

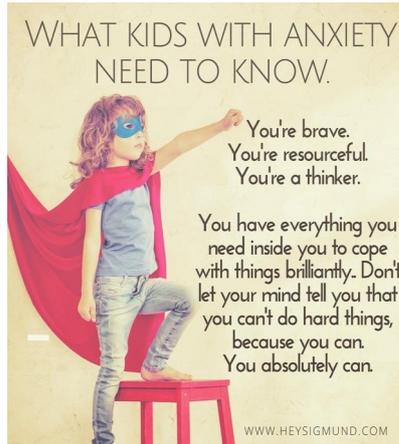


# Understanding and Responding to Anxiety

Aberdeenshire Council Educational Psychology Service March 2021

## Anxiety is normal

**Anxiety is a normal, human feeling of fear or panic.** This is the first message children should hear when they appear to experience feelings of anxiety. Normalising the feeling, and letting our children know we understand it, helps them to feel more in control (see also our [Emotion Coaching leaflet](#)). We usually experience anxiety when we face stressful situations.



## Inside this leaflet:

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## What happens in the brain?

Anxiety can set off our brain's in-built alarm bell, which tells us something isn't right and that we need to deal with it. Our brain wants the difficult situation to go away, so it makes us feel more alert, stops us thinking about other things, and even pumps more blood to our legs to help us run away (you might know of this reaction as "flight"). In this way, anxiety can be helpful and support us to stay alert in dangerous situations. However the in-built alarm bell might also sound and cause this reaction to less threatening situations (e.g. friendships, being asked a question in class or to read aloud in classes, leaving the house to go to the park).

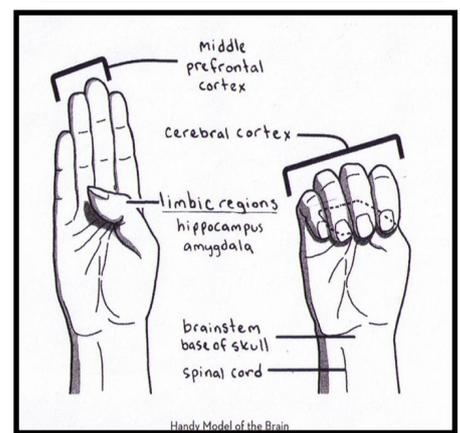
When the alarm bell rings, if we don't do something to stop it, our brain takes over and tells us to fight the difficult thing, escape/ run away from it or freeze. The alarm bell system, and the brain "take over" reaction is also known as "flipping our lids" - this is also explained in our leaflet about

[Understanding Anger](#).

Our job as adults is to help our children to understand anxiety and support them to develop strategies that will help them recognise and manage their own feelings of anxiety so that the fight, flight or freeze response isn't triggered.

Click [here](#) to see a YouTube video which can help explain the fight, flight or freeze responses to anxiety to children.

A good example of how this model can be explained to kids is by [watching this video by Jeanette Yotte](#)



## THE STRESS RESPONSE IN KIDS

| FIGHT   | FLIGHT   | FREEZE  |
|---|--|---|
| Yelling, Screaming, Using Mean Words            | Wanting to Escape, Running Away                  | Shutting Down, Mind Goes Blank                    |
| Hitting, Kicking, Biting, Throwing, Punching    | Unfocused, Hard to Pay Attention                 | Urge to Hide, Isolates Self                       |
| Blaming, Deflecting Responsibility, Defensive   | Fidgeting, Restlessness, Hyperactive             | Verbally Unresponsive, Says, "I don't know" a lot |
| Demanding, Controlling                          | Preoccupied, Busy with Everything But the Thing  | Difficulty with Completing Tasks                  |
| Oppositional, Defiant, Noncompliant             | Procrastinating, Avoidant, Ignores the Situation | Zoned Out, Daydreaming                            |
| Moving Towards What Feels Threatening           | Moving Away From What Feels Threatening          | Unable to Move, Feeling Stuck                     |
| Irritable, Angry, Furious, Offended, Aggressive | Anxious, Panicked, Scared, Worried, Overwhelmed  | Depressed, Numb, Bored/Apathetic, Helpless        |

## What Might our Children Worry About?

Some adults believe that children's lives should be worry-free, and we should remove/avoid all things which cause them anxiety. However research tells us that anxiety is a perfectly normal, and healthy emotion, and **the earlier a child is taught to manage their anxieties or worries, the more resilient they will become.**

Some common fears or anxieties which children might develop in their early years might include animals, insects, storms, heights, water, blood and the dark. As the child grows older they may experience anxiety around transitions (e.g. from early learning and childcare to school, from Primary 1 to Primary 2 etc), starting a new hobby; moving house, friendships; speaking in front of peers/the class; assessments; meeting new people. It is important that as adults we recognise and support our children with their anxious thoughts and feelings.

**'Having courage does not mean that we are unafraid. Having courage and showing courage mean we face our fears. We are able to say, 'I have fallen, but I will get up.'**

**Maya Angelou**

## What Does Anxiety Look Like? How Might we Know if our Child is Anxious?

In addition to the behaviours you see on the right here, you might find that your child has become clingy, started bed wetting, wakes through the night (if this is unusual for them) and/or avoids everyday activities they usually enjoy.



### 8 WAYS A CHILD'S ANXIETY SHOWS UP AS SOMETHING ELSE

#### 1. Anger

The perception of danger, stress or opposition is enough to trigger the fight or flight response leaving your child angry and without a way to communicate why.



#### 4. Chandeliering

Chandeliering is when a seemingly calm person suddenly flies off the handle for no reason. They have pushed hurt and anxiety so deep for so long that a seemingly innocent comment or event suddenly sends them straight through the chandelier.



#### 2. Difficulty Sleeping

In children, having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep is one of the hallmark characteristics of anxiety.



#### 5. Lack of Focus

Children with anxiety are often so caught up in their own thoughts that they do not pay attention to what is going on around them.

FOCUS

#### 6. Avoidance

Children who are trying to avoid a particular person, place or task often end up experiencing more of whatever it is they are avoiding.

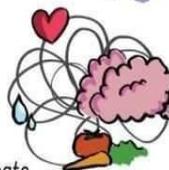


#### 7. Negativity

People with anxiety tend to experience negative thoughts at a much greater intensity than positive ones.

#### 3. Defiance

Unable to communicate what is really going on, it is easy to interpret the child's defiance as a lack of discipline instead of an attempt to control a situation where they feel anxious and helpless.



#### 8. Overplanning

Overplanning and defiance go hand in hand in their root cause. Where anxiety can cause some children to try to take back control through defiant behavior, it can cause others to overplan for situations where planning is minimal or unnecessary.





# What Can I do? Strategies to Help Manage the Physical Response of Anxiety

**Stay calm!** In order to support our children to manage their anxieties, we need to make sure that they know we understand how they are feeling and that we can HELP THEM take control of the feeling, and the situation. We might describe this as self-regulation (managing your own emotions) followed by co-regulation (helping your child manage their emotion). **Remember the goal isn't to avoid anxiety altogether, but to help your child learn how to manage anxiety.**



Let your child know that you understand *why* they are feeling anxious, that you believe they will be okay, they will be able to manage, the feeling always passes, and they will become less anxious over time.

**Help your child to calm down.** We want to reduce the physiological response of anxiety (e.g. the faster beating heart, the blood rush to legs, the butterflies in the stomach) so that we can use the rational part of the brain and talk to them about what is causing the anxiety. There are lots of ways we can calm children down, different things work for different individuals. Sometimes hugs, stroking their hair, giving them their favourite cuddly toy is enough, but at other times we might need to try taking deep breaths, counting to ten, practicing grounding techniques. Refer to [Relaxation and Mindfulness](#) leaflet for other relaxation techniques.

**Create a 'calm box' or 'self-soothe' box** containing things you know your child will engage with and will calm them. For example a favourite book, some colouring, fidget toys, sensory bottles/jars, musical items. For other ideas look at [How to prepare a calming box for kids/students](#).

**Once your child is calm help them to understand and manage anxiety by identifying the signals:** The Child Mind Institute guide [How to cope with an anxious child](#) would help.

**Encourage children to let go of their worries using Cosmic Kids Yoga** -[Guided Relaxation for Kids: Cosmic Kids](#)

**Make a Worry Box**-Many parents have worry boxes or jars. Children can use these throughout the day to record their worries so they're not "holding onto them" all day. Recording a worry is the first step in developing a plan to address it. Writing worries down makes them less scary for children—they know you will talk it over at an agreed time and then they can stop it going round and round in their heads and becoming bigger than it needs to be. [Young Minds-How to make a worry box: a guide for parents](#)

**Positive Affirmations**  
'...there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think but the most important thing to remember is that even if we are apart, I'll always be with you.' *Christopher Robin*

\_\_\_\_\_ 's 5-Point Scale

|   |                      | I Feel...  | I can...  |
|---|----------------------|--|---|
| 5 | <br>Really Nervous   | Crying<br>I miss my mom & dad                                | Break with Mrs. Rockwell<br>*Relaxation Strategies<br>Sit in the quiet reading chair<br>Draw a picture of Mom & Dad |
| 4 | <br>Nervous          | Chewing<br>Asking questions repeatedly<br>Picking at fingers | Break with Mrs. Rockwell<br>*Relaxation Strategies<br>Bubbler<br>Squeeze toys                                       |
| 3 | <br>A Little Nervous | Chewing  | Break in Classroom<br>*Relaxation Strategies<br>Bubbler<br>Squeeze Toys   |
| 2 | <br>Happy, Calm      | Feeling good<br>Ready to work                                | I will stay with my friends in my classroom.  |
| 1 | <br>Happy, Excited   | Feeling good<br>Smiling, ready to work                       | I will stay with my friends in my classroom.  |

**\*Relaxation Strategies: 3 deep breaths, Count Slowly to 5, Squeeze & Release Hands**

## When is Anxiety a Problem for Children?

### THINGS THAT HELP ANXIETY

BY @twentysevenLKLD



Anxiety becomes a problem for children when it starts to get in the way of their everyday life. For example, they find it difficult to go to nursery/school, clubs or other activities they enjoy, or they can't speak to you in public places, or play with their friends. If any of these, or other signs of significant difficulties, become apparent please discuss with your child's named person at nursery, their class teacher/Head Teacher at primary school or their guidance teacher at secondary school. In addition you may want to discuss this with your GP.

## Helpful Statements to Use When Your Child is Feeling Anxious...



### 9 things to say to your anxious child

1. I'm here with you. You're safe.

2. Do you want to do some dancing or running to get rid of the worried energy?

3. Tell me about it.



4. What would you like to say to your worry? What might your worry say back? Then what?

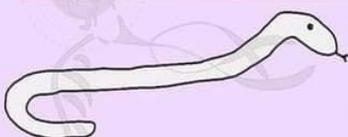
5. Let's draw it.

6. What does it feel like in your body? Where is the worry? How big is it?



7. Match your breaths to mine.

8. Let's think up some endings for what could happen (anxious ones, goofy ones, AND realistic ones).



9. What's something we could do to help you feel better?

It is helpful to consider your immediate response to anxiety

Avoid...

- 'Don't Worry'
- 'Its not a big deal'
- 'Stop thinking about it'
- 'I'll do that for you'
- 'There's nothing to be afraid of /worried about'

Instead try....

- Lets talk about that and make a plan
- I can see that this is hard for you lets try ...
- Lets figure this out together, do something you enjoy like...
- I know you are worried but I can support you
- Would you like to try...
- That will help you deal with those anxious feelings



# Strategies to Manage Anxious Thoughts...

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| I am always important, no matter what.  | I've dealt with harder situations and I know it will get better.    | I prefer something else, but I can deal with this, too. |
| Some people like me. Some people don't. | <b>COPING THOUGHTS</b><br><small>© Big Life Journal</small>         | This hurts, so I need to be extra kind towards myself.  |
| This is tough, but so am I.             | It's not that great right now, but it's not the worst thing either. | Not everything will go my way, but I am flexible.       |

Remember to acknowledge how real this may feel for your child no matter how irrational their worry may seem.

Tell them that 'thoughts are not facts, because I think it, it doesn't mean it will happen'. If anxious thoughts are persistent then distraction techniques can be effective (e.g. going for a walk, listening to music, doing some thing they enjoy).

Help your child recognise and identify their anxious thoughts. For example, "you seem to be worrying about ..." "we are having a lot of discussions around ..., is there something that is bothering you?"

Coping statements "this feeling will pass", "I've got through this before and I can do it again", "once this is over I will feel better" and "I can do this".

Positive self-talk "how would I reassure a friend if they were feeling that way".

## Avoiding the Avoidance Trap!

Avoidance is the most common coping strategy that we all default to, however it can be the main reason anxiety grows. Does your child avoid situations?

**Avoidance of things that we think might be dangerous is the one thing that actually makes anxiety get bigger, avoidance is addictive as feels good in the moment but unhelpful in longer term.**

The following video explains the unhelpful avoidance strategy to managing anxiety. Unfortunately children and young people can get trapped in this cycle.

 [The Anxiety Cycle in 2 minutes: Therapy in a Nutshell](#)

Avoidance gives us the key to managing anxiety—helping our brain learn that situations are safe by **gradually facing our fears**. It is important to think about real versus perceived dangers. Children need to be supported to face their fears, see that they can survive them and help their brains to relearn feared situations are actually safe.

Talk to your child about what they want to change or achieve, start with a goal which is important to them, once you decide on an area to work on, break the area down into manageable tasks, repeat each of these steps until it feels comfortable for them then increase the challenge/time spent in feared situations. For examples click on following links:

-  [Step ladder approach to facing fears](#)
- [Examples of fear ladders](#)

## The 4 PROVEN STEPS to GOAL-SETTING for kids

by Big Life Journal

**1 LET THEM CHOOSE THEIR BIG GOAL**

Ask questions like:

- What's something you wish you could achieve?
- What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?



**2 DISCUSS THE PURPOSE OF THEIR GOAL**

Ask questions like:

- What do you think is the greatest benefit to you doing well in this class?
- How can that help others?



**3 BREAK THE BIG GOAL INTO SMALLER STEPS**

Use a "goal ladder" to break down their big goal. At the top of the ladder, write down the big goal, then work your way through the steps it would take to achieve it.



**4 BRAINSTORM POTENTIAL OBSTACLES**

Encourage them to plan for potential obstacles. Talk about bad habits or negative thoughts, including a desire to give up. Ask: "If you feel like giving up, what will you do instead?"



**BONUS TIP: ASK TO WRITE IT ALL DOWN**  
By writing down their goals, they're 42% more likely to achieve them.

- IF THEY WANT TO GIVE UP ON THEIR GOAL...**
- Remind them of the **purpose** behind their goal.
  - Remind how they decided to deal with this **obstacle**.
  - Recognize as they climb the **steps** on their "goal ladder".
  - Give examples of **your** own struggles at their age.
  - Focus on how they can continue **improving**.
  - Celebrate their **effort, determination, and persistence**.
  - Teach them **positive** self-talk.

# Responding to Anxiety in Older Children

adapted from [Trauma informed schools](#)  
[Recognising and Responding to anxiety](#)

- ◆ Notice , describe and wonder aloud - 'It seems like it' s really important for you to feel like you' re in control of things right now, I'm wondering why that might be?'
- ◆ Offer supportive care ' What could I do that would be helpful right now?' 'Would it be helpful if I.....'
- ◆ Accept and validate the perspective of the individual, even if this is different from your understanding of events 'so you are letting me know just how awful you are feeling about this, I can understand why you would feel that way'.
- ◆ Avoid distracting, minimising or problem solving for the individual.
- ◆ Offer opportunities to move, teach self regulation strategies and practice these together—see leaflet on [Self-Regulation](#).
- ◆ Offer a lower stimulus environment - quieter area with fewer people, space outside.
- ◆ Show genuine interest - 'Can you help me understand how this is for you?'
- ◆ Be conscious of your own breathing and body language - make it audible and slow it down, stay steady and regulated.
- ◆ Teach the neuroscience of how the body and brain responds to fear - this helps to normalise and remove any shame—click [here to view a video](#) which is helpful for sharing with older children and teenagers.
- ◆ Be warm, empathic and non-judgemental.
- ◆ Hold limits and boundaries whilst maintaining connection - gentle on the individual, firm on behaviour and expectation.
- ◆ Offer sensory breaks and a sensory diet if appropriate to support regulation.

## Further Information & Resources



[R U Worried?](#) Child-friendly leaflet to explain worries/ anxiety, produced by NHS Scotland.

[The Incredible Five Point Scale](#)

[Anxiety in Children - Anxiety Canada](#)

[Anxiety UK - National charity helping people with Anxiety](#)

[The Anxious Child booklet: The Mental Health Foundation](#) and other free CAMHS downloadable booklets

[Relax Kids](#)—local groups are usually available

[Grounding techniques for those with ASD: Middletown Centre for Autism](#)

[NHS Grampian CAMHS Early Intervention team webinars managing anxiety tools](#)

[Parent - Understanding Anxiety and Avoidance Behaviour](#)



**Breathe Out: A creative guide to happiness for teen minds** in association with Mind

**The Huge Bag of Worries** by Virginia Ironside

**The Colour Monster** by Anna Llenas

**When My Worries Get Too Big** by Kari Dunn Buron

**The Invisible String** by Patrice Kars: specifically for children who struggle with separation anxiety.

**Hey Warrior: A book for kids about anxiety** by Karen Young

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