

## **Introduction**

Attending school is a fact of childhood with primary school age children receiving an average of 805 hours rising to 916 in secondary school (OECD, 2023). Outside of the home and family relationships school is often the most important influence on children's development. It is therefore crucial that children and young people experience school as a safe place in which they can develop and grow.

For many children starting school may represent the first time they have been separated from their parents/carers for a significant period of time. This can be difficult for both children and parents/carers as they learn to manage the separation and adjust to the new pattern of life. It can represent both an exciting and anxiety provoking time as children adjust to new relationships, routines and rules. The challenges associated with such a major transition can take some time to settle with some children naturally managing the change easier than others.

Of course, going to school for the first time is only the first of a series of transitions during a child's educational journey. Moving from primary to juniors and then from juniors to secondary school are also major transitions points and represent times when children may need a little extra support as they adjust to the changes.

Some children will also experience their own additional challenges throughout the course of their school career. These may be associated with difficulties with their learning, peer relationships, bullying, self-esteem or wider worries about things that are happening in their lives. Anxiety is a very natural response to these situations.

What is absolutely crucial is that children/young people are supported to be able to talk about their worries. Home and school should work closely together in order to develop a shared understanding about what is causing the child/young person to feel anxious. They should then together create the right conditions for the young person to feel safe/less anxious and further support the young person to develop appropriate coping strategies.

This booklet has been written to help you to understand your child's anxiety at school. It will look at a number of questions you may have as parents and carers, including; "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?

Many children and adults experience anxiety at some point in their lives and anxiety can be thought of as 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 increases our heart rate and quickens our breathing in order to get oxygen and energy to the muscles that most need them. This 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.

Anxiety can affect children (and adults) in a number of ways:

- The way our body works
- The way we think
- The way we behave
- The way we feel

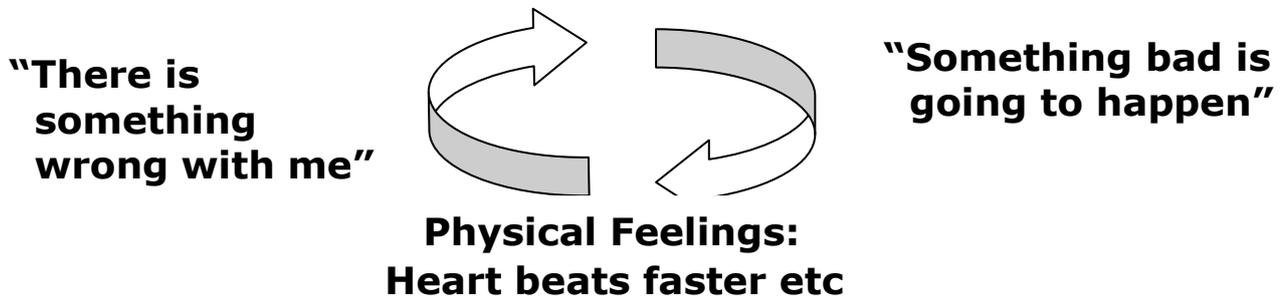
## The Ways in Which Anxiety Can Affect Us All

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

## The Vicious Cycle of Anxiety

The physical feelings of anxiety, such as heart racing and feeling sick can make us feel even more anxious because we might think something is wrong with us. A vicious circle can develop.

### Feelings of Anxiety



These physical feelings can make both children and young people as well as their parents, carers and teachers worried about what is happening for them. This is why it is important to ensure that as adults we are constantly trying to understand the reasons underlying the anxiety and attempting to address the underlying cause(s). This requires us to be constantly talking to our children or thinking creatively about how to support children to communicate their worries.

### Avoidance

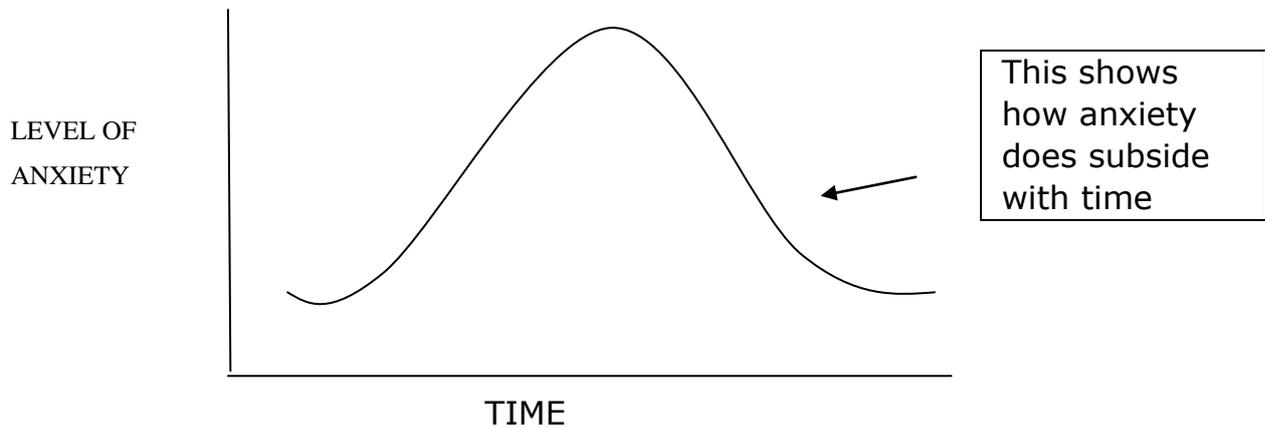
The experience of anxiety can often lead children to avoid certain situations. In fact, avoiding the situation is likely to reduce the feelings of anxiety in the short term. However, in the long term the 'problem' will worsen. If a child avoids their feared situation, they learn that avoidance makes them feel safe again. This reinforces the avoidance.

Again, we as adults need to understand what it is they are fearful of and thus avoiding. Once we have created the right conditions for them to feel safe, we need to support them to face their feared situation so they can have an experience of nothing bad happening to them.

### The Wave of Anxiety

Anxiety, like all emotions, comes in a wave. This wave may last a long time or a short time. Once the right conditions are in place it is important to help them experience that anxiety will pass. All waves by their very nature subside.

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, and further that relief only comes by avoiding or escaping the feared situation.



### **What as a Parent/Carer Can I Do to Help?**

There are some things you can do to help children and young people when they are feeling anxious. Although anxiety may be felt by the child/ young person, there will always be links to what's going on outside of them (even if this is not clear at first). Supportive relationships help children to make these links and then to find ways to make changes in their lives that will help them to feel less anxious.

### **Help understand the reasons underlying the anxiety and work with school to develop a shared understanding/support plan**

- Talk to children and young people about their worries and fears. Do not try to persuade them that they are not really anxious. Accept their experience and help them understand it.
- Then, ensure that any underlying causes are addressed with the relevant adults

Some common reasons for anxiety include: changes at home, changes at school, finding lessons hard, not feeling understood by others, feeling lonely/ excluded and/or struggling to keep up with social demands (ideas about how they should look or behave, including on social media).

- '13 powerful phrases' to help Children and young people when they feel anxious are included in the appendix of this document. These are things you can say to actively show support and help the other person feel safer/ less anxious.

### **Body Diagram: (Appendix)**

Try drawing a body shape, ask the 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. All of the bodily sensations that we experience have perfectly good

explanations that are all about keeping us safe. See the table below for the reasons for these strange feelings that can make children feel scared and confused.

<b>WHAT YOU FEEL</b>	<b>REASON THIS IS HAPPENING</b>
Eyes go funny Blurred vision Tunnel vision Feel unreal	Eyes trying to focus to fight danger
Breathing Changes	Body trying to take in more oxygen to fight or run away.
Chest Pains	Muscles held tight ready to fight
Heart pounding	Increase flow of blood through body
Pounding in head Headache	Increased pressure of blood flowing through the body for extra energy
Numbness or tingling in fingers or lips Butterflies in tummy	Blood diverted to muscles.

### **Worry Diary**

Writing a diary may help to identify places, times or situations that trigger their anxiety. This may help them to understand why it makes sense that they feel anxious and helps us as adults to make changes to remove or reduce the source of their distress.

### **Worry Box**

This is something that you could encourage your child to do at home. This exercise is about showing the child that they do not have to carry their worries around with them. Please find attached a copy of the exercise instructions based on the exercise from "Creative Therapy" by Hobday and Ollier (Appendix page 14).

## Positive Self-Talk

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

*(It can help to ask what they'd tell a friend or someone they cared about if they said the worry thought)*

<b>WORRY THOUGHT</b>	<b>POSITIVE THOUGHT</b>
"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 the child feels anxious, saying these positive statements to themselves can help to calm them down and break the cycle of anxiety. 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 them "what is the worst thing that could happen?" Talk to them about their very worst fear. If you sensitively 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.

## 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 them 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 them to find the best way for them.

**"Sitting still like a frog"** by Eline Snel is a useful book with accompanying CD to help learn how to understand how normal it is for our minds to be busy and how to learn to feel calm.

'**Headspace**' app is also a useful resource for older children and/or parents who want to try out this sort of an approach and want to understand the ideas behind this.

## **Physical Relaxation**

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

1. Find a quiet place, free from interruptions
2. Get comfortable
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 rag doll" (Appendix page 11).

## **Controlled Breathing**

When someone becomes frightened, they start to breathe more quickly, so that oxygen is pumped more quickly round the body. However, breathing too fast, deeply or irregularly can lead to more symptoms of panic, such as faintness, tingling and dizziness. If breathing can be controlled during panic, these symptoms may be reduced and so the vicious circle described earlier can be broken.

You must breathe more slowly. If you breathe calmly and slowly for at least 3 minutes, the alarm bell should stop ringing.

When a child is worrying or about to do something that usually makes them worried, the following technique is very useful.

Fill your lungs with air. Imagine you are filling up a bottle, so it fills from the bottom up. Your stomach should push out too. Do not breathe in a shallow way, from your chest, or too deeply. Keep your breathing nice and slow and calm. Breathe out from your mouth and in through your nose.

Try breathing in slowly saying to yourself:-

*1 elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4.*

Then let the breath out slowly: *4 elephant, 3 elephant, 2 elephant, 1.* Keep doing this until you feel calm. Sometimes looking at a second hand on a watch can help to slow breathing down.

Generally, learning to control breathing will be a really helpful skill to develop and the following exercise should be practised regularly.

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 them to think of a colour that makes them feel comfortable and relaxed. With eyes closed, have them visualise breathing in that colour through their nose and into his/her lungs.

Guide them to visualise the colour moving down to reach all parts of their body, more and more, with each breath, until they is filled with the peaceful colour and is totally relaxed and in control.

## **Calming Pictures**

Ask them 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 them 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.

## 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.

## Exposure

This means to 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 to lunch at the school canteen because they feel scared in large crowds of children. Each time the child has to go to lunch, they become more and more distressed and anxious and wants to avoid going. As teachers, it can be difficult to manage the child when they become extremely upset and distressed at the thought of going to lunch and you may decide to make alternative arrangements for the child to eat lunch elsewhere in a quieter environment. However, the child will now be extremely scared of the thought of going to the canteen and will refuse to even try. 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 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. The child will need someone supportive to help them, either a trusted teacher or a friend. 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.

## Problem-Solving

Think together with them 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 (Appendix, Page 12.) 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 them 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.

You may want to give them examples of your own anxieties and how you have overcome them.

## **Rewards and Praise**

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

## **Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway**

This is the title of a book that you may find useful or you may just want to use the phrase as a helpful mantra for children to learn and use when they feel nervous.

## **Summary**

Anxiety is felt by us all as human beings. It is a normal response to situations around us that feel threatening. Talking to people who you trust and like can help to work out the links between what's going on outside and within us so we can see what needs to change to make us feel less threatened and anxious. We hope some of these ideas will help you to feel less worried about feeling anxious.

## **Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)**

For some children, school can provoke a great deal of anxiety or fear in children and young people, leading to them being unable to attend school. Where this becomes persistent you may need to seek more specific help and support. Since the pandemic non-attendance rates have risen to 7.6% from around 4-5% before the pandemic.

The four main factors for school avoidance are:

- To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school, such as feelings of anxiety or low mood
- To avoid situations that might be stressful, such as academic demands (e.g. speaking in class), bullying, social pressures and/or aspects of the school environment (e.g. noisy corridors)
- To spend more time with a family member, this might be because of separation anxiety, being a young carer, having a new sibling, divorce etc.
- To spend time doing things they enjoy, like staying in bed, playing computer games, watching videos etc.

There can be many different causes or aspects leading to a child avoiding school and it may be necessary to access support to help understand what might be the underlying reason or reasons and to implement change. Schools may be able to offer advice and support to help overcome some of these challenges.

If problems persist then you can also access support via SPACE Wellbeing. Each borough has its own panel which is made up of a number of professional organisations aimed at providing support to children, young people and families. To find out more you can visit:

## Appendices

### 13 Powerful Phrases Proven to Help an Anxious Child

If your child struggles with anxiety, you know the challenge of finding the right things to say when he or she is worried. It's not easy to connect without making the fears worse, while at the same time offering support and encouragement.

Rather than telling your child "You'll be fine," or "Don't worry about it," try one of these phrases the next time your child is feeling worried:

#### What to Say to Help an Anxious Child Calm Down

- **"I am here; you are safe."** Anxiety has a way of making things look worse and feel scarier than when we are not feeling worried. These words can offer comfort and safety when your child is feeling out of control, especially if they are at the height of their worry. If you're not sure what to say, this is an excellent go-to phrase!
- **"Tell me about it."** Give your child room to talk about their fears without interrupting. Some children need to have time to process through their thoughts. Do not offer solutions or try to fix it. Children sometimes do better with a set amount of time: "Let's talk about your worries for 10 minutes."
- **"How big is your worry?"** Help your child verbalize the size of their worry and give you an accurate picture of how it feels to them. They can represent their worry by using arm length (hands close together or arms stretched wide apart) or by drawing three circles on a paper (small, medium and large) and choosing the one that applies.
- **"What do you want to tell your worry?"** Explain to your child that worry is like an annoying "worry bug" that hangs around telling them to be worried. Create a few phrases, then give them permission to talk back to this "worry bug." They can even be bossy: "Go away!" or "I don't have to listen to you!" Use silly voices, and try it loud and quiet.
- **"Can you draw it?"** Many kids cannot express their emotions with words. Encourage them to draw, paint or create their worries on paper. When they are finished, make observations, and give them a chance to explain the significance: "That's a lot of blue!"
- **"Let's change the ending."** Anxious children often feel stuck in the same pattern without a way out. Help them see different options by telling their story, but leaving off the ending. Then, create a few new endings. Some can be

silly, but at least one should be realistic for your child. Focus on your child conquering their fears with confidence!

- **“What other things do you know about (fill in the blank)?”** Some children feel empowered when they have more information about their fear (especially things like tornadoes, bees, elevators, etc.). Grab a book from the library, do a science experiment, research together online: How often does your fear happen? How do people stay safe?
- **“Which calming strategy do you want to use?”** Work proactively to create a long list of calming strategies your child enjoys. Practice them during the day, at random times when your child feels calm. When your child feels a worry sneaking into their thoughts, encourage them to pick something from the list.
- **“I’m going to take a deep breath.”** Sometimes our children are so worried that they resist our encouragement to pick a calming strategy. In this case, use yourself as the calming skill! Verbalize what you are doing and how it makes you feel. Some people hold their children close so they can feel the rise and fall of their chest as they breathe.
- **“It’s scary AND…”** Acknowledge your child’s fear without making it even more frightening by using the word “AND.” After the word “and” you can add phrases like, “You are safe.” or “You’ve conquered this fear before.” or “You have a plan.” This models an internal dialogue your child can use next time they are feeling worried.
- **“I can’t wait to hear about…”** It’s hard to see our kids suffer with worry. Many parents rush in to rescue their child from an anxiety-producing situation. Encourage your child that they will survive this difficult feeling by bringing up a topic to talk about when you’re together later — what they did at recess, who they sat by at lunch, etc.
- **“What do you need from me?”** Instead of assuming that you know what your child needs, give them an opportunity to tell you what would help. Older kids may be able to verbalize if they need you to listen, give a hug, or help them find a solution. If you can’t do it, give them their wish in fantasy: “I wish grown-ups could go to kindergarten too!”
- **“This feeling will pass.”** This may be a phrase you can both use when your child is at the height of panic. All feelings pass eventually. It often feels like they will never end, you won’t make it through, or it’s too hard. And that’s OK. Don’t let your brain get stuck in that moment; focus on the relief that is on the horizon.

Anxiety and worry look different for every child. Not every one of these strategies will work for your kids. You are the expert on your child. If you try something and it makes their worries worse, don’t panic. Just pick something else from the list to try next time. Eventually, you will find a few phrases that are effective for sending a calm, encouraging and empowering message to your child.

## **Relaxing Like an Old Rag Doll**

First, wrinkle up your face,  
Keep it like that... Gently let it go  
Till you look like...  
An old rag doll

Now shrug your shoulders up to your ears  
Keep them like that...  
Gently let them go  
Till they feel like they belong to...  
An old rag doll

Make your arms like a strong man act  
Keep them like that...  
Gently let them go  
Till they feel like they belong to...  
An old rag doll

Take a deep breath to tighten up your chest  
Keep it like that...  
Gently let it go  
Till it feels like it belongs to...  
An old rag doll

Pull you tummy in to make it feel really tight  
Keep it like that...  
Gently let it go  
Till it feels like it belongs to...  
An old rag doll

Stretch out your legs till they feel really tight  
Keep them like that...  
Gently let them go  
Till they feel like they belong to...  
An old rag doll

## Problem Solving and finding solutions

### **What is your worrying situation?**

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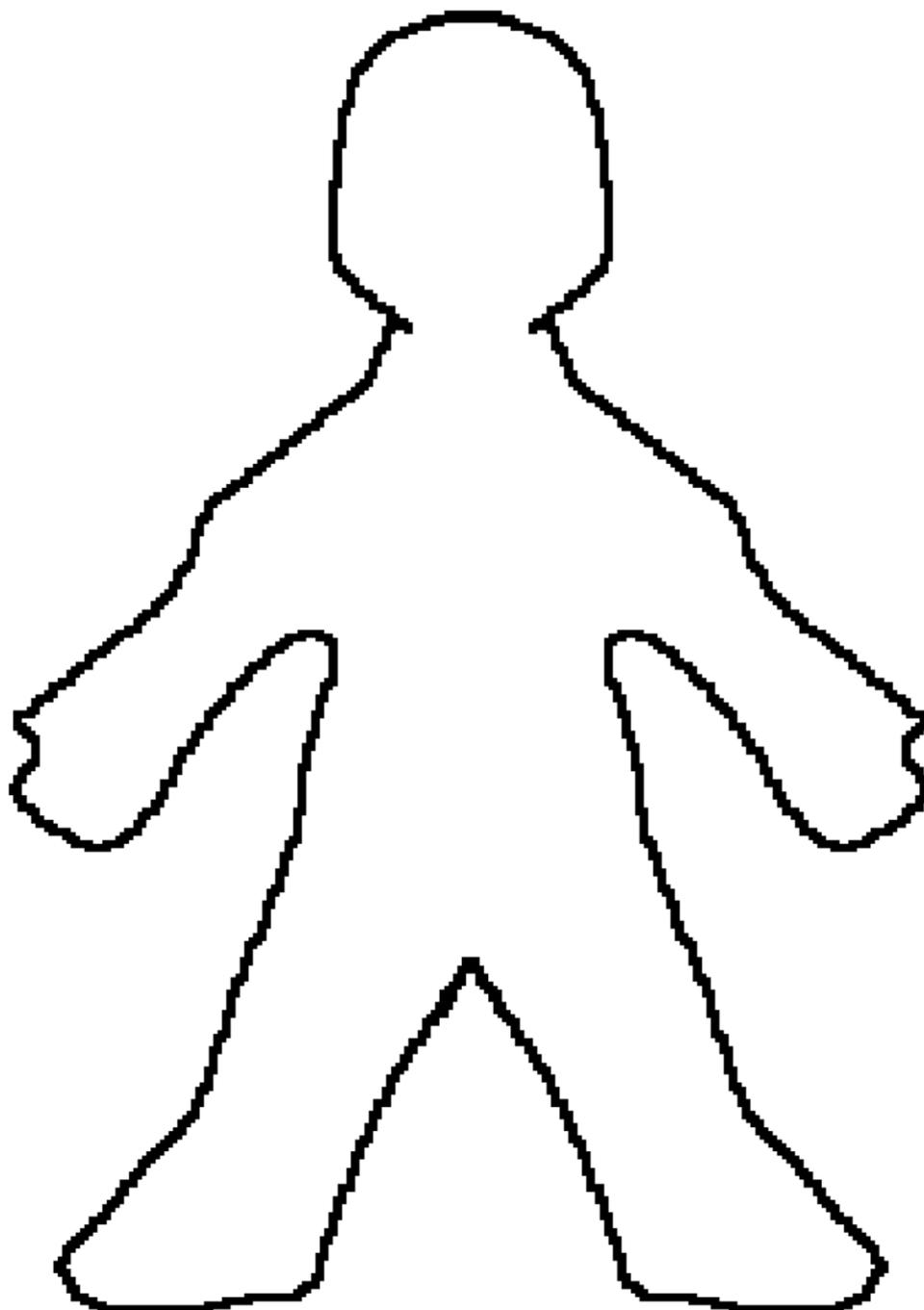
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Write down all your ideas for possible solutions, even the not so healthy ones.

Possible Solutions	Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

**On balance the best way of solving this problem is:**



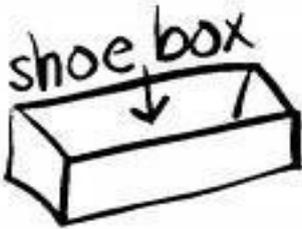
### **Body Diagram**

**What can you feel in your body when you're worried?**

## Exercise

**Aim:** to help to reduce worries by helping the child to learn not to carry them around with them.

**Materials:** a shoe box that could be decorated by the child, with a slot in the top. A set of blank cards or slips of paper that can fit through the slot.



**Method:** talk to the child about how we all have worries and that putting them away can help to get rid of them so that we can get on with life. Ask the child to decorate the box how they want to, and to think of a place where the box of worries can be kept. The box needs to be kept some distance from the child to illustrate that the child does not have to carry the box around with them. For example, they could be deep in a cupboard at home. If the child is worrying about matters that adults should be concerned about, it is appropriate to give the box each day to the carer to illustrate to the child that it is the adults who should be carrying the responsibility.

Next, take the set of cards and ask the child which worries they would like to put away. Write each worry on a separate card or piece of paper. Then, ritually have the child put the worries in the box, giving positive reasons why they need not be concerned about them. Now put the lid down. The child may like to seal the box with some tape or ribbon.

Finally put the box away together in the place already discussed. Explain to the child that they can now go and enjoy their day without taking their worries with them.

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.

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Please let us know what you think about this booklet

1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

Not at all easy	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	Very easy

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

Not at all helpful	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	Very helpful

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

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

Adversity	
Anger	
Anxiety	
Behavioural Difficulties	
Bereavement	
Separation and Divorce	
Siblings - Helping your children to live with and learn from each other	
Sleep Problems	
Sleeping walking, nightmares and night terrors	
Soiling	
Trauma	

Do you have any other ideas for booklets?

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Your name and address

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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.

Please return to Child and Family Psychology and Therapies Service  
Llwyn Onn, Grounds of St Cadoc's Hospital  
Lodge Road, Caerleon, Newport NP18 3XQ

**“This document is available in Welsh /  
Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg”.**