

Managing Anxiety – talking to children and returning to school

In the current situation with Covid 19 there are many anxieties for families – for adults and children alike. It is important that we learn to recognise when our children are anxious and find ways to support them, to make sure that it doesn't develop into a much bigger problem. Anxiety itself is a normal emotion and can be helpful in our daily lives. It can help to sharpen attention, increase focus and enhance performance, However it can turn into a problem when it becomes excessive and gets in the way of everyday life.

How can we tell if our children are anxious?

There are many different ways that anxiety can display itself - listed below are a few of the symptoms of anxiety of children and young people:

- Difficulty concentrating and finding it hard to focus.
- Not sleeping or waking up during the night – bad dreams
- Loss of appetite – not eating properly
- Tummy aches or complaining of not feeling well.
- Talking too much and asking lots of questions, or becoming sullen and quiet
- Being clingy to adults or crying
- Becoming more fidgety than normal
- Going to the toilet a lot

Talking to your child

Some children may be happy to talk about their concerns whilst others may find it more difficult and clam up. Never force a child to talk or 'interview' them as this may increase their levels of anxiety. Instead create a safe and familiar environment where talking is likely to occur naturally. Examples of such situations may include cooking, reading together or going for a walk. If a child does share with you it is important that you thank and reassure them. Tell them that you will do your best to find a way to help them with what is on their mind.

Good conversation starters (ask open questions):

- What are you enjoying about today?
- What's the hardest thing for you at the moment?
- When you are missing your friends from school – what helps?
- How do you feel about things changing?

- When you feel uncertain what is it you do that makes you feel better?
- What worries you the most?

If your child responds be sure to attune and validate e.g. “I can see that you are really worried about that” or “that must be really hard for you” Don’t try and offer a ‘quick fix’ – instead tell them that it is okay to feel like that and offer reassurance.

Setting a goal and making a plan

Work with your child and identify one key issue that is causing concern right now - set a realistic goal for example *‘to have a fun time with my friends when I go back to school’*. Make a step by step plan working towards the goal:

- Talk with your child and identify a series of steps that will help them work towards and ultimately achieve the goal (between five and ten)
- Rate each step according to the level of anxiety and make sure that the first one is very achievable i.e. something that your child can already do (for example talking to friends on social media)
- Order the steps according to the levels of anxiety, starting with least cause for concern and ending with the final goal
- Give lots of positive feedback - praise and celebrate all efforts along the way
- If necessary break down each step into smaller more manageable steps and repeat any step if needed – remember this is a marathon, not a sprint.

Talk to your child’s school

All schools will have plans in place about children returning to their classes. It is important that you make yourself aware of these – be informed. Listed below are some things that you can do in conjunction your child’s schools:

- Create a social story for your child about returning to school. Be sure to include information about any new or different arrangements that might be in place e.g. class sizes, working in a different space, changes in adult support etc. Ask school if they can supply photographs if necessary. Share this with your child before their return.
- Make lists with your child about anything they may need to take with them that might be different to usual. Encourage your child to plan what they will need to pack in their bag.
- Set up Zoom or FaceTime conversations for your child with some of their friends before it’s time to start back
- Talk to other parents about what they are doing to prepare their children for returning to school

- Talk to staff in the school – make them aware of any anxieties your child may have. People in schools will be more than willing to offer support and helpful advice.

Other things you can do to help reduce anxiety in children and young people

- Try nurturing touch activities with your child if they are willing. The Massage in Schools Association (misa.org.uk) has ideas for this simple, clothed massage, such as 'The Weather Massage.' Examples of The Weather Massage can be found on YouTube. Nurturing touch has been shown to produce the anti-stress hormone oxytocin in the body, both for the person giving the massage and for the person receiving it. The giving and receiving is a 'win-win' exchange, promoting feelings of well-being as well as reinforcing parent-child bonds (NB always with permission).
- EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques) is a great tool to help reduce anxiety, for adults and children alike (emofree.com). It involves tapping or pressing on acupuncture meridian end-points on the body. Studies show that this calms the amygdala, which is the part of the brain which controls our fight/flight/freeze response. It may seem an unusual approach, but it has been found to be highly effective for many people. For a demonstration of using it to reduce anxiety, and to learn where the points are: <https://energyeft.com/>
- Yoga and mindfulness activities are becoming ever more popular ways of promoting calm and relaxation, and have been found to be beneficial for mind, body and emotions. There are lots of examples of these available for children and young people **online**.

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Useful links and resources:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/childrens-mental-health/depression-anxiety-mental-health/>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/childrens-mental-health/depression-anxiety-mental-health/>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/coronavirus-advice-support-children-families-parents/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/activities-and-conversation-starters-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-you-re-anxious-about-coronavirus/>

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic/worries-about-the-world/coronavirus>

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/advice-talking-children-about-illness>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources>

<https://www.contact.org.uk/advice-and-support/coronavirus-information-for-families-with-disabled-children/>

Useful reading:

Overcoming Your Child's Fears and Worries – A guide for parents using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques by Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts

Useful Links:

Remember that you can make contact with our SEMH Team at Babcock LDP for support and advice should you need to. Thank you.