



## Supporting Children with Anxiety

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### What is Anxiety?

- **Anxiety is a NORMAL emotion, like all our other emotions.**
- Anxiety comes from a part of the brain called the *Amygdala*, which is used to protect us and keep us safe from perceived danger.
- Anxiety shows up to check if we are ok.
- Anxiety is common but can become a PROBLEM if it starts to affect your child's learning, relationships or general wellbeing.

### How does Anxiety show up?

When we become anxious, our body is preparing to manage and 'take action' against the perceived danger. This is sometimes called the 'Fight-Flight' response. Physical changes in the body may occur such as:

- stomach aches
- headaches
- tight chest
- dizziness
- shortness of breath
- raised heart rate
- sweating
- shivering
- blurred vision

Children who feel overwhelmed by anxiety may also show challenging behaviours or appear to withdraw into themselves. Often the anxious feelings can cause children to become avoidant of the thing they are worried about, as a way of controlling the anxiety. In extreme cases, anxiety can lead to severe panic attacks.

### SOME REASONS FOR ANXIETY

#### Negative thoughts

Children may often become anxious due to negative thought patterns. They might think things will go wrong, that they will fail at something or that they will be unable to cope. They may also worry about what other people think of them, or how they are viewed by others. Low self-esteem is a common cause of anxiety in children.

#### Decision-making

Sometimes children get worried when they have to make a difficult decision. Remind children to take time with their decisions and tell them you believe in their decision-making skills. Avoid suggesting that one decision is 'right' and the other is 'wrong'. It is usually the case that we have a number of choices, none of which are wrong. Limit choices so that children do not feel overwhelmed.



### **Pressure to succeed or 'fit in'**

Children often struggle with anxiety relating to academic pressure and the need to fit in with others. For some children, this pressure can be too much and they become overwhelmed with worry about 'getting it right'.

There are many more reasons why a child may be feeling anxious but **they may not know what the reason is**. Some children find it very difficult to *verbalise* and explain why they are feeling anxious, which can make it hard to know how best to support them. Often it is useful to consider non-verbal strategies to support your child, as well as offering space to talk.

## **IDEAS TO SUPPORT AN ANXIOUS CHILD**

### **Creativity and Play**

#### **Play with your child as much as you can, whatever their age!**

Encourage and make space for creativity and free-play regularly. Provide access to creative tools at home, such as art and craft materials, pencils, pens and paper, as well as toys that encourage imaginary/role play. Children use creativity and play to express themselves and explore their feelings, when they are not 'directed' to do things a certain way. Avoid making these activities into a 'learning experience'. It will only be useful to process FEELINGS if the child can play or create freely, without judgement or expectations.

### **Mindfulness**

The mind is powerful! Helping children to control negative thought patterns can really help to manage anxiety. Mindfulness is one method of doing this and there are many resources available to practice mindfulness at home. Being mindful is simply about being 'in the present moment'. If we can help our minds to focus on the here-and-now, then we are less likely to over-think, which causes anxiety.

### **Breathing Techniques**

Breathing techniques are also very simple as a way of calming an anxious mind. Strong, steady breaths are proven to help us feel calmer and more in control, as this can reduce adrenaline in the body. Try breathing with your child when they are anxious. It may also benefit you! A simple technique is as follows:

*Breathe in for 3 counts, hold for one count, out for 3 counts. Repeat. Try to lengthen the out breath by one count each time, until you can count down from 10.*

### **Physical Activity**

- Use physical activity to relief tension and keep brains and bodies healthy.
- Use rhythmic walking when a child is feeling anxious.
- Walking alongside a child is also a good time to talk about feelings, as it is less intense than face-to-face talking.
- Go on a sensory/mindful walk – notice what you see/hear/smell/touch.
- Physical activity encourages good sleep and anxiety is significantly increased when children (and adults) are tired.



### **Make time to talk about feelings**

- Model to children that ALL feelings are ok and acceptable.
- Separate **feelings** from **behaviour**, for example: “It’s ok to feel angry, but it’s not ok to hit your brother.”
- Make space for repair after conflict – try to resolve arguments before bedtime.
- Talk about feelings often, so that it becomes normal.
- Show that adults have difficult feelings too, without making your child feel responsible for them. For example: “I’m feeling a bit angry about my car breaking down, but I will sort it out and you don’t need to worry about it.”

### **Notice our own worries and anxieties**

If we are more aware of our own worries and anxieties then we are less likely to unknowingly push these on to our children. It is fine to tell children that we also have worries but always remind your child *that they are not responsible for them* – that it is not their job to sort your worries out. You might explain that you have support from other people; that you don’t have to deal with everything alone.

### **Encourage and model Self-kindness**

A lot of anxiety comes from our internal ‘self-critic.’ This is when we punish ourselves for something we have done that we aren’t happy about. It might be because we want to please others and we may feel that we’ve let someone down.

*If a child is being especially hard on themselves, ask them to imagine that a good friend of theirs is telling them something they have done wrong, or a mistake they have made. What words might they use to comfort and support that friend? Then invite them to use these phrases towards themselves. For example:*

“You did your best.”

“We can’t get it right all the time.”

“You were in a really difficult situation.”

### **Other key phrases to support a more positive mindset:**

“I’m ok, you’re ok.”

“This is not an emergency.”

“I can do this.”

“I am important.”

Ask your child to come up with three of their own and stick them on up in their bedroom or on the fridge as a daily reminder.

### **Use of Praise**

Try to praise **effort** rather than just praising achievement/success. This encourages a *Growth Mindset*. Children can often become anxious if they feel they must always achieve to please others. Over-using praise can create issues with self-esteem, as the child will constantly seek external praise, rather than feeling good about what they have done for themselves. Try and ‘say what you see’, when a child seeks praise, for example: “Wow, your picture is so colourful, I can see how hard you’ve tried,” rather than “I really like it, well done.” You may also like to ask your child: “What do *you* think of your work?”