



Therapy for Children Helping with Anxiety

Understanding what Anxiety means

Anxiety has been found to be one of the most common causes of distress in children and young people. Anxiety is a completely normal emotion and it shows itself in many ways.



Understanding what Typical /'normal' Anxiety can look like

Infants can appear to be upset, to be irritable and sleepless, but in very small children, such behaviour is more likely to be caused by hunger, cold, and illness than anxiety. The situation is not so clear cut as children get a little older. Certainly, it may appear to many parents of toddlers that their children are overly anxious or clinging. All toddlers express distress at being separated from their carers, along with occasional sleeplessness. It might feel as if your child clings excessively. Some children are naturally more timid and anxious than others, and for them the stress of new experiences is greater than for other children. However in time this behaviour will usually pass.

The world of young children can be a frightening and uncertain place. Such feelings are part of growing up, and confronting the many changes being presented to us throughout childhood. Children are sensitive to what happens around them, and young children in particular can feel that it is their fault when things go wrong at home (such as parents becoming ill). This makes them feel worried and guilty. Not all children's emotions are logical. Small children ordinarily have fears about the dark, insects, ghosts, kidnappers and getting lost or abandoned. Such fears are common and normal in all young children. Usually children grow out of their fears but sometimes they persist as the child grows up. Only when such fears stop your child doing ordinary activities is there real cause for concern. If your child clings so much that they are unable to play with other children, if they are unable to sleep alone, or be in a different room from you, this might indicate that they are overly anxious

Understanding what more troubling Anxiety can look like

School age children

Like young children, some school age children can become over-anxious. This can be a real concern for parents and professionals working with them.

Reasons why children might become anxious:

- Lack of confidence
- school worries
- problems with friends and activities out of school
- a temperamental disposition. Anxiety can run in families. There is a genetic predisposition to some children being anxious.
- Inappropriate parenting e.g. Overly harsh, neglectful, lacking in boundaries or inconsistent
- Attachment issues in relationship between parent and child
- physical illness, disability, neurodevelopmental need not being met
- sensory issues

- family problems or a trauma

Signs of anxiety in children of this age:

- are extremely shy, timid and clinging
- have real difficulties mixing with other children
- have difficulty getting off to and staying asleep
- have repeated nightmares (more than one a week)
- have repeated complaints of headache or tummy ache
- are constantly asking if things are all right or other ways of asking for reassurance
- chewing clothes
- picking



Some children will have panic attacks in which they feel that it is difficult to breathe and that they are going to die. Anxious children can be irritable and demanding, or aggressive. They can also be a source of extreme worry for parents. In addition to this, it often takes a great deal of patience for parents to see that behind the difficult behaviour there is anxiety and uncertainty. Many parents will respond angrily to their children's behaviour, when what the children want is for their parents to be calm, to know exactly how they are feeling and why. If parents seem not to understand, children can feel that the parents are ignoring their feelings on purpose, which can in turn exacerbate their difficult behaviour. It is important for parents to try and talk calmly to children about the things that are worrying them, and to reassure them whenever possible.

Psychologists believe that extreme anxiety is maintained by a vicious circle of thoughts, behaviours and feelings. If your child experiences severe anxiety, they can get exactly the same feelings and symptoms as adults. They may look terrible when anxious: pale, clammy, crying, shaking, saying they are going to be sick or pass out. However, when this happens, although they may look ill, they are OK. The more they avoid the thing that links with feeling bad, the more they think of it as being dangerous. This means that the next time they have to face the situation or event, their body tells them that it is dangerous and the fight, flight or freeze response kicks in. They feel they should either run away from the 'dangerous' thing, fight it or their body becomes frozen to the spot.

How are most anxieties helped ?



- This is usually achieved by talking to or helping children understand how the problem has developed so that children can understand and overcome the anxiety. Talking with small children about worries is quite often helped if they are encouraged to draw or play with small toys. Children tend to reveal their preoccupation in some of their play, and skilled observation can understand this!!
- Specific fears are usually treated by helping children confront their fear in a way and at a pace that they can manage.
- Some older children can be taught how to relax and learn ways to understand and manage their anxiety, as we will explain later in this leaflet.
- Some children with anxiety which is more troubling or hard to understand, can benefit from psychotherapy - intensive talking with a psychotherapist or professional skilled at this, which is where we at **F&TP** come in!!

Understanding what Anxiety needs

Positive parenting

Trying to stay calm will help you stay in control of the situation, and help you to manage your child's anxiety. So, if you know your child has to do something they may get distressed about, let them have a really positive experience in the same situation beforehand (e.g. going to play in the dentist's chair). It really works!

Ways to help small (Toddlers - Early Years) children

- try to make sure that small children get a wide range of experiences, particularly meeting people outside the home and playing with other children.
- try and ensure that your child is able to make their own decisions over small things - this will help them grow in confidence.
- help children to learn how to fall asleep on their own when they have a nap in the afternoon as well as at night.
- Make their bedroom a nice place to be, with a night-light. Keeping to a regular bedtime is often beneficial, as is a set routine of getting children into bed. Explain what you want them to do (lie quietly in bed waiting to fall asleep; they can't fall asleep by will-power), return to their bedroom at regular intervals to comfort them if necessary but leave the room before they fall to sleep and praise them for lying in bed quietly.
- try to make sure they spend at least a day away from home and parents before starting school. By experiencing such a separation they will be less apprehensive about having to spend time away from home.
- try and ensure that you are not always worried and anxious. Bringing up children can be stressful, but, if your child feels that you are always worried, they are more likely to be anxious themselves. Remember to take time out for yourself - to relax

(Adapted from Anxious Child)

Ways to help school age children

1. Help them learn how to worry well! Sounds odd but it is a skill that we can learn, which means we can become much better at dealing with a worry and problem solving or letting it go .
2. Teaching them strategies to distract themselves from dwelling on their worries has been found to be a really effective way of helping them become less fearful of their worries - they are just **thoughts not facts**. This also helps the worries to fade:

- ✚ Imagine your favourite place - it's like taking a mini holiday wherever you are there
- ✚ Think of your favourite things
- ✚ Name animals alphabetically (alligator, bear, cow, dog, etc...)
- ✚ Squeeze Something (play dough, clay, silly putty, your fists, a stress ball)
- ✚ Get a cold drink of water
- ✚ 54321 Grounding - go through each of your 5 senses and name: 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can smell, 2 things you can touch, BREATHE nice and deep and steadily 5 times.
- ✚ Look at a picture of someone you love to help calm you by feeling that love
- ✚ Carry a small object that you care about that makes you think about your family and friends that all love you and will help you
- ✚ Talk to someone and ask for their help
- ✚ Think of all the times in the past you overcame something - you are a Superhero



- ✚ Draw a picture of yourself as a Superhero overcoming your worries
- ✚ Remember things almost always turn out fine - thoughts are not facts!
- ✚ Count back or forwards in 2's, 10' or other number challenges
- ✚ Go and have some fresh air - take a little walk and change the scene
- ✚ Go and do something that takes your mind of your worry like tidying, planning something
- ✚ Do some puzzles
- ✚ "Hide and seek Hugs"

(Pila Pala Back to school resources)



Top Tips for parents to help children manage their anxiety

- Children thrive on plenty of love, affection, warmth and hugs - it helps them to feel safe. The more you give, the more your child will learn to give back in return.
- Giving a child clear boundaries helps to keep him/her feeling secure. A lack of boundaries creates anxiety. If you say 'yes' or promise something to a child remember to follow it through. If you say 'no' stick to it if possible, so they know you mean 'no'. This will help them feel safe!
- Try to make some time in your daily schedule to play with your child on a one to one basis, or read to them. Children feel confident knowing that they have your undivided attention even if it is only for a short period of time.
- Talking with your child can be difficult sometimes. A parent can learn a lot from their child though interaction or by just listening carefully to what they are trying to say to you. Involve yourself in your child's world with a non-critical ear.

(Adapted from "Children and Young People with Anxiety A Guide for Parents and Carers" by Anxiety UK)



Preventing Anxiety and providing ongoing strategies

Develop your capacity to parent in a way that really nurtures your child in order to truly meet their needs, Naish (2018) describes it as "Therapeutic Parenting". This needs you to become really self-aware and provide consistent, empathic, insightful responses to your child's distress and behaviours. This will enable them to begin to self regulate (understand and manage their own emotions and behaviours) and ultimately form secure attachments.

- ❖ Make life predictable and safe. Strong routines and boundaries are a must.
- ❖ Establish yourself as the sound safe base.
- ❖ Give lots of reassurance - a simple touch can help to reassure
- ❖ Think about when you share information - too soon and then too long to worry for some children
- ❖ Be aware that if your child is showing controlling behaviours and are anxious, this is because they are struggling to keep themselves feeling safe. Control is a fear-based behaviour.
- ❖ Fear can lead children to behave aggressively in order to feel safe. They may show a lack of remorse for behaviours acted out at these times. It is not because they are 'bad'. By helping children to feel safe, they are able to relax enough to take on the perspectives of others and then experience and develop empathy and remorse
- ❖ Empathic commentary can help your child recognise when their anxiety levels are rising e.g. "looks like you are getting worried..."

(adapted from "The A-Z of Therapeutic Parenting")