# Understanding difficult mornings



## Why a school morning can feel impossible

ADHD can make starting tasks, remembering steps, switching attention, managing time and coping with frustration unusually demanding. A child may understand what to do but be unable to get started without support. This is a difficulty with executive functioning, not necessarily a refusal to cooperate.

Anxiety, sensory discomfort, poor sleep, hunger, social worries, bullying, learning difficulties and previous school experiences can add to the load. A difficult morning may be a sign that school itself feels unsafe or unmanageable. Ask what is hard rather than assuming the problem is motivation.

## Recognise what is happening

Look for patterns: freezing at the bedroom door; getting stuck choosing clothes; losing belongings; repeating questions; tears or anger when rushed; headaches or stomach aches; silence, withdrawal or panic near the school gate. The same child may appear settled once in class but still be struggling.

Notice the point at which the morning changes. Is it waking, washing, clothing textures, breakfast, leaving a preferred activity, travel, the entrance, or separation? Record what happened just before the difficulty, not only the behaviour that followed.

## Reduce the work before the morning begins

Prepare a small number of essentials together the evening before: bag, clothing, shoes and a predictable breakfast choice. Keep important items in one visible place. Use a short, realistic visual sequence such as “dress, eat, teeth, shoes” rather than a long checklist.

Build in extra transition time and a buffer for unexpected difficulties. Give one instruction at a time, allow processing time and use an agreed prompt rather than repeated reminders. Offer meaningful choices, such as which of two comfortable tops to wear, without turning every step into a decision.

## A calmer way to respond

Try: “I can see this is hard. Which part should we make easier?” or “We only need to think about the next step.” If distress rises, lower your voice, reduce talking and pause non-essential demands. Support regulation first; problem-solving usually works better later.

Avoid threats, comparisons with siblings, lectures about lateness or forcing a child to explain themselves while overwhelmed. Calm support is not the same as removing all expectations: it means making the next expectation accessible.

## Quick reflection: where does the morning get stuck?

The hardest moment is usually: _____

One barrier we could reduce tomorrow: _____

What helps my child feel ready: _____

A phrase I want to try: _____

One thing to prepare the night before: _____

# Attendance and transitions



## When attendance becomes difficult

School attendance difficulties are not always solved by a firmer routine. Ask whether the child is avoiding a particular lesson, noisy corridor, social situation, unpredictable change, separation, academic demand or an environment that does not meet their needs. A child may want to attend and still feel unable to do so.

Listen at a calm time using low-pressure questions: “What part of school takes the most energy?” “Is there a place or person who helps you feel safer?” “What would make arriving ten per cent easier?” Drawing, rating scales or written responses may be easier than face-to-face discussion.

## Make the transition more predictable

Use a consistent departure cue and describe the immediate next step rather than the whole day. A five-minute warning helps some children; others find countdowns stressful, so agree the approach together. Avoid sudden removal of a preferred activity when possible; offer a natural stopping point.

At school, explore a quieter entrance, a named adult to meet the child, a short settling activity, a predictable first task, a visual timetable and advance notice of changes. A flexible arrival arrangement or phased plan may be appropriate when agreed with school and tailored to the child.

## What to do when distress escalates

If a child is panicking, crying, frozen or becoming overwhelmed, prioritise safety and connection. Use fewer words: “You are safe. I am here.” Reduce the audience, sensory input and demands. Do not physically force attendance or use restraint except where necessary to prevent immediate harm and in line with applicable safeguarding procedures.

Once settled, agree a manageable next step. That may be entering with a trusted adult, using a quiet room, contacting the school to review support, or seeking additional help. Repeated distress is information that the plan needs adjustment, not evidence that the child needs more pressure.

## Work collaboratively with school

Share concrete observations: when difficulties occur, what helps, sensory needs, signs of overload and the impact after school. Ask for a meeting with the class teacher and SENCO to identify barriers and reasonable adjustments. Agree who will greet the child, how information will be shared, and when the plan will be reviewed.

If attendance difficulties persist, discuss an individual support plan and seek appropriate advice from the GP, school nursing team or relevant mental health and neurodevelopmental services. In England, additional SEN support or an EHC needs assessment may be relevant depending on the child’s needs.

## Questions to take into a school conversation

What happens at arrival? Who is the trusted adult? Which adjustment will we trial first?

Agreed adjustment / person responsible: _____

A concern I want school to understand: _____

How we will check whether it helped: _____

# Build a plan that actually helps



## A realistic five-step morning

1. CONNECT: greet without an immediate list of instructions. Check how the child is feeling and whether they need quiet, movement, food or time to wake.

2. START SMALL: use the first visible task only. Offer practical help to begin, such as laying out clothing or walking to the bathroom together.

3. REDUCE FRICTION: keep the route clear, limit background noise and move distractions out of the way without blame. Use a visual prompt or gentle cue the child has agreed to.

4. TRANSITION TOGETHER: give an accessible warning, name the next step and allow a familiar comfort item or regulating activity where appropriate.

5. RECONNECT: after school, allow decompression before asking lots of questions. Notice effort and review difficulties later, when everyone has capacity.

## If the plan does not work

Do not treat one difficult morning as failure. Ask whether the plan demanded too many steps, moved too quickly, relied on spoken instructions, ignored sensory needs or failed to address a school-based concern. Change one thing at a time and observe whether it helps.

Progress may look like less distress, quicker recovery, more trust or a child being able to communicate what is difficult; it does not have to mean perfect punctuality. Protect the relationship while keeping school informed and working toward sustainable access to education.

## After a difficult morning: repair without shame

Once everyone is regulated, acknowledge the experience without blame: “That was hard for both of us. I am glad we can work on it together.” If you raised your voice, a simple apology models repair. Ask what helped and what made things harder, but do not insist on a conversation immediately.

Parents and carers need support too. Share responsibilities where possible, build in recovery time and seek help if mornings are affecting family wellbeing. Persistent severe anxiety, unsafe behaviour or significant attendance problems warrant individual professional and school-based assessment.

## Our personalised morning and school plan

**My child’s early signs of overwhelm:**

**The first step we will make easier:**

**Helpful words, cues or sensory adjustments:**

**School contact and agreed arrival support:**

**What we will do if the plan becomes too much:**

General information only; not a substitute for individual clinical, educational or emergency support.