

How to Support Your Child with Anxiety

Within this document is a range of information and ideas to support you and your family if your child is feeling anxious or has anxiety. We hope they are helpful.

What makes young people anxious?

Children tend to feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a **normal part of growing up**.

From about eight months to three years, for example, it's very common for young children to have something called separation anxiety. They may become clingy and cry when separated from their parents or carers. This is a normal stage in children's development and tends to ease off at around age two to three.

It's also common for pre-school children to develop specific fears or phobias. Common fears in early childhood include animals, insects, storms, heights, water, blood, and the dark. These fears usually go away gradually on their own.

Throughout a child's life there will be other times when they feel anxiety. Lots of children feel anxious when going to a new school, for example, or before tests and exams. Some children feel shy in social situations and may need support with this.

What are the signs of anxiety in children?

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice that they:

- become irritable, tearful or clingy
- have difficulty sleeping
- wake in the night
- start wetting the bed
- have bad dreams

In older children you may notice that they:

- lack the confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping or eating
- are prone to angry outbursts
- have negative thoughts going round and round their head, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or attending school

Why is my child anxious?

Some children are more prone to worries and anxiety than others.

Children often find change difficult and may become anxious following a house move or when starting a new school.

Children who have had a distressing or traumatic experience, such as a car accident or house fire, may suffer with anxiety afterwards.

Family arguments and conflict can also leave children feeling insecure and anxious.

Teenagers are more likely to suffer with social anxiety than other age groups, avoiding social gatherings or making excuses to get out of them.

Anxious parents, anxious child?

Nature & nurture?

Some research suggests there may be a link between parental anxieties (through the environment created) and the effect on children.

Is not a foregone conclusion that a parent/carer with anxieties will create a child with anxieties
Do children worry because they sense their parents are worried, or do parents worry because they see their children are worried about something?

What we know:

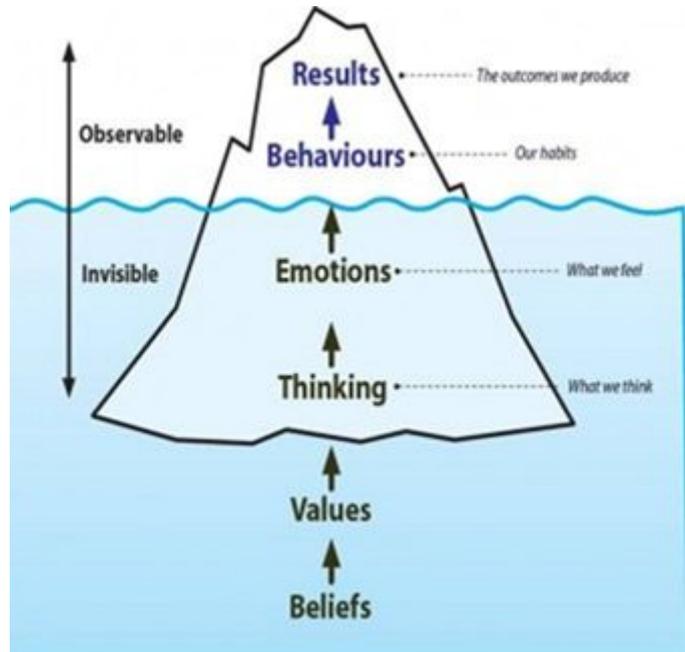
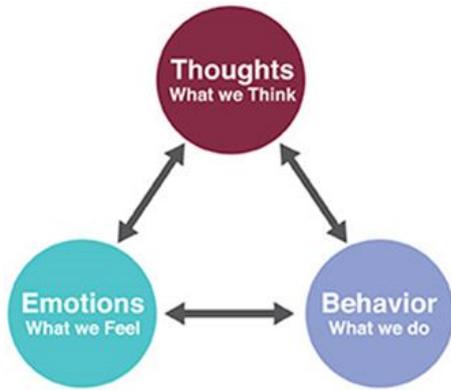
Parenting is hard! We just have to be 'good enough'

Social media creates an illusion of everyone doing so well – unrealistic pressures on us and our children

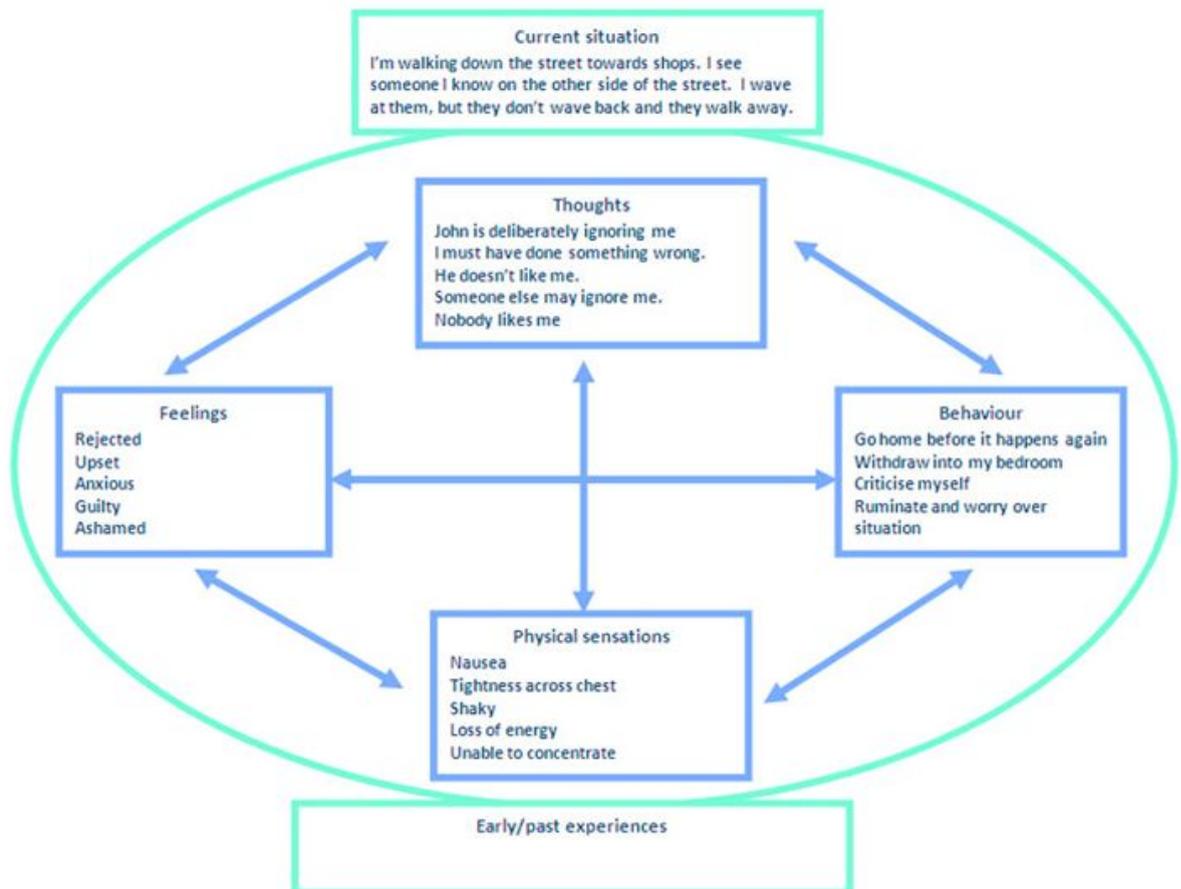
Anxiety- what we see?



Anxiety- what doesn't help



If we focus on solely on the behaviour, the likelihood of change is reduced... We must consider the **emotions** and **thoughts** that are also involved.



Unhelpful Anxiety Beliefs/Strategies

- 1.If I do nothing, my anxiety continues going up...
- 2.Delaying doesn't really sort/solve anything
- 3.Shifting our attention to the symptoms & not the task
- 4.Confusing fear and danger
- 5.Berating yourself because anxiety affects you
- 6.Trying to get rid of anxiety completely
- 7.A 'gain without pain' expectation

Anxiety – what doesn't always help...

Trying to completely protect children from worrying/difficult events.

Accommodation or enabling techniques:

One last kiss

Stay and watch

'I will be just right here'

'Come and sleep in my bed'

'It's ok, you don't have to'

Simply telling them:

'Don't worry...'

'It will ok'

'Stop being silly'

'Cheer up'

'It will be fine'

'It's no big deal'

'I'll do it'

'There's nothing to be afraid of'

'Hurry up'

'Stop thinking about it'

'It's all in your head'

Accommodating Anxiety: What can we do?

Remind your child, "I know this will probably be really frustrating, but I don't want to feed your anxiety and help it grow. Is there another way I can support you or help you face this?" Encouraging them to use tools/strategies will help them feel supported, as well as using points or small rewards to motivate.

If you must offer accommodation, consider following these steps to reduce the negative impact:

1. State clearly to your child this is an exception because of the unusual situation (e.g. your child is sick; your car broke down; etc.)

2. If you can give partial accommodation, do so and encourage your child to use some tools such as a coping card or breathing to assist.
3. Consider making a deal with your child that in exchange for the current accommodation your child will do 2, rather than the 1 exposures the following day, or they will use another tool to show anxiety they are still in charge despite the need for some accommodation.
4. After the event and accommodation has passed, ask your child how they could handle it without accommodation if it happens again. Make a plan for the future.

What helps?

Like adults, anxious children and teenagers prefer to have a sense of control in their lives. They do not cope well with a disorganised, "spontaneous" lifestyle. They feel calmer when:

1. Life is predictable
2. Expectations are clear
3. Consequences/Praise are immediate and consistent

Setting limits and creating routines are 2 ways to help make life more predictable for everyone in schools and families

Limits and Routines

Limits

We all feel comfortable knowing what the limits/boundaries are and what we can and cannot do.

Although children may not seem like they like boundaries they are important and create a sense of safety.

Routines

Simple routines from day to day are helpful (for children & adults)

They can be for:

Getting up

Getting ready for school

Transitions in school

How to ask for help

Dinner times

Homework

Getting ready for bed

How to help an anxious child

First and foremost, it's important to talk to your child about their anxiety or worries. Reassure them and show them you understand how they feel.

If your child is old enough, it may help to explain what anxiety is and the physical effects it has on our bodies. It may be helpful to describe anxiety as being like a wave that builds up and then ebbs away again.

Is important if we can to help children to find their own solutions

"The tendency is to say, if you're worried about that sleepover, don't go," he says. "But what you're doing is saying, if you get anxious about something, it means you can't do it.

"It's more helpful to say, 'I hear that you're worried about this. What can you do that's going to help?' Focus on exploring solutions with your child, instead of just talking about all the things that could go wrong."

Helpful ways to respond to our children

Consider **PACE** (Dan Hughes)

PACE is a way of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving that aims to make the child feel safe. It is based upon how parents connect with their very young infants. As with young toddlers, with safety the child can begin to explore.

Playfulness - This is about creating an atmosphere of lightness and interest when you communicate. It means learning how to use a light tone with your voice, like you might use when storytelling, rather than an irritated or lecturing tone. It's about having fun, and expressing a sense of joy.

Acceptance - is about actively communicating to the child that you accept the wishes, feelings, thoughts, urges, motives and perceptions that are underneath the outward behaviour. It is about accepting, without judgment or evaluation. NB – it does not mean accepting the bad behaviour

Curiosity - Curiosity, without judgment, is how we help children become aware of their inner life, reflect upon the reasons for their behaviour, and then communicate it to their parents/carer. Curiosity is wondering about the meaning behind the behaviour for the child. Curiosity lets the child know that the adults understand.

Empathy - lets the child feel the parent's compassion for them. Being empathic means the adult actively showing the child that the child's emotions/thoughts are important to the adult and he or she wants to be with the child in her hard times. This shows to the child that the adult will stay with them and they will get through it together

Ways to ease anxiety in children

- Keep talking and listening to your child - empathy
- Teach your child to recognise signs of anxiety in themselves and to ask for help when it strikes.
- Children of all ages find routines reassuring so try to stick to regular daily routines where possible.
- Use pictures to explain and reinforce routines
- Sharing and explaining **expectations** in advance
- Create (jointly) an 'emergency' plan that could be used if things do go 'wrong/unexpected'
- If your child is anxious because of distressing events, such as a bereavement or separation, see if you can find books or films that will help them understand their feelings and normalise things.
- If you know a change, such as a house move is coming up, prepare your child by talking to them about what is going to happen and why.

Try not to become anxious yourself or overprotective – rather than doing things for your child or helping them to avoid anxiety-provoking situations, encourage your child to find ways to manage them

Ways to ease anxiety

- Practice simple relaxation techniques with your child, such as taking three deep, slow breaths, breathing in for a count of three and out for three.
- Distraction can be helpful for young children. For example, if they are anxious about going to nursery, play games on the way there, such as seeing who can spot the most red cars.
- Make a "worry" box. Get your child to write down or draw their worries and post them into the box. Then you can sort through the box together at the end of the day or week.
- Keep a diary – 3 positive things at the end of each day
- Work on positive-thinking. Name their worst case scenarios and think through together how to sort out the situation if it happens, e.g. 'I'm worried that we'll miss the bus.' 'What do you think we could do if that happens?' 'We could get the next bus'.
- Don't forget the physical things – sleeping well/enough, sport/activities, mindfulness, good diet, breathing exercises, yoga
- Help children to make their own decisions/make simple choices
- Look for the successes, the exceptions that you can use as evidence to discuss with children. "Remember when..."
Record success in photos – celebrate them

Panic Attacks

During a panic attack, physical symptoms can build up very quickly. These can include:

- a pounding or racing heartbeat
- feeling faint, dizzy or light-headed
- feeling very hot or very cold
- sweating, trembling or shaking
- nausea (feeling sick)
- pain in your chest or abdomen
- struggling to breathe or feeling like you're choking
- feeling like your legs are shaky or are turning to jelly
- feeling disconnected from your mind, body or surroundings

During a panic attack you might feel very afraid that you're:

- losing control
- going to faint
- having a heart attack
- going to die.

Panic attacks can be frightening, but there are things you can do to help yourself cope. It could help to keep print these tips out and keep them somewhere easy to find.

During a panic attack:

- Focus on your breathing. It can help to concentrate on breathing slowly in and out while counting to five.
- Stamp on the spot. Some people find this helps control their breathing.
- Focus on your senses. For example, taste mint-flavoured sweets or gum, or touch or cuddle something soft.
- Try grounding techniques. Grounding techniques can help you feel more in control. These focus on things around you in detail – using all the senses.

After a panic attack:

- Think about self-care. It's important to pay attention to what your body needs after you've had a panic attack. For example, you might need to rest somewhere quietly, or eat or drink something.
- Tell someone you trust. If you feel able to, it could help to let someone know you've had a panic attack. It could be particularly helpful to mention how they might notice if you're having another one, and how you'd like them to help you.

Use scaling

 <p>Anxiety Level 0 "Life is good. Nothing to stress about. I can handle anything life throws my way." How average people start their day.</p>	 <p>Anxiety Level 5 "What the hell am I going to do?" Imagine totalling your car, messing up your big presentation at work or failing your final exams at school.</p>
 <p>Anxiety Level 1 "Just a little hiccup. Nothing I can't handle." Akin to misplacing your sunglasses or the remote. Easily resolved.</p>	 <p>Anxiety Level 6 "This is all too much to handle!" Imagine losing your job, failing the big test AND totalling your car all in the same day.</p>
 <p>Anxiety Level 2 "Oh c'mon.. where the heck are they? This is NOT a good time!" Similar to misplacing your keys when you're running late for work.</p>	 <p>Anxiety Level 7 "I can't take anymore.." Imagine having all of that happen, then coming home to discover your basement flooded and your family pet died.</p>
 <p>Anxiety Level 3 "Where did that scratch come from?" Imagine finding a scratch or small ding on your new car.</p>	 <p>Anxiety Level 8 "Could anything else freakin go wrong?!" Imagine adding to that your identity was stolen, your bank account closed AND your spouse left, taking the kids.</p>
 <p>Anxiety Level 4 "What am I going to tell them?" Imagine being the cause of a scratch or ding on your parents' new car.</p>	 <p>Anxiety Level 9 *Silently rocking back and forth* Imagine not being able to take anything else and just wrapping in a blanket and shutting down completely.</p>

Exposure

Laddering: - E.g.

- Go to pet store and interact with many dogs
 - Go to park with mum and pet “safe” dog while owner has dog on leash
 - Pet and play with Rover off leash with owner for 5-10 minutes
 - Pet Rover and stay next to him while he is on a leash for 5 minutes
 - Let Rover sniff my hand and, when I am ready, pet him while he is on a leash
 - Go to neighbour’s house and look at Rover while he is on a leash, 2 feet away for 5 minutes
 - Go to neighbour’s house and look at Rover while he is on a leash, 6 feet away for 5 minutes
 - Watch a video clip of a big dog for 10 minutes
 - Watch a video clip of a small dog for 10 minutes
 - Look at real pictures of dogs for 10 minutes
 - Look at animated pictures of dogs for 10 minutes
- Focus on one step of the ladder at a time and ensure success and confidence before moving up
- Always end a ‘practice’ session on success
- Exposure practices are better spaced apart, close in time, will result in faster progress – little and often – momentum
- Some exposure situations are hard to generate - e.g. fear of flying.
Work with your child to create a story or script of the "worst case scenario" that anxiety tells your child in his/her imagination. Use all 5 senses to capture as much detail as possible.
When the story is complete, develop an audio recording and have your child listen to this over and over again just like you would with a traditional exposure situation.
- Some children will do better if you or another trusted adult show them how to do the exposure practice first. For example, you pet the dog before your child does.
- Record your child’s progress. Use a piece of paper to record your child’s fear rating before, during and after each practice (see chart below). This will help your child to know when s/he is ready to move up the ladder. When scaling is at a low level for several days, your child is probably ready to move. Photos of success really help.
- Don’t rush. It can be hard to start facing the things you have avoided for so long. Be encouraging and recognise that your child needs to go at his/her own pace.
For some children this process can take weeks, for others months

Naming the Bully

Consider characters from stories, movies, or even people you might know to inspire a name for your child's anxiety.

Encourage your child to choose a name and character identity that can be defeated.

Characters that are invincible may leave your child feeling defeated on days when anxiety is being particularly mean.

For young children, they can draw or paint a picture and hang it somewhere central in the home so the whole family knows whom you are fighting against. Your child might want to create trading cards, or make a clay sculpture/junk model that depicts the anxiety. Let his or her creativity flow.

Most children are good about taking responsibility for their own actions and putting the blame on anxiety only when it really belongs there.

Once the anxiety has a name and identity, encourage your child and the whole family, to start using it.

E.g.

...I can't believe X is scaring you into missing the sleepover. What a bully!

...It looks like X has really trying to boss you about today and now it's telling me what to do!

...X is at it again! Telling lies about germs and disease. What can you say back?

Summary

Listen

Make sure you take the time to listen to the child's thoughts and feelings. Simply feeling heard can be very helpful to your child.

Normalise

It is important to let your child know that he or she is not alone. Lots of children have problems with anxiety at times.

Educate

Let your child know that anxiety is normal, harmless, and temporary. Become an expert on anxiety.

Model it

Model facing fears by doing some of the feared challenges yourself, or even tackling your own fears. This can help to provide support and encouragement. Motivate the child through supportive coaching. However, be careful not to push the child too far too fast. Let your child work at his or her pace.

Tolerate

Resist giving excessive reassurance, or letting your child avoid challenges or escape scary situations. While it's hard to see the child feeling anxious, learning to cope with anxiety is a critical life skill.

Further reading/support

•Go your GP – possible involvement of CAMHS

•www.nhs.uk – 'anxiety'

•www.youngminds.org.uk

•www.plymouthias.org.uk

•www.plymouthonlinedirectory.com

[Appendix: additional info.](#)