

KNOWLEDGE HUB

PRACTICE

They seemed fine.
How do I know if my
child is struggling
with the return to
education?

A practical guide for
parents and carers.



INSIGHT THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE.



Something has changed.

The start of a new school or academic year can bring all sorts of changes at home. Your child may be more tired than usual, quicker to become upset or irritable, need more reassurance, complain of headaches or stomach aches, struggle to sleep or suddenly seem reluctant to go somewhere they had previously been looking forward to.

For some families, the change is much more obvious. Mornings become a battle, there are tears at the school gate, a teenager starts asking to stay at home, or a young person who was excited about university calls to say they want to leave.

It can be difficult to know what to make of it, particularly when things seemed perfectly fine only a few weeks earlier.

Is this just part of settling in?

Should you encourage them to keep going?

Is there something happening that you don't know about?

Are you making too much of it - or not enough?

There isn't one answer that will fit every child or every situation. What can help is knowing what to pay attention to and what questions to ask before deciding what to do.

What you are seeing can give you clues about what may be difficult.

If your child suddenly says they do not want to go to school, it is natural to focus on getting them there. If they are irritable or emotional every evening, the behaviour itself can quickly become the problem everyone is dealing with. But what you can see is not always the same as what is causing it.

“I don't want to go to school” can mean lots of different things: I'm worried you'll leave; I don't know who I'll sit with at lunch; someone is being unkind to me; the classroom feels too noisy; I'm frightened I'll get something wrong; I keep forgetting what I'm supposed to bring; I don't know where I'm meant to go.

The words are the same. **What is making school difficult may be very different.**

Sometimes children and young people don't know exactly why something feels difficult. They simply know that it does. Rather than trying to find the answer immediately, it can help to spend a little time working out which part is difficult and what has changed.



Children may struggle to explain why something is difficult, they just know how it feels.

“What's wrong?” can be a very difficult question to answer. Smaller questions may be easier:

- *Which part of the day feels hardest at the moment?*
- *Is there a time when you feel better?*
- *What do you find yourself thinking about before school?*
- *Is there anything you're not sure how to do or where to go?*
- *If we could make one bit of tomorrow easier, which bit would you choose?*

You may not get an answer straight away, and that's okay. Don't keep asking until they produce one. They may need time to work out what they are experiencing before they can explain it.

WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

- Enjoys learning, but finding school hard
- Likes their teacher, but struggling elsewhere
- Has friends, but finds the environment exhausting
- Capable academically, but uses huge effort to cope
- Confident socially, but worried inside

QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT HELP

- What part of the day is hardest?
- When does it start?
- Is there a part they dread?
- What feels easier?
- What are they having to think about now that they didn't before?
- What would make tomorrow 10% easier?

Why ordinary things can suddenly take more effort

Returning to education can require more effort than it appears to from the outside. Think about somewhere you know really well. You don't have to work out where to go, what happens next, who to ask for help or what people expect from you. You already know. When somewhere is new, lots of those ordinary things require thought again.

For a child entering a new class or school, much more is uncertain. They may be learning new routines, new people, new expectations and new spaces while also trying to concentrate and learn. Secondary school can multiply those demands - there may suddenly be several teachers, different classrooms, older pupils, a timetable to manage, equipment to remember and changing groups of classmates throughout the day.

For a young person starting university, academic work may be only one part of the adjustment. They may also be living away from home, managing money, cooking, making friends, navigating a new place and making dozens of everyday decisions that somebody else previously helped them make. None of these things has to be particularly difficult on its own. The challenge is that lots of them can happen at once.

As things become familiar, we would usually expect some of this effort to reduce. Being unusually tired, needing extra reassurance or finding parts of the day difficult at first does not automatically mean that something is wrong.

What matters is what happens next. Are things gradually becoming easier as the days and weeks pass, staying much the same, or becoming harder?

“School says they're absolutely fine.”

This can be particularly difficult for parents and carers. Your child gets through the school day, their teacher has no concerns and then they come home exhausted, angry, tearful or unable to cope with something that would normally barely register. It can leave you wondering whether you are imagining the problem, and schools can equally find it difficult to understand concerns about a child who appears to be functioning well while they are there.

Both experiences can be true.

Getting through the school day tells us that a child managed it. It doesn't necessarily tell us how much effort that took. At the same time, becoming upset at home doesn't automatically mean that school is the cause.

Rather than trying to establish which version of the child is the “real” one, it is more useful for home and school to put their observations together. What is happening before school, during the day and afterwards? Is there a pattern? Is something becoming progressively easier or harder?

Different environments often show us different parts of the same picture.



**Coping tells us that the child or young person has managed something.
It does not necessarily tell us what managing it cost them.**

Look for patterns.

One difficult Monday morning probably tells us relatively little. Repeated difficulty every Monday morning tells us more.

The same is true if stomach aches repeatedly appear before PE, distress builds every Sunday evening, sleep becomes worse during the school week or a child consistently becomes overwhelmed immediately after getting home. Patterns can help us move from “school is making them anxious” towards a much more useful understanding of which situations appear to be difficult.

Over a week or two, notice what happens without turning family life into an assessment.

- When do they seem most settled?
- When are things hardest?
- Are mornings getting easier as the weeks pass, staying the same or getting worse?
- Does something change on particular days?
- What happens after school?
- How are they sleeping?
- Are they still enjoying things outside education?
- Have friendships changed?
- What seems to help?

Sometimes a pattern points towards something quite specific. Sometimes it simply tells you that the difficulty is broader than you first thought. **You are not trying to diagnose the problem. You are trying to understand it a little better.**



Think about what else is happening.

Children and young people don't start September with a completely clean slate. What has happened over the summer matters too. Friendship problems, family changes, poor sleep, illness, bereavement or difficulties that were already there can all affect how manageable the return feels.

This can also explain why something they managed last year feels harder now. It doesn't necessarily mean they have become less resilient or gone backwards. The same situation can feel very different depending on what else is happening in someone's life.

So alongside asking what has changed at school, consider what has changed elsewhere.



The same school day can feel manageable at one point in a child or young person's life, and much harder at another.

Help with the part that is actually difficult.

Once you have a better idea of what is difficult, it becomes easier to think about what might help.

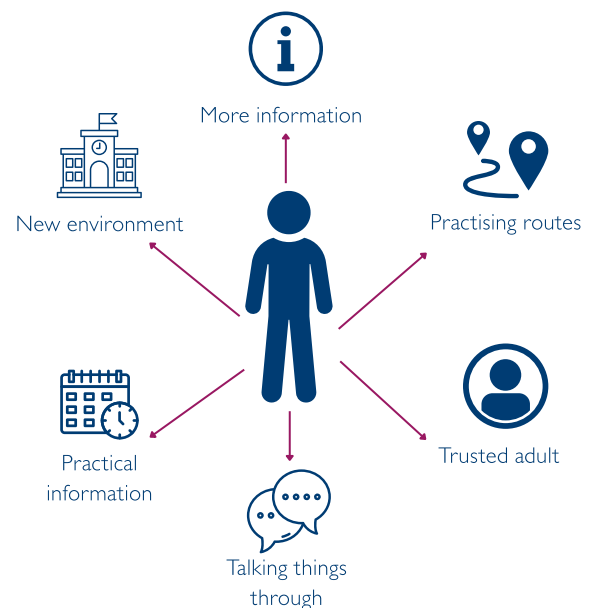
If the difficulty is uncertainty, more information may help. If it is finding their way around, practising routes may help. If lunchtime is overwhelming, understanding what options are available during lunch becomes relevant. If they are frightened about asking for help, knowing exactly who they can approach and what to say may make a difference.

For younger children, photographs of people and places, practising the journey or talking through what will happen can make something unfamiliar more predictable.

Older children may benefit from very practical conversations about timetables, transport, equipment, where to go during breaks or what happens if something goes wrong.

For a young person starting university, the equivalent might be understanding their new environment, such as finding the important buildings, registering with a GP, understanding public transport, knowing how student support works or simply working out where to buy food.

These things can sound too ordinary to make much difference. But when so much is unfamiliar, making even one part of the day more predictable can help.



Reassurance helps, but it doesn't have to mean promising everything will be fine.

When children are worried, adults naturally want to reassure them. Sometimes we say things such as “you'll be absolutely fine”, “there's nothing to worry about” or “you'll love it once you're there.” The problem is that we cannot always know that, so a different kind of reassurance can be more useful. Instead you might say:

- “I can see this is difficult. Which bit feels hardest?”
- “You don't have to know how to do everything yet.”
- “If something goes wrong, who could help?”
- “You managed today even though it was difficult. What helped?”
-

These responses don't pretend that the difficult thing isn't difficult. They show your child that you can work it out together and that difficult things can become more manageable.

One trusted person can help, but they shouldn't be the only option.

A trusted teacher, teaching assistant, family member or member of pastoral staff can make an enormous difference to a child who is finding school difficult. The longer-term aim, though, is for the child to feel increasingly able to feel more confident getting help from other people and places too.

If your child has somebody they trust, that is a strength. You can build on it by helping them know who else they could approach, where they could go, how they could ask for help and what they could do if their usual person was absent.

For a young person away at university, parents remain important too. Supporting them does not mean suddenly expecting them to manage everything alone; it can include helping them find support where they are, rather than home becoming the only place where problems can be solved.

What if they don't want to go?

This is often the point at which things become especially difficult for families. You may be worried about their distress and, at the same time, worried about the consequences of them missing education. It can feel as though your only choices are to force the issue or allow them to stay away.

There isn't always a simple answer. But if attendance is becoming difficult, it is important to try to understand why as early as possible.

Staying away from something frightening or overwhelming can bring immediate relief, but the problem is that longer periods away can introduce new difficulties: missed work, disrupted friendships and routines, uncertainty about what has happened while they were absent and increasing worry about returning. At the same time, repeatedly pushing a very distressed child into a situation without understanding what is wrong may not solve the problem either.

If attendance is becoming difficult, involve the school or education setting early, share what you are seeing at home and ask what they are seeing there. Try to move the conversation beyond "How do we get them in?" towards "What is making it hard for them to go in, and what might help?"

When should I be more concerned?

There is no precise number of difficult mornings or tearful evenings that separates normal adjustment from something requiring additional support. What matters is the overall picture and whether it is changing.

Some nervousness, tiredness or uncertainty can be a normal part of adjusting to something new. As routines become familiar and relationships develop, we would usually expect at least some of that effort or uncertainty to begin to reduce.

It is worth seeking additional advice if:

- distress is becoming more intense rather than less;
- difficulties are continuing without improvement;
- attendance is becoming increasingly difficult; or
- you notice significant changes in sleep, eating, relationships, mood or everyday life.

You know your child. If something feels significantly different or you are worried, you do not need to wait until things reach crisis point before asking for help.

For school-aged children, you might start with their teacher, pastoral team, SENCO, school nurse or GP, depending on the concern. College and university students can also contact student support or wellbeing services, as well as their GP.

If you are worried about a child or young person's immediate safety, seek urgent professional help via NHS 111 Option Mental Health.

If you're not sure where to start.

You don't need to diagnose your child or have all the answers before talking to their school, college, university or another professional.

Start with what you know.

 **What has changed?**
What are you seeing now that is different from before?

 **Which way are things moving?**
Are they gradually finding their feet, staying stuck or finding things increasingly difficult?

 **What seems to help?**
Notice the people, routines, information or practical things that make a difference.

 **When is it hardest - and when is it easier?**
Look for particular times, places, days or situations.

Then ask: ***What do I understand now that I didn't understand before?***

You may realise that something small and practical could help. You may have a clearer conversation to take to school or another professional. Or you may recognise that your child needs more support.

You do not need to understand everything before taking the next step. You just need somewhere useful to start.

From Eleos

At Eleos, we know that it can be difficult to judge when a child or young person simply needs time to find their feet and when something needs more attention.

Our work brings psychological expertise into everyday situations in ways that are practical and useful. For families, that means helping to make sense of what may be happening without turning every difficult day into a problem — and knowing when it may be time to ask for more help.

This article is accompanied by our free parent and carer resource [Something has changed](#), which provides a simple way to bring together what you have noticed and prepare for a conversation with your child's school, education setting or another professional.

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ELEOS KNOWLEDGE HUB

Insight that makes a difference.



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