

Does my child experience anxiety and what can I do to support them?

Anxiety is a feeling of fear or panic. Feeling generally anxious sometimes is normal for everyone. Most people worry about something at some time for example money or exams - but once the difficult situation is over, you feel better and calm down. A certain low level of anxiety can often be helpful and motivating too.

When anxiety becomes more of a problem is when the feeling of fear or panic stays or even gets stronger, even though the cause of the stress has gone or when it interferes with our ability to carry out our daily routines and life without difficulty or distress.

If you feel that your child is being affected by difficulties with anxiety here are a few do's and don'ts to help you.

Do not..

- Do not panic! Many children experience times of heightened anxiety and may need some support. Try hard not to show your worry about the anxiety to your child - they may feel that there is something wrong with them and this may make anxiety worse. We need to remain positive and calm.
- Do not tell your child that they are anxious.. Again they will worry about being worried unless we are careful.
- Try not to question your child about what they are worried about and expect them to be able to answer in words. They will often find this difficult and sometimes may not have a reason to feel anxious - they may even tell you things that may not be accurate worries that they tell us if we expect them to have reasons and words for what they are feeling.
- Do not rely on object like worry monsters and worry dolls etc. to work in isolation. Instead the worry monster or doll should be used support a child to feel more regulated and communicate their worries to a grown up.
- Do not jump in to try to solve all of your child's worries for them - Use noticing and wondering and help them to decide what you are going to do together to make things feel better.
- Try hard not to tell your child not to worry or that they are being silly for worrying about something. Acknowledge their big feelings and help them to manage and regulate them.

Do..

- Do notice and wonder with your child about what you are seeing. "I have noticed that you are feeling upset in the morning before school - I wonder why that might be and how I might be able to help you?"
- Use books and stories to help them to explore anxiety for themselves without labelling them - The Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside and many other books are a great way to help your child to consider what they are experiencing and what they should do.
- Do help your child to recognise the signs that tell them when they may feel anxious - These are often called Early Warning signs and might include tummy ache, a rapidly beating heart and other signs. When they notice their signs teach them to come and tell you about them so that you can help to notice and wonder with them about why they may be there and help them to feel safer.
- Do reach out for support from school. Let us know so that we can work together to support you and your child.

Resources and Activities that can support a child who is anxious;

Books;

The Huge Bag of Worries' by Virginia Ironside
'Panicosaurus' by Kay Al-Ghani
'The Girl who Never Made Mistakes' by Mark Pett
'When my Worries get too Big' by Kari Dunn Buron
'What to do when you worry too much' by Dawn Huebner
'All Birds Have Anxiety' by Kathy Hoopmann
'David and the Worry Beast' by Anne Marie Guanci
'No Worries!' by Lily Murray



Apps can be very useful for children to gain support - a great one is **Stop Breathe and Think Kids** which can be found for free on your app store.

Bubble-Blowing.

Blowing bubbles is extremely relaxing for children and can be done mindfully! Hold the bottle of bubble mixture in your hand. Notice how it feels : is it smooth, does the top have wrinkles to help you to grip? Slowly undo the lid and look closely at the wand. Is there already some mix on the wand? If not, put the wand back in and try again.. Hold it up and notice if any drips fall : are they thick or runny? Can you see any colours reflected in the liquid? Slowly blow some bubbles. Choose one and watch it drift to the floor.

Take a Breath— using simple breathing techniques can help us to feel calm.

Hot Air Balloon

Sit in a comfortable, cross -legged position, cup your hands round your mouth. Take a deep breath in, through your nose and out through your mouth, growing your hands outwards in time with your exhale as if you are blowing up an enormous hot air balloon. Once your balloon is as big as can be and you have finished your exhale, then breathe normally and admire the balloon you have created.



Noticing—this is a useful way to relax

1. Choose your location, either inside your house or garden, if you have one. Open the window if you stay inside.
2. Look around, notice what you can see, what is the biggest thing? What is the smallest?
3. Close your eyes, notice what you can hear? Are they human sounds or natural?
4. Notice any smells. Cooking? Fresh air? Anything else?
5. Notice what you can feel, is the air cool/ warm?



Take a line for a walk!

Get a piece of blank paper. Choose a place to start. Put the pencil on the page and move it around making loops and crossing the lines you have already drawn. Continue doing this until the pattern is as complex as you like. Colour the shapes you have created.

What do I do if my child does not want to go to school?

Many children experience times when they show anxiety about or reluctance to go to school. Sometimes they might be so reluctant that they become anxious or upset about going or might refuse to attend. As parents it is very hard not to worry about these times but below there are some tips to help you to manage these times if you experience them.

Talking to your child;

- Give them time to express their worries and listen to them, without trying to fix them. Verbalise your understanding to ensure they feel heard and safe. You should try to validate and show empathy toward their worries but be careful not to confirm their anxieties. Do not minimise their feelings or tell them they are being 'silly' as their anxiety feels very real to them at this point.
- If they struggle to articulate their worries, or they struggle to talk to you directly, you can suggest that they write down or draw their concerns to share with you.
- Try to avoid leading questions – ask 'how do you feel about...' rather than 'are you worried about...'
- Model appropriate ways to deal with anxiety e.g. 'I feel a bit worried today' this validates and normalises their own feelings. You can then go on to model effective coping strategies e.g. 'I tried deep breathing for 30 seconds and it made me feel much calmer'.
- 'Don't look for the monster under the bed'. Reassurance is important but not in excess, and behaviours surrounding their anxieties should be carefully thought about e.g. if they're nervous about being separated from you then do not dwell on long goodbyes as it will only confirm their worries.

When preparing for school;

- Try to create and follow a simple morning routine which involves time to take part in calming activities together. Crunchy breakfast and drinks through straws will be calming and support a child to be more regulated.
- On the journey to school create fun distractions where possible - singing to favourite songs and making up funny rhymes in the car, singing and marching if you walk are ideal ways to do this.
- Be as positive about school as you can - if you appear anxious about school the child will feel that they should be worried about it too. It is hard to mask our worry but its so important that we remain as regulated as possible to support them to regulate and think more positively so that they will attend school.
- At the end of the school day check in with them about their day but be very careful not to focus upon the negative - for example you could ask them to tell you the best thing about their day and the trickiest.
- Acknowledge their feelings and show empathy but then give reassurance, "I can see that you are finding it difficult today, it must be very tricky for you. I am sure that your teachers and I can help you feel better when we get to school".

- Use positive praise and reward with your child and make sure you are validating the effort that they are making – notice every small step.
- When you get to school it is helpful if you have a short and predictable goodbye routine in place for how your child comes into school so they know what to expect. If they are incredibly anxious it may be possible from an adult in school to greet them - please discuss this with your child's teacher or SENCO.
- When it comes to school pick up time try your very best to make sure that they know who will be fetching them and for that person to be in the same place and on time each day.

Can I get more help?

Always speak to us at school if you feel that your child is having any anxieties or difficulties with attending school at all. Try to speak to us before they get to the point of not attending because the sooner that we can support you to find out why your child may be having difficulties and put some strategies in place to support the situation the better. Also we may be able to get further help outside support agencies like the SEMH Team or the Educational Psychology Service to support children with more significant difficulties.

If a crisis happens –and your child does not come into school...

- Show that you care about how your child is feeling and support them to regulate. If you feel that they are too distressed to stay at school and your strategies are not working you may decide that your child needs to be at home. We have to be very careful when we make this decision that we do not create an even larger gap between the child and school. If you decide that your child needs to be at home please let the school know as soon as possible as we are keen to reach out and support you.
- Try to stick to a similar routine as there would be in school if possible. Also try to avoid making staying home feel like a treat. This could encourage your child to want to stay home more often and make it more difficult for them to attend.
- Make a plan with your child and their school about how you can support them to go back into school. Take small steps for example a first step might be completing the morning routine. Next, it might be traveling to school but not going in. Then, try a morning or afternoon in school. Talk to your child about any feelings or concerns they have during the process. The idea is to help them to address their anxious feelings, one step at a time so as not to overwhelm them.

