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A Psychological Guide for Families: Anxiety in Childhood

Child & Family Psychology & Therapies Service

Introduction

This booklet has been written to help you to understand your child's anxiety. We will look at a number of questions you may have as parents and carers, for example "What is anxiety?" and "What can I do to help my child"? We hope this booklet will be helpful in giving you a better understanding of anxiety and also some practical advice.

What is Anxiety?

All children and adults experience anxiety. Anxiety is a normal response to situations that we find threatening or stressful. If we approach a difficult and challenging experience our bodies prepare us by releasing adrenaline into our blood stream. This response increases our heart rate and quickens our breathing in order to get oxygen and energy to the muscles that most need them. This reaction prepares us for a fight or flight response. We may get butterflies in our tummies and we may feel sweaty and shaky. This physical reaction to stress can be healthy and can even help us to perform better at tasks and help to protect us from danger.

Childhood can be quite an emotional and challenging time. Children are often exposed to new and scary situations that might make them feel very nervous or frightened.

For example:-

- First day at school
- A maths test
- A new babysitter
- An appointment at the dentist

All of these things may make a child feel anxious. However, there may be times that your child's feelings of fear and worry may seem silly or irrational to you or you may feel that your child feels anxious **most** of the time.

This may be distressing for both you and your child and may also interfere with your lives and stop you from doing things you would like to do. When this happens you may start to wonder if your child has a 'problem'.

What are the signs?

Anxiety can affect children in different ways:

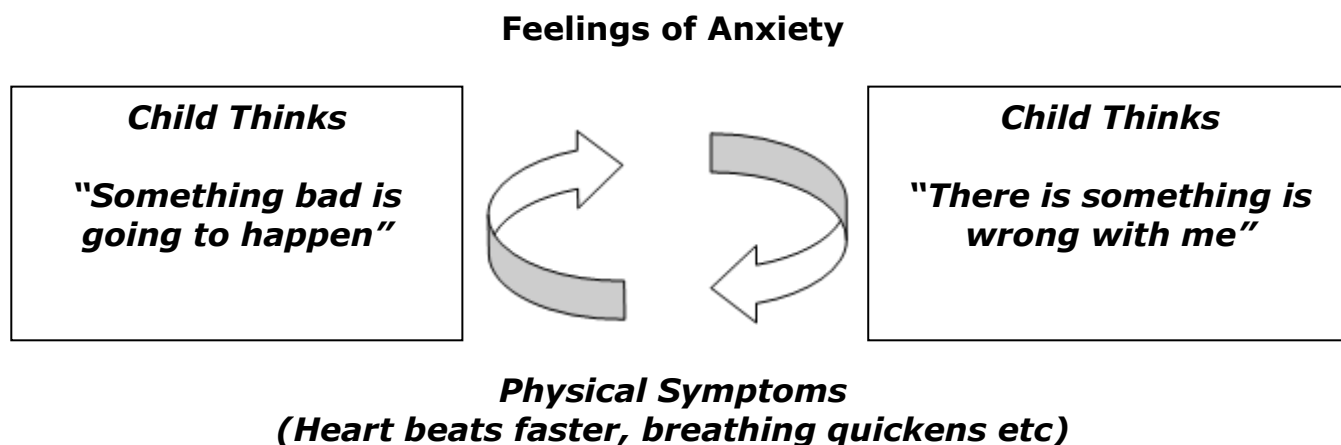
- The way their body works
- The way they think
- The way they behave
- The way they feel

Remember: All people, children as well as adults, are very different in how sensitive they are to 'stressful' situations. For example, going to a party may be seen as an exciting event for one child but a worrying event for another. Anxiety and excitement often occur together.

Here are some common symptoms of anxiety:

<p>Body reactions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heart beats faster • Breathing quickens • Feeling sick or having butterflies in your tummy • Chest pains • Fidgety and jumpy • Sweating • Shaking • Muscles tense ready for action • Body aching • Dizzy, light-headed 	<p>Feelings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxious, nervous, worried, frightened • Panicky • Scared but don't know why • Embarrassed
<p>Thoughts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't concentrate • Racing thoughts • Constant worrying • Imagining the worst • That something bad is going to happen 	<p>Behaviours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid situations, people or places • Unable to sit still • Increased/decreased appetite • Pacing up and down

The physical symptoms of anxiety, such as heart racing and feeling sick can make your child feel even more anxious because they might think something is wrong with them. A vicious circle can develop.



Anxiety can have the effect of making us think negatively. Negative thoughts like:

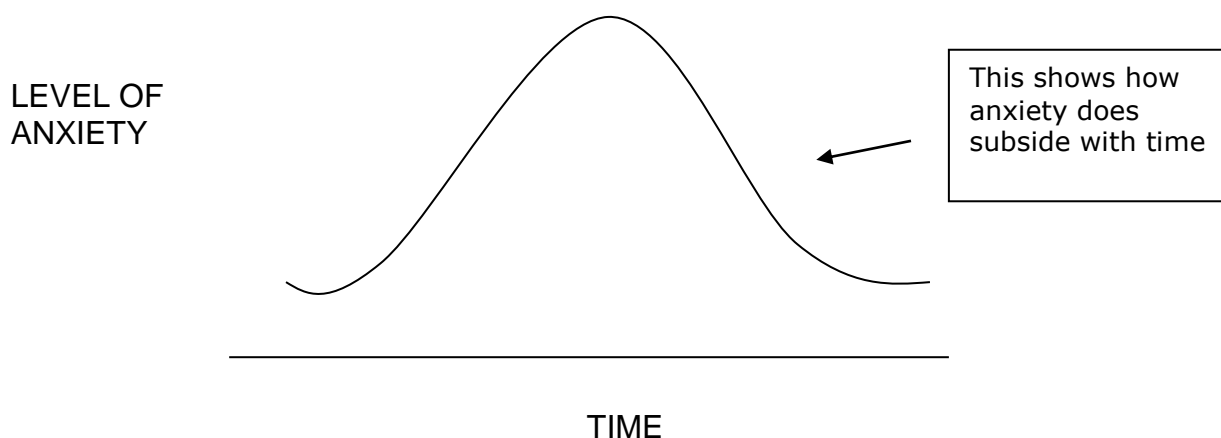
- "Nobody likes me"
- "I can't do anything right"
- "Something is wrong with me"
- "I must be stupid"

Avoidance

Both these negative thoughts and these worrying physical symptoms often lead children to avoid certain situations. Avoiding the situation may reduce the feelings of anxiety in the short term. However, in the long term the 'problem' is likely to worsen. If a child avoids their feared situation they learn that avoidance makes them feel safe again. They then do not get the chance to learn that nothing bad will happen to them if they try and face their feared situation. The common sense advice of "if you fall off your bike get back on it straight away" is an example of this. If a child does get back on their bike straight away they have the chance to learn that riding a bike can be fun and safe.

The wave of anxiety

Anxiety, like all emotions, comes in a wave. This wave may last a long time or a short time. It is important to remember and it is important to help your child experience that anxiety will pass.



A child needs to stay in their feared situation long enough to allow the anxiety to come and then to subside. So, they only leave the feared situation when the anxiety has reduced. If they leave whilst anxiety is high, they will learn to associate high anxiety with the feared situation.

Are there different types of anxiety problems?

There are several different kinds of worry/anxiety that are common in childhood.

Generalised

Some children constantly feel anxious and nervous, but for no apparent reason. They may worry about a number of events or situations in the past, the present or the future. They may feel anxious about health issues, upcoming events, school, sporting events or war. This excessive worrying normally interferes with their daily lives.

Fears and phobias

Very young children often develop fears and phobias, which arise at different points in their development. Common fears include being afraid of the dark, fire, water, ghosts, storms, strangers and animals. These may develop from traumatic experiences (e.g. traumatic dog attack), but for some children there may be no clear event that causes their fear to arise. Some children may become fearful if they see their friend or loved one scared of something, or from having watched something on TV or heard about some danger in the news.

These fears tend to disappear naturally with time, as the child grows older. However, when children's fears persist and begin to interfere with everyday life, they are called phobias. Typically children who are experiencing a phobia should access some extra help and support.

Anxiety around separation or loss

This type of anxiety is particularly common in young children and adolescents. Separation from people (most commonly a parent figure) or places that are familiar to them causes great distress and anxiety. Crying, clinging and panic are common reactions in younger children. Older children may display unrealistic fears and worries that they will be separated from their carer/family and fear excessively for their safety when they are not around. Children who worry about this may avoid a variety of different situations relating to separation, including going to bed at night, going to school or staying at a friend's house. Physical symptoms may include stomach aches and headaches upon separation.

Anxiety about school

Most children get nervous when they first start school. There are lots of new and exciting things about school, but this can also be scary and difficult for some children to cope with. Most children will settle in within the first few weeks of school. However, some children develop excessive fears relating to school. They may refuse to go in the morning and begin feeling frequently sick and nervous.

Changing from infants to juniors or from primary to comprehensive school can also be anxiety-provoking times for some children.

School worries can be very disruptive and can be hard for both the parents, children and teachers involved. It is also difficult because the child may miss out on their education and peer relationships.

What causes these worries and anxieties?

Every child is different and what may cause one child to worry excessively may not cause another to worry at all. Different factors make some children more likely to worry, such as temperament (personality), relationships with others, or life events (family problems, divorce or separation, death or illness of a parent or close relative). It is important to remember that it is unlikely to be just one thing, but a combination of factors that have contributed to your child's anxiety.

What can I do to help my child?

There are some things you can do to help your child break their cycle of anxiety.

1. **Help your child to understand their anxiety.**

Some children may not know what anxiety is and may not understand why they are feeling scared and nervous. Talk to your child about their worries and fears. Talking them through with someone they love and trust may help them to rationalise their thoughts. Talking with your child about the physical symptoms of anxiety can also help them to understand their own bodies and "why" they feel this way. Explain to them that anxiety is like a wave and they can try to surf the wave rather than stop it coming or be drowned by it!

Exercises to try

Reading - There are some wonderful children's books that may help you to approach and talk about anxiety, stress, worries and fears (see list of books on back page). Try reading some of these with your child.

Body diagram - try drawing a body shape, ask your child to label all the bits of the body that feel strange or funny when they feel anxious. Talk them through the feelings and sensations so they can recognise what is happening to them next time they feel anxious. Let them know this is natural and they are not odd or silly to feel these things.

Anxiety diary - writing a diary may help your child to identify places, times or situations that trigger their anxiety. This may help them to understand why they are anxious.

2. **Positive Self-Talk**

Replacing worries with positive thoughts can be very helpful. Ask your child to write down some of the worries he/she may have when they feel anxious or afraid. Beside each of these, think together of alternative "positive" statements. For example:

Worry thought	Positive thought
"Something bad is going to happen"	"Everything is fine, I am ok"
"This is never going to end"	"This feeling will pass"
"I can't do it, I am stupid"	"I am strong, I can do it"

If your child feels anxious, saying these positive statements over and over again to himself/herself can help to calm him/her down and break the cycle of anxiety described above. Younger children may need to say these things out loud for quite a while, and to hear them said by trusted adults before they learn to say it "inside their heads".

It might be helpful to ask your child "what is the worse thing that could happen?" Talk to them about their very worst fear. If you take their fear to the extreme and let them see that there would be ways of coping even if this happened then they may feel more able to cope with their lesser fears.

3. Relaxation and Breathing

In our everyday, busy lives we often don't put aside enough time to relax. Doing a simple relaxation exercise, together with your child could have enormous benefits for you both.

Relaxation:

- Helps to relieve stress and anxiety
- Combats fatigue
- Assists healing
- Promotes better physical health
- Improves sleep
- Improves concentration
- Improves relationships

Remember that there is no one way of relaxing and people find many different ways to relax. It is important for your child to find the best way for them.

Exercises to try

Physical relaxation

This is an exercise that involves tensing and relaxing your muscles.

1. Find a quiet place, free from interruptions
2. Get comfortable - lying down is best
3. Concentrate on your breathing...in and out...
4. Start with your HANDS and ARMS and then move right down your body clenching and relaxing all of your muscle groups from FACE and NECK to YOUR FEET and TOES. Finish off with a WHOLE BODY tense.

5. TENSE the different muscles as hard as you can
6. Hold for about 5 seconds.....and then RELAX
7. How different do your muscles feel when they are tensed or relaxed?

For younger children, who may not understand the terms "tense" and "relax", you can also add the image "like a robot" and "like a rag doll".

Quick relaxation exercises (taken from book "Think Good - Feel Good" by Paul Stallard, 2002)

Arms and hands: Clench your fists and push your arms straight out in front of you.

Legs and feet: Push your toes downwards, gently raise your legs, and stretch them out in front of you.

Stomach: Push out your tummy muscles, take a breath and hold it.

Shoulders: Scrunch up your shoulders.

Neck: Push your head back against the chair or bed.

Face: Screw up your face, squeeze your eyes tight and push your lips together.

Controlled Breathing

Anxiety often causes rapid breathing. Learning to control breathing will be a really helpful skill for your child to develop.

1. Find a quiet place, free from interruptions.
2. Get comfortable - either lying or sitting.
3. Close your eyes and place your hand on your stomach.
4. Focus on your breathing.
5. Take a long slow breath in.
6. Take a long slow breath out.
7. Try and concentrate on the air filling your lungs and then slowly coming back out.
8. Feel your stomach move in and out with each breath (this is important - with deep relaxed breathing, it is your stomach that moves and not your chest).

9. Repeat.
10. Practice breathing for 5-15 minutes a day.

Tip: Ask your child to think of a colour that makes him/her feel comfortable and relaxed. With eyes closed, have him/her visualise breathing in that colour through his/her nose and into his/her lungs. Guide him/her to visualise the colour moving down to reach all parts of his/her body, more and more, with each breath, until he/she is filled with the peaceful colour and is totally relaxed and in control.

Calming Pictures (taken from book "Think Good - Feel Good" by Paul Stallard, 2002)

Ask your child to think about their dream (safe/magic) place. It could be somewhere they have been or an imaginary place. Get them to imagine a picture of it and make the picture as restful and peaceful as possible. Ask them to make the picture as real as they can, by prompting them to imagine the colours, the smells and the sounds of the place. E.g. hear the noise of the sea, feel the wind in their hair, the smell of the trees, the feel of the sunshine on their face.

Guide your child to practice imagining their relaxing places, and if they start to feel worried, they can try turning the picture on. Ask them to bring to mind a picture of their restful scene and see if it helps them to relax.

Worries Boat

Sometimes children can't relax because they find themselves worrying about lots of things. This may be especially true at night-time. Talk to your child about their worries. Suggest they take each worry and place them on a little paper boat in their mind. Tell them to picture the "worries boat" floating away downstream before bedtime.

Worry Time

Your child may find it helpful to make a list of their worries and have two minutes to worry about each of them. When the time is up the worry time is over and they can turn to their 'happy list' and spend equal time thinking about each of these. Some children like a physical container for their worries e.g. a shoe box (decorated if you like) so they can lock their worries away again afterwards.

Fun and Laughter

One of the best ways to release stress and tension is to laugh and have fun! When we laugh chemicals are released in the brain which make us feel more relaxed. Why not try to find some fun things that you and your child can do together, like flying a kite or baking a cake.

Other things that can help us to relax:

- Sleep - Encourage your child to get a good night's sleep. Children are more likely to be irritable and stressed if they are tired. Developing a bedtime routine may help to reduce anxiety.
- Exercise - Exercise actually helps our bodies to relax. Physical activity, like walking, riding a bike, yoga or swimming helps us to use up adrenaline and nervous energy in a positive way. Exercise also releases chemicals in our brains called endorphins that make us feel good.
- Food - A healthy balanced diet is important for all aspects of wellbeing. Any child will be more easily agitated if they have ingested too many sweets, chocolate or caffeinated soft drinks etc. Try to make sure your child cuts down on these foods and instead eats plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Hobbies - Encourage your child to take up a hobby. This will help them to relax and focus their mind on something they enjoy.
- Physical comfort - Some children love to be stroked, massaged or just held. This can be reassuring and relaxing.
- Music - Your child may respond well to music. Experiment with different kinds of music so they can find which is relaxing for them.

4. Exposure

This means you and your child deliberately confront the feared situation. It may be done with a trained therapist but you may also be able to achieve results on your own if you do it gradually and understand how the approach works.

For example: A child is frightened of going in the car following a traffic accident. Each time the child has to go in the car he/she becomes more and more distressed and anxious and wants to avoid getting in. This is a normal reaction to having had a frightening experience. As concerned parents you may decide that it is too upsetting to force the child to continue trying and before long the child completely refuses to try and becomes extremely upset at the thought of going in the car. This child has now developed a real fear of going in the car. One of the difficulties with this situation is that running away from fears feels right and in the short term everyone feels better. However what the child, and often the parent, then experiences is more and more anxiety about the event and this can only be overcome by going into the situation, however distressing, and staying there until the level of anxiety has levelled out or decreased (see diagram of anxiety wave). By practising this repeatedly, you learn that it is not as frightening as you thought and gradually the situation can be approached with less fear. This can be as difficult for parents to do as for their children and you may need a calm friend to help keep you going. Many people find it helpful to check how anxious they are on a scale from 0-10, so that they know when it is decreasing.

Gradual exposure

It can be helpful to think of a ladder of worries with the scariest situation at the top and the least scary at the bottom. Start at the bottom of the ladder. For example, a child may be scared at just looking at pictures of cars. Practise this until the anxiety around this has gone. The next step may be sitting in a stationary car. Again, practise this until it can be done without anxiety. Each step is achieved before moving on. The final stage may be to travel in a car on a busy road. Of course, each step will be anxiety-provoking but the child must be helped to stay in that situation until the fears have reduced.

5. Problem-solving

Think together with your child about situations or places where they feel most anxious. Talk about their fears and worries about what might happen. Talk through what they might do in those situations if they occurred. Think about different things to do and talk about which of those things might be best. See if you can think of a situation when everything went well or OK. What happened? Why was it better than other situations? Was it something the child did or said that made things easier?

Talking through these things with your child may help them to think of different ways to behave in certain situations, which are scary for them. Preparing for those situations before they happen can reduce the child's anxiety.

6. Rewards and praise

Remember that every little step is a huge success, reward your child if you see improvement and encourage them as much as you can to use the skills you have learnt together.

Where can I get more help?

If you feel you have tried all you can and things are not improving for your child you may want to look for further help.

Health Care Professionals (Health Visitor, School Health Nurse, General Practitioner, Clinical Psychologist) - can help you and your child to talk through any problems you are having.

YoungMinds Parent Information Service provides information and advice on child mental health issues 0800 0182138

www.youngminds.org.uk

Books you can read together

- * Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside - Is a storybook about anxiety appropriate for 4-12 year olds.
- * I'm Worried by Brian Moses - A children's book about anxiety. Also includes notes for parents and teachers.
- * Wemberly Worried by Kevin Henkes - For Baby to Preschool years
- * Night Light: A Story for Children Afraid of the Dark by Jack Daltro and Kenneth Boyle
- * Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak

Books for parents

- * Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step by Step guide for Parents by Ronald M. Rapee (2000)
- * Helping your Anxious Child by David Lewis (2002)
- * School Phobia, Panic Attacks and Anxiety in Children by Marianna Csofi (2003)

We hope that you have found some ideas in this booklet that you would like to try out. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can get worse before they get better. It can be hard to keep going, but many families tell us that it is worth persevering.

Please let us know what you think about this booklet

1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

Not at all easy	1	2	3	4	5	Very easy

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful

3. What might you do differently now that you have read this booklet? _____

4. Please tick the box and give us your address if you would like to receive another booklet from our range.

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Sleep Problems	
Sleeping walking, nightmares and night terrors	
Soiling	
Trauma	

Do you have any other ideas for booklets? _____

Your name and address _____

Thank you for taking the time to give us your comments. Please return this slip to us directly or by giving it to the person who passed the booklet on to you.

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 Llwyn Onn, Grounds of St Cadoc's Hospital
 Lodge Road, Caerleon, Newport NP18 3XQ