Supporting children with school anxiety & school refusal

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Educational Psychology

For Everyone

Aims for the session



- To explore what is meant by ‘school anxiety’
- To increase our understanding of school anxiety and how to support it
- To explore what is meant by ‘school refusal’
- To consider risk and protective factors associated with ‘school refusal’
- To consider the role of parents and schools in supporting children with ‘school refusal’

School anxiety

- School brings challenges for a variety of reasons
- For some, these challenges become more intense and distressing
- School anxiety may start gradually or come on suddenly
- It could be related to something specific in the school environment or more general in nature
- It is likely to appear different in every child
- School anxiety presents challenges for parents too
- It's not a case of *won't*, it's a case of *can't*



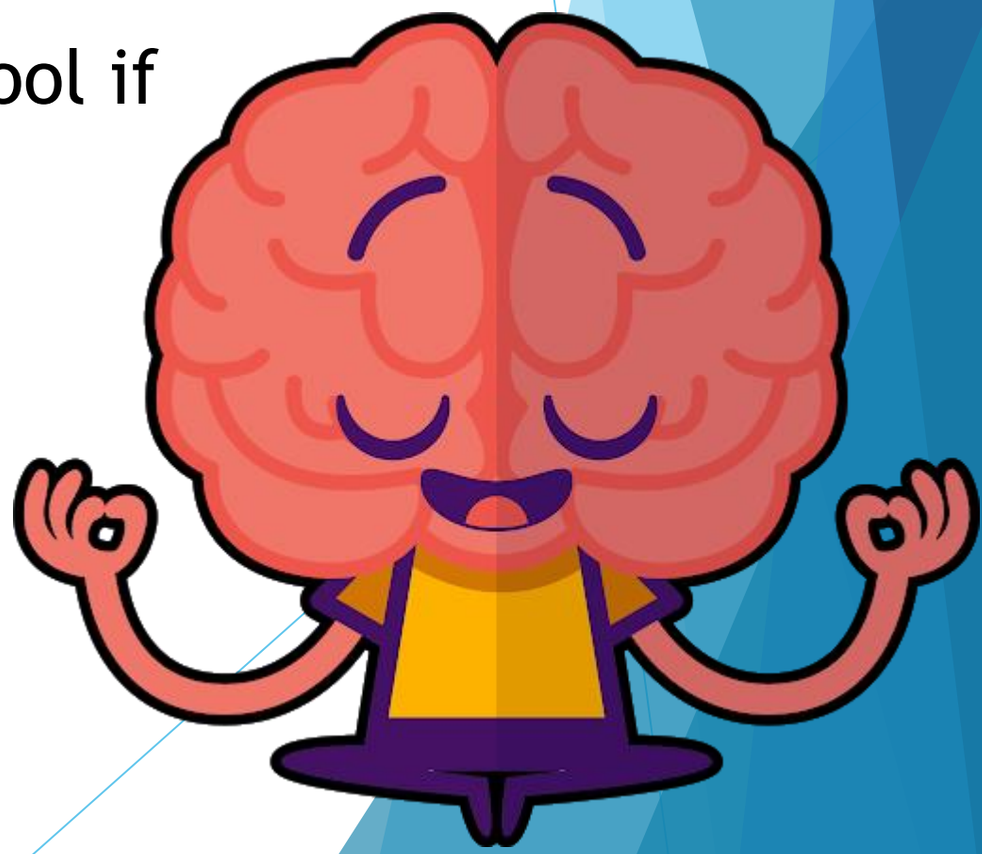
The anxious brain

- Survival centres of the brain see danger, whether this is real or imagined
- The brain essentially hijacks the body as it feels under threat
- Our amygdalae trigger a chain reaction of physical symptoms – fight, flight or freeze
- Survival instincts are hard-wired and instinctual



Helpful strategies for school anxiety

- Help your child learn about their brain and body response to anxiety
- Introduce simple ‘in the moment’ calming techniques
- Develop ways to ‘let go’ and ‘top up’
- Plan a regular morning routine
- Identify who your child can talk to at school if they feel worried
- Create a simple sensory soothing box and introduce ‘sensory anchors’



Helping with school anxiety



- Talk to your child about specific things that might be causing them worry at home or school
- Reach out to their school as early as possible to avoid things building
- Think together about what changes might help to reduce the anxiety
- Keep a diary of your child's reluctance to attend school to identify patterns / triggers
- Encourage support from friends / trusted adults



School refusal



- Occurs when anxieties become more severe and entrenched
- Involves an active reluctance or refusal to attend
- May start gradually or appear suddenly
- A serious emotional problem that is stressful for children and parents
- Can result in significant short and long term effects
- The child seeks the comfort and security of home, preferring closeness to parental figures

Emotionally based school refusal

- A severe difficulty in attending school
- Severe emotional upset when faced with school
- Parents are generally aware of the child's absence
- There is an absence of significant anti-social disorders
- More prevalent amongst boys
- Affects 5 – 28% of children at some time
- No relationship to social class or academic ability
- The youngest and / or oldest child in the family may be more affected
- Common around times of transition



Early warning signs of school refusal

- Tantrums, clinginess or running away on arrival to school
- Frequent complaints of illness
- Frequent requests to go home or call family
- Absence or lateness after weekends, school holidays
- Periodic absences with no explanation
- Frequent lateness to school
- Frequent visits to the nurse or school office



Why do children refuse to attend school?

- Problems at school e.g. bullying, worries about tests, not getting on with their teacher
- Separation anxiety
- Fear of losing a parent
- Jealousy or resentment of a younger sibling
- Perception of parent's worries about school



Risk Factors: School Refusal

Physical illness

Anxiety / Depression

Fear of failure

Low self esteem



Social issues & Bullying

Loss or Bereavement

Sensory

Over-protective parenting

Parental mental illness

Transition

Pressure to achieve

Protective Factors: School Refusal

Sense of belonging

Secure relationship between parent and child

Supportive school

Social skills

Low stress

Co-parenting



Consistency

Accessible and available support

Understanding of anxiety

Good coping skills

Separation anxiety



- Unrealistic worry about harm coming to key attachment figures
- Unrealistic worry about a calamitous event leading to separation
- Persistent reluctance or refusal to go to school
- Persistent reluctance or refusal to go to sleep
- Persistent avoidance of being alone at home
- Repeated nightmares around separation
- Complaints of physical symptoms on school days
- Signs of excessive distress on separation
- Social withdrawal, apathy or sadness when not with key attachment figure

Practical strategies for school refusal

When talking to your child:

- Show them that you understand
- Use clear, calm statements about going to school
- Show that you believe your child can go to school by staying positive
- Using direct statements that give less chance of saying ‘no’
- Talk about what needs to happen to help your child feel safe and comfortable at school



Short Term Pain vs Long Term Gain

SHORT TERM GAIN	LONG TERM PAIN
Not feeling anxious Feeling less stressed Not getting upset Feeling less worry	Missing my friends Losing confidence Finding it hard to return Not going to college
SHORT TERM PAIN	**LONG TERM GAIN**
Increase in anxiety Feeling scared Friends might be funny Explaining myself Catching up on work	Seeing friends, having fun Feeling more confident Knowing I can overcome it Going to college Able to do what I want



Which future would you rather have?
Is what you've got currently worth it?

What parents can do:

- Believe that your child will get over this
- Try not to let them see your worry
- Check with the teacher what is happening at school
- Offer reassurance and connection when sought
- Be reliable when collecting child from school
- Consider someone else taking them to school
- Transitional objects and ‘Hug Buttons’
- Involve your child in discussions
- Be consistent with strategies and don’t give up too quickly
- Consider whether outside help is needed



Working with the school

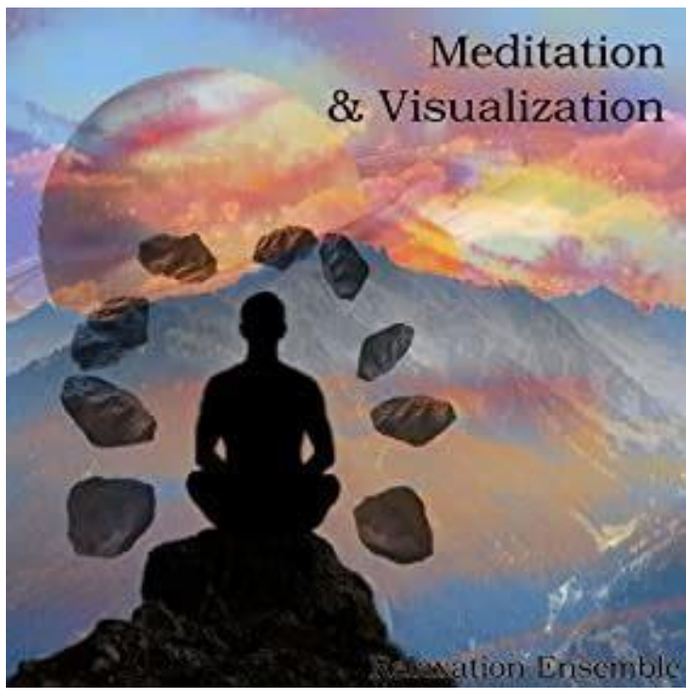
- Talk to the teacher for ideas and advice
- Ask for a referral to support staff
- Ask about the school attendance policies
- Set up regular monitoring appointments to monitor progress and need
- Talk to school about a gradual return
- Find ways to help your child feel part of the school community
- Consider whether your child will benefit from flexible start / end times
- Ask for a reduced timetable
- Discuss changing class / set
- Request a home visit from school

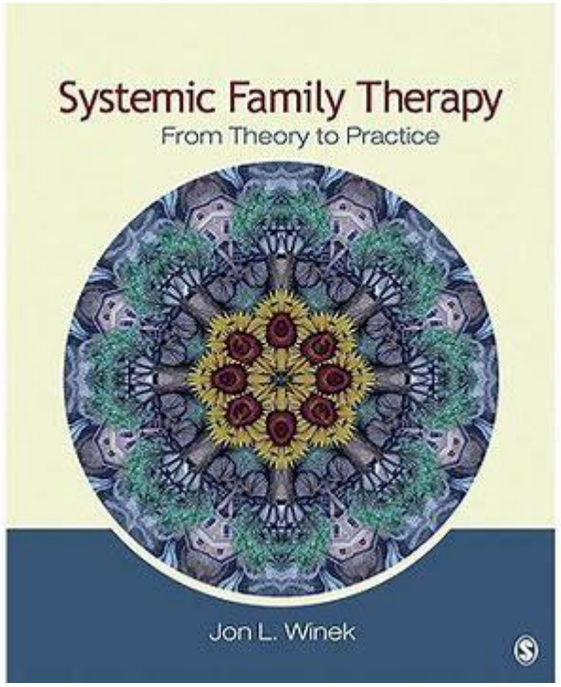


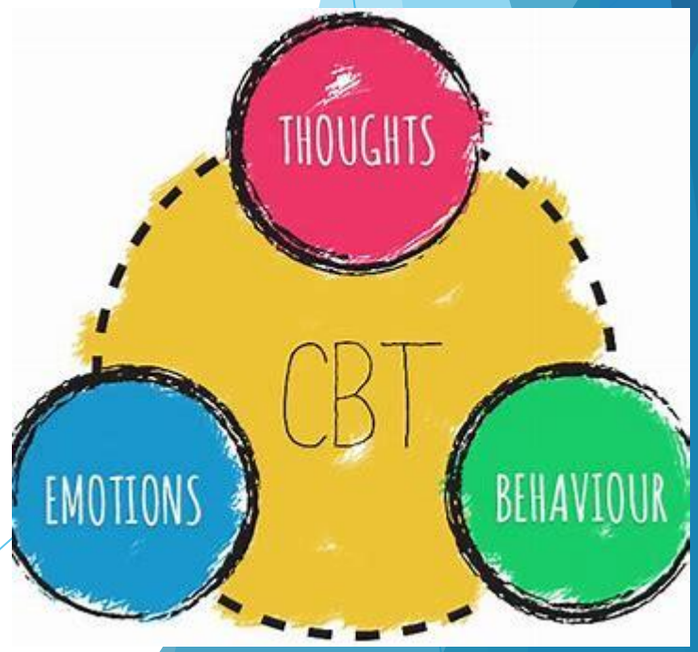
Treatment Approaches







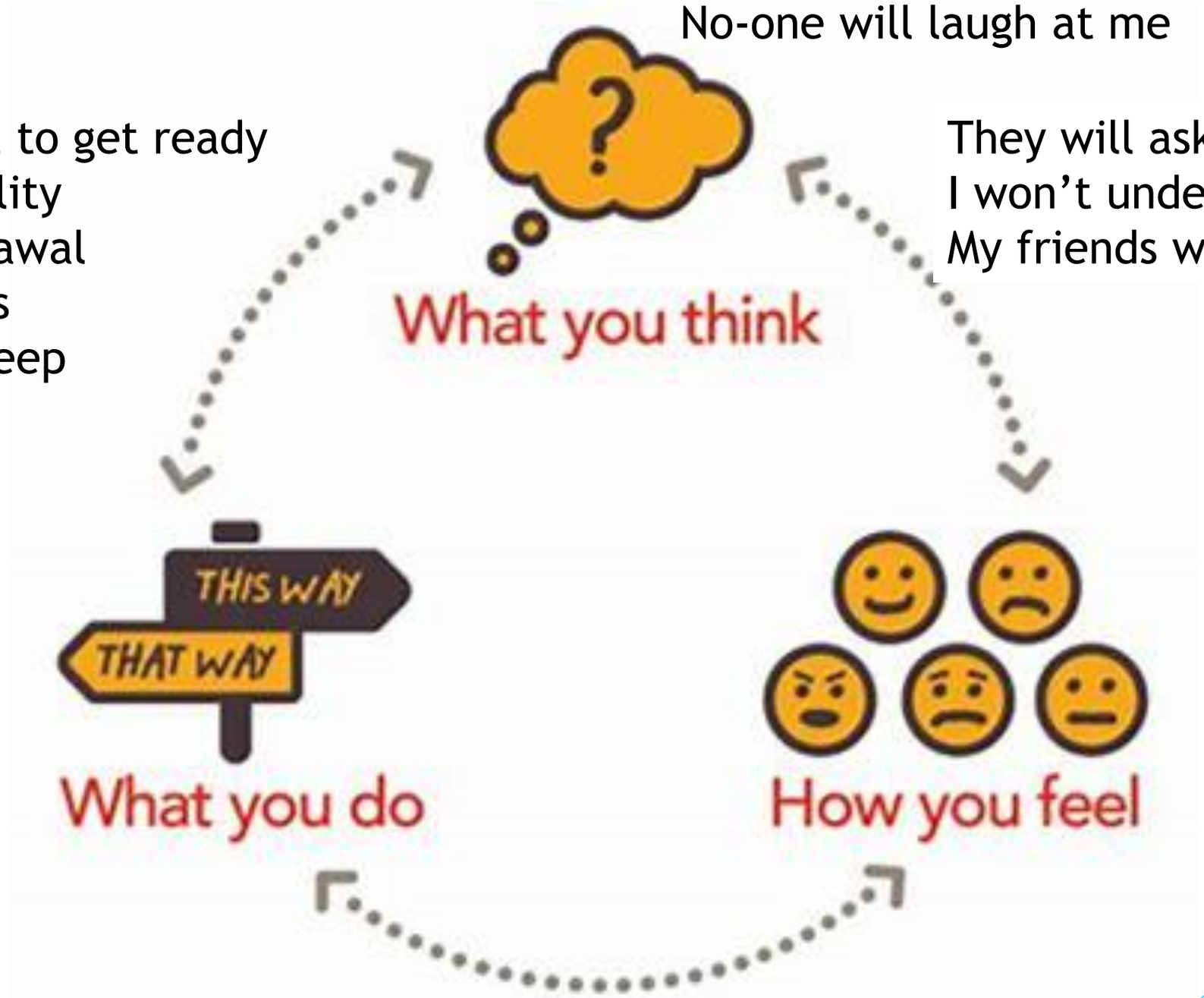




Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Mum is poorly…
I'm safe at home
No-one will laugh at me

Refusal to get ready
Irritability
Withdrawal
Distress
Poor sleep

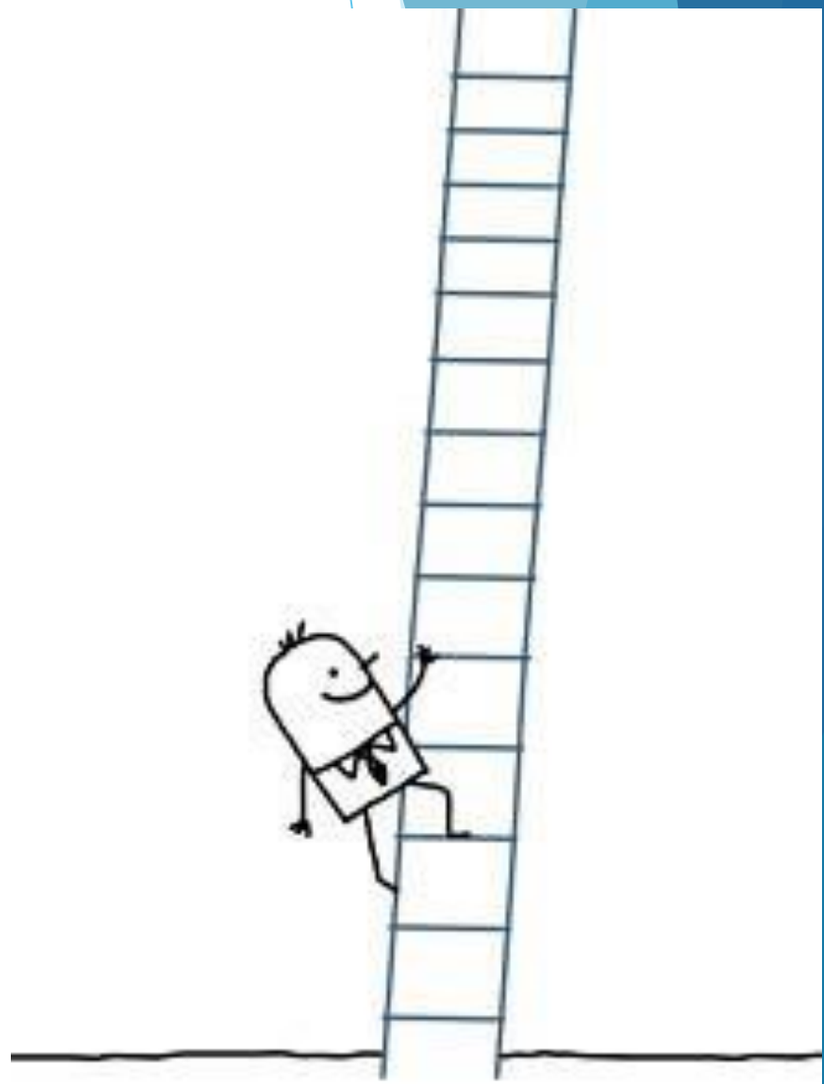


They will ask questions..
I won't understand the work
My friends won't want me

Anxiety / fear
Embarrassment
Uncertainty

Systematic Desensitisation

- Looking at the uniform in the wardrobe
- Hanging the uniform on the wardrobe door
- Placing the uniform on the bed
- Putting on one item of uniform
- Putting on two items of uniform
- Putting on three items of uniform
- Packing the school bag, wearing uniform
- Getting up and ready for school
- Walking to the school gates
- Walking through the school doors
- Walking into an empty classroom
- Standing outside a full classroom…



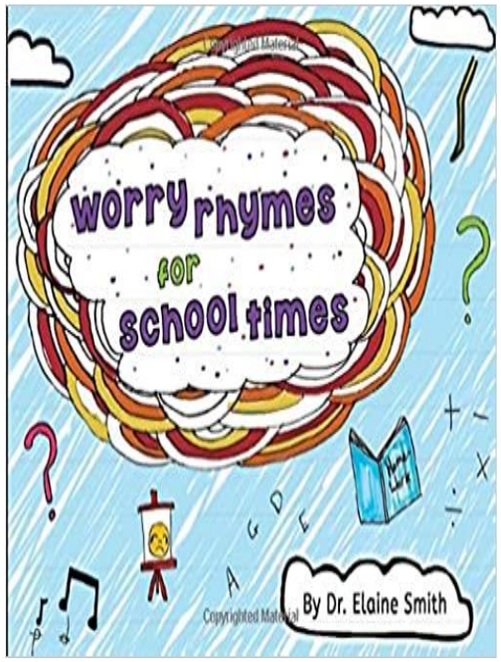

WHEN THE WORLD
says, "give up."
HOPE WHISPERS,
"try it one more time."
DrMichelleBengtson.com
#HopePrevails

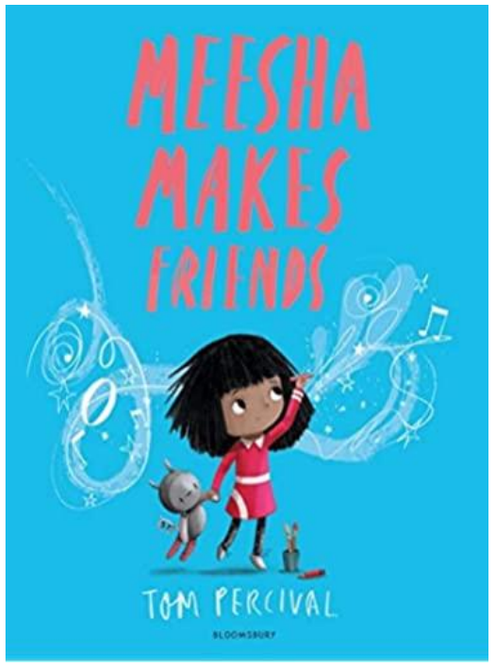
Useful Links

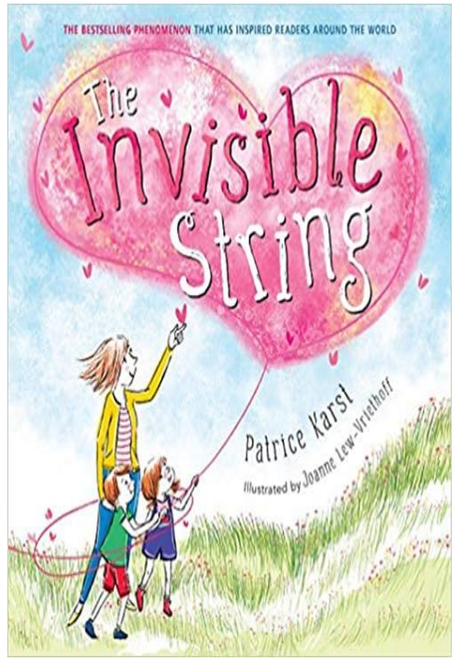


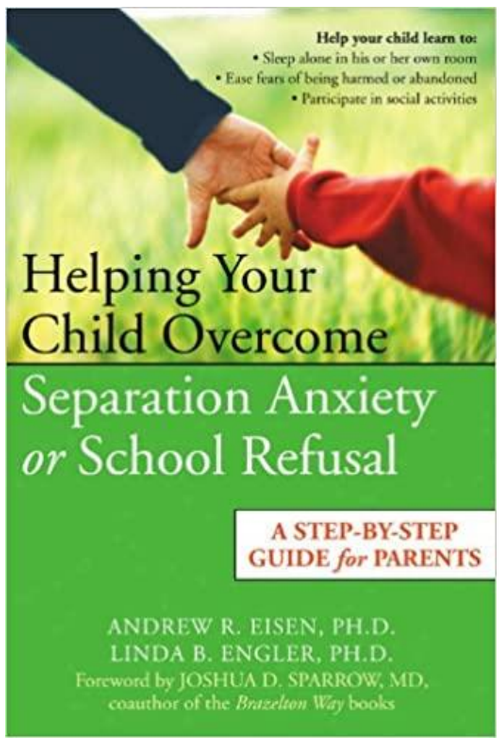
- https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-school-anxiety-and-refusal/
- https://www.camhsnorthderbyshire.nhs.uk/school-refusal
- https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic/managing-your-anxiety/
- https://notfineinschool.org.uk/
- https://www.ipsea.org.uk/

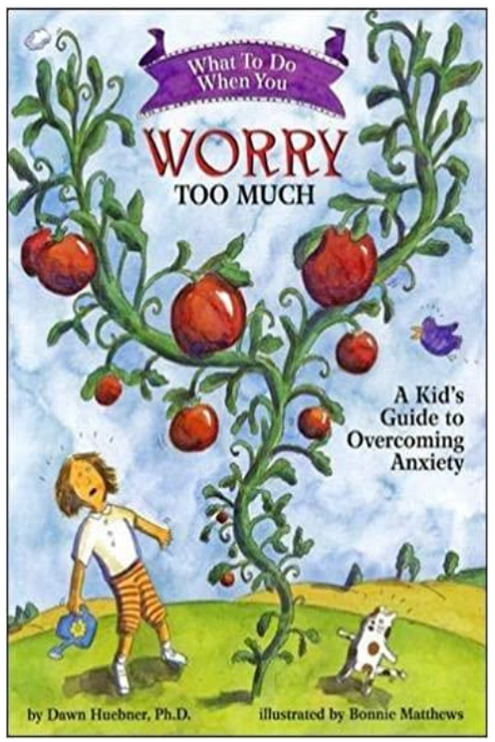
Useful Books

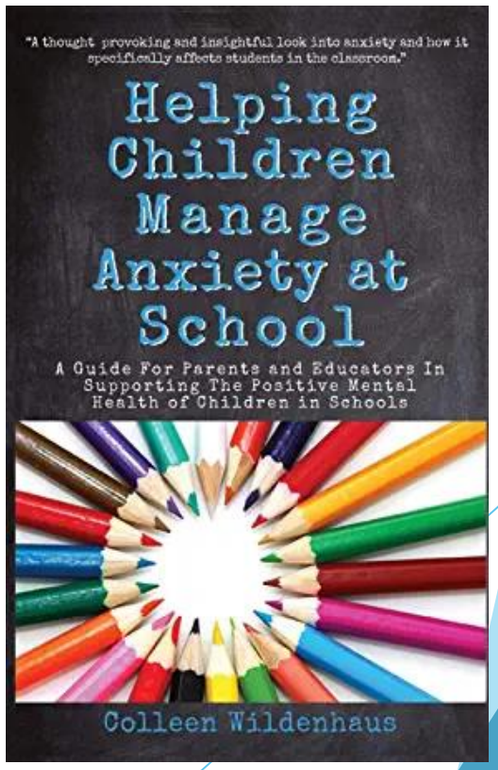












ANY QUESTIONS?



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