x



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Why the Usual Advice Makes It Worse

You've probably heard some version of these:

- 'Just push them in - they'll be fine once they're there.'
- 'If you give in, you're making it worse.'
- 'They need to face their fears.'

And here's the frustrating thing: there's a grain of truth in all of it. Avoidance does reinforce anxiety, over time. But the way those messages are usually applied - especially in the middle of an acute anxious moment - tends to backfire.

Here's why.

When your child is in the grip of anxiety, their nervous system is in a genuine state of alarm. The part of their brain responsible for rational thinking, perspective-taking, and listening to reason is essentially offline. What's running the show instead is the threat response - the same system that's designed to protect us from danger.

Pushing, arguing, reasoning, or reassuring during this moment doesn't land the way we hope. Instead, it can amplify the feeling that something really is wrong, because if mum or dad is this stressed, surely I'm right to be scared?

What helps instead is what we call co-regulation: helping your child's nervous system calm down by first calming your own. You're not giving in.

You're giving them something their brain actually needs in order to think clearly again.

That's not soft parenting. That's neuroscience.

The 5 Things You Accidentally Say That Spike Anxiety

None of these are said with anything other than love.

But understanding their impact can make a real difference.

1. 'You'll be fine!'

What we mean:
I believe in you. This isn't as scary as it feels.

What they hear:
I'm not sure you can do it, it is really scary.

Try instead:
'I can see this is difficult for you, you can work through it.'

2. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

What we mean:
I want to take this feeling away from you.

What they hear:
'You might be right to worry'.

Try instead:
'It sounds like your body is really worried today. Let's just take a breath together.'

3. 'Everyone else manages - why can't you?'

What we mean:
I'm frustrated and scared and I don't know what else to do.

What they hear:
I'm broken. I'm different. There's something wrong with me.

Try instead:
Say nothing. Sit with them. Comparison never helps anxiety.

4. 'If you don't go in, you'll fall behind / miss your friends / get in trouble.'

What we mean:
I'm trying to give them a reason to push through.

What they hear:
There are even more things to be scared about now.

Try instead:
Focus only on right now, not on consequences. 'It's time to get into the car, let's think about what we will do together when I pick you up at 3'.

5. 'You were fine yesterday — what's changed?'

What we mean:
I'm confused and trying to make sense of this.

What they hear:
My feelings are inconsistent and therefore invalid.

Try instead:
'I know this feels different today. That's okay. I'm here.'

The 3-Minute Calm Reset

You can do this in the car, at the school gate, or in the hallway. It's not magic. But it is grounding - and grounding can help refocus the mind away from overwhelming thoughts.

Step 1: Ground yourself first. (30 seconds)

Before you say or do anything, take one slow breath. Drop your shoulders. Soften your face. You don't have to feel calm to do this - you just have to do it. Your nervous system and your child's are in constant communication. How you are in your body in this moment will register with them.

Step 2: Get physical. (30 seconds)

Sit down (if you can), get level with them, lower your voice. Physical cues of safety - open body language, a calm face, a slower pace - communicate safety before words do.

Step 3: Say the one sentence that helps most.

'I'm here. I've got you. We'll figure this out together.'
You don't need to fix anything in this moment. You just need to be a safe place for them to land.

Step 4: Don't rush the recovery.

Anxiety spikes fast but takes longer to come down. Give it a minute or two. Don't fill the silence with more reassurance. Just be there.

Step 5: Gently, when they're calmer:

'Let's walk together? (or move in some way) 'we can do it now or when the clock reaches.....' Give them a sense of agency - even small choices help regulate the nervous system.

Tonight's Conversation Starter

One of the most important things you can do for an anxious child happens not in the middle of the meltdown - but later.

When things are calm.

This is when the window opens.

Not with questions like 'What's wrong with you?' or 'Why do you hate school?' - but with something much gentler.

Try this tonight:

'I noticed this morning felt really hard. You don't have to talk about it. But if there's ever anything on your mind - even something tiny - I'm always here to listen. And I promise I won't try to fix it or tell you not to worry. I'll just listen.'

And then - this is the hard part - be quiet.

You don't need to problem-solve.
You don't need to fill the silence.
You just need to hold the space open and let them know that their inner world is safe with you. Give them space to think.

Sometimes they'll talk. Sometimes they won't.
Either way, you've done something important: you've told them that their feelings have a place.

That you're not afraid of what's going on inside them. That they don't have to manage it alone.That is not a small thing.

That is, in fact, everything.

What's Really Going On Under the Surface

If this guide has helped you start to see your child's anxiety differently, I want to leave you with one final thought.

What we see on the outside - the avoidance, the meltdowns, the stomachaches - is never the whole story.

Anxiety is communication.

It's the mind and body's way of saying: something feels unsafe. Something feels too big. I don't have the resources to cope with this right now.

The surface-level strategies in this guide can help in the moment. But the deeper work - understanding what your child is really communicating, and why, and how to respond in a way that builds lasting safety - that's where the real transformation happens.

It's also where I come in.



How I can help you

If you'd like to go deeper, there are two ways I can support you:

The Parent Insight Pod — £25/month

A monthly community membership for parents who want real insight into their child's inner world. We use the INSIGHT model - helping you understand what's behind the behaviour, so you can respond in a way that actually helps.

Monthly live sessions, mini trainings, downloadable resources, and a warm community of parents who just get it.

Cancel anytime. No commitment. Just support.

Join the Parent Insight Pod →

The Breakthrough Group Anxiety Programme

A structured programme for families who are ready to go further.

This is the deeper work - understanding your child's anxiety from the inside out, and creating lasting change as a family.

Find out more →



About Charlotte

I am the founder of The Thinking Pod and the child who missed 3 years of school due to anxiety.

History repeated itself when I became a parent and at the same age (11) my daughter began avoiding school.

Because of this I went on to research childhood anxiety and work with families to develop a way of working that actually helped families.

I then completed a seven-year doctoral training programme and registered with the Association of Child Psychotherapists and the British Psychotherapy Foundation.

My mission is to help children, teenagers and their families feel seen, heard and understood - especially in the moments when life feels overwhelming or disconnected.



I believe every child deserves to feel safe, valued and supported and that parents are the most powerful force in making that happen.

I work with families to create lasting emotional change, not quick fixes - using curiosity, compassion and genuine clinical insight.

You don't need to figure this out alone.

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Children are not anxious because they are weak.
They are anxious because they feel alone with
something too big to carry.