



## Birchington CE Primary School

### Reducing Anxiety

In these uncertain times, you might be finding that your child is showing signs of anxiety. I hope that the following strategies will help to calm fears and provide comfort.

Below is a link for night-time anxiety with useful resources and further links

<https://copingskillsforchildren.com/blog/12-kid-friendly-strategies-to-calm-anxiety-at-night-from-a-child-therapist>

'The Invisible String' is a reassuring story for younger children who are worried about being alone:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJNwqtr8Oww>

#### **5 Ways to Calm an Anxious Child:**

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can actually be beneficial to children at times. Anxious thoughts trigger the brain to send out a warning signal for impending danger. When a child begins to cross the street without looking and an oncoming car is in the child's path, for example, the anxious response signals the child to step back to the curb.

For some children, however, anxiety can become excessive and interfere with normal daily living. Anxiety can make it difficult for children to interact with peers and establish friendships, separate from parents to attend school or other activities and make it difficult for children to learn. It can also negatively impact their sleep, their eating habits, and their physical health.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 25.1% of children have a lifetime prevalence of an anxiety disorder.<sup>1</sup> Not all children who experience anxiety have an anxiety disorder. Children experience a wide range of emotions and some stress is inevitable. Knowing how to cope with stress is an important skill for children.

All children are different, so the best strategy is to help children build a toolbox of coping skills. While one calming technique might work well for one child, it might not work well for another. Building coping skills requires some trial and error, and it's always a good idea to begin by asking your child to close his or her eyes and name three things that inspire a feeling of calm. More often than not, children know what they need or what calms them, but they don't know how to begin.

Try a few of these strategies to help your child learn to cope with anxious thoughts and feelings: -

### **Deep Breathing**

Children are often told to take a deep breath when they feel anxious, but learning to use deep breathing effectively actually requires practice. Daily deep breathing, especially when children are calm, helps children learn to control their breathing on their own. When they're anxious or under stress, using deep breathing will slow their heart rate and regulate their physical responses to anxious feelings.

Adding a visual to deep breathing makes it more fun for children and helps them remember what to do when they are under stress. Try these two strategies from *The Happy Kid Handbook*, to practice deep breathing in your home:

#### **Balloon Breathing:**

Ask your child to close her eyes and picture herself blowing up a balloon. First, she should choose the colour for her balloon. Second, explain that blowing too hard or too fast will cause the balloon to pop right out of her mouth. To inflate the balloon, she needs to inhale and exhale slowly. Third, cue her to breathe in for a count of four, hold for a count of four, and exhale into her balloon for a count of four. Repeat three times. Finally, ask her to "write" one worry on that balloon and let it fly off into the sky.

#### **Rainbow Breathing:**

This strategy often appeals to older children. Have your child lie down on the floor in a comfortable position and play some relaxing music in the background. Cue your child to inhale, hold, and exhale while you count out loud, but add one colour per breath. Tell your child that when she takes a red breath, you want her to visualise as many happy red things as she can (e.g. strawberries, watermelon, kites, etc.) Repeat for all seven colours of the rainbow. Talk about the rainbow or relaxing things she created while working on her breathing.<sup>2</sup>

One great way to practice deep breathing is to use the Stop, Breathe, & Think Children app each night before bed. This app takes children through guided meditation in short increments to help them understand and practice mindfulness for feeling calm.

### **Self-talk**

Children can learn to boss back their worries by reframing their thoughts and using self-talk to feel empowered. While it might feel strange for children to talk to themselves at first, bossing back their worries in an assertive voice helps children gain control over their anxious thoughts.

Practicing self-talk is easy and can be fun for children. Follow these steps to work on bossing back those pesky worries:

- State the anxious thought
- Talk about why that thought keeps popping up
- Come up with a reasonable counter statement
- Boss it back

If a child is afraid of dogs, for example, practicing might look like this:

*Dogs are scary because dogs bite.*

*I once saw a dog bite someone and that scared me.*

*Dogs can be friendly and are soft to pet.*

*Stop it worry brain! I'm not afraid of dogs! My friend has a friendly dog and I know I will be safe near that dog.*

## **Get Moving**

Daily exercise can help reduce the body's physical response to anxiety. One study found that children who practice yoga not only experience the uplifting effects of exercise immediately following the workout, but that the results last long after they are finished. <sup>4</sup>

Children also benefit from playing on team sports, taking exercise classes, and simply taking a walk through the park. Going for a nature walk, be it a hike along a trail or a walk through your neighbourhood, helps children reconnect with the world, calm anxious thoughts, and practice mindfulness.

## **Write it down; Tear it up**

Children need time to vent their feelings, but they also need to learn how to get their anxious thoughts out on their own. They need strategies they can use at school, and camp, or even on a sleepover.

Writing down anxious feelings is a great way to vent those negative emotions on paper. Encourage your child to write down his anxious thoughts and then tear them up and throw them away. The process of getting it down on paper and tearing up the paper helps children symbolically throw away their worries for the moment. Sure, those worries might come back another time, but once children learn that they can overcome them by bossing them back and throwing them out, they feel greater control over their anxiety.

## **Hug and Empathise**

Sometimes we underestimate the power of human touch. Physical touch releases oxytocin, a feel-good hormone, and reduces cortisol, a stress hormone. A long hug can help comfort an anxious child in the moment and restore a feeling of calm.

It also helps to empathize with your child during that hug. It's perfectly normal to experience stress and anxiety, and anxious children need to hear this often. Whisper empathic statements, hold your child tight and wait for the physical symptoms subside. Once your child is calm you can also talk about the fact that giving yourself a hug or holding your own hand (by clasping your hands together) can actually help you control the physical symptoms of anxiety.

## How can I help my child?

All children and young people get anxious at times, and this is a normal part of their development as they grow up and develop their 'survival skills', so they can face challenges in the wider world. We all have different levels of stress we can cope with - some people are just naturally more anxious than others, and are quicker to get stressed or worried. There are many ways you can help your child to manage their anxiety.

If you feel your child's anxiety is not getting any better or is getting worse, and your efforts have not worked, contact your GP to get professional support.

### These are things that can really make a difference:

- Talk to your child about anxiety, what is happening in their body and why it happens. Many children and young people don't know what they are feeling when they are anxious, and it can be very frightening and overwhelming. They might even think they are very ill or that they are having a heart attack.
- Help them to recognise anxious feelings so they can tell when they are becoming anxious and can ask for help.
- Tell your child it will be okay, and the anxiety will pass. It can be helpful to describe the anxiety as a wave to ride or surf that gets smaller after it peaks.
- Get your child to breathe deeply and slowly, in through their nose for three counts and out through their mouth for three counts.
- Distract them by focusing on something else.
- Give them a cuddle or hold their hand if they will let you - touch can be soothing.
- It can help to talk to your child about finding a safe place in their mind - somewhere that they feel relaxed and happy. It may be a grandparent's or friend's house or a holiday beside the sea which they can picture when 'wrong thoughts' come into their head or they are feeling anxious. Sometimes holding a memento, like a seashell or pebble, can help.
- If your child is feeling the need to check things or repeat certain actions, suggest they count up to 10 before they start checking as a delaying tactic. <http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk/relaxation/> has some good ideas.
- Encourage your child to notice what makes them anxious. Talking it through can help but your child could also try keeping a diary or a 'worry book'.
- Make a 'worry box'. Your child can write each worry down and post it in the box out of sight. Small children will enjoy decorating the box too. They can leave the worries in there for, say, a week to see if they were worth worrying about (if not they can be torn up). Alternatively, you could designate a specific 'worry time' for around 10 or 20 minutes, (but not too close to bedtime, or when the child is in bed), so worries can be saved up for that time. This gives the message that we are in control of their worries and not vice versa.

- Work on positive-thinking. Name their worst-case scenarios and think through together how to sort out the situation if it happens, e.g. 'I'm worried that we'll miss the bus.' 'What do you think we could do if that happens?' 'We could get the next bus'.
- Help them maintain a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise to reduce the levels of stress hormones, good sleeping habits, calm bedtime routines, limited screen or computer time in the evening, and a healthy diet.

### **Some relaxation exercises to try:**

#### **Calm Breathing**

This is one of the simplest types of relaxation exercise, and is sometimes known as deep breathing or belly breathing.

- Anxiety Canada, teaching calm breathing:  
[www.anxietycanada.com/parenting/how-teach-your-child-calm-breathing](http://www.anxietycanada.com/parenting/how-teach-your-child-calm-breathing)
- GoZen, breathing exercise:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxbdX-SeOOo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxbdX-SeOOo)

#### **Guided Relaxation**

This focuses on the mind rather than the body by using stories describing relaxing places that encourage feelings of calm.

- Cosmic Children, guided relaxation  
[www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8snGkhBF7njO0QvtE97AJFL3xZYQSGh5](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8snGkhBF7njO0QvtE97AJFL3xZYQSGh5)
- Green Child, selection of guided relaxation scripts:  
[www.greenchildmagazine.com/guided-relaxation/](http://www.greenchildmagazine.com/guided-relaxation/)
- Moodcafe, relax like a cat exercise:  
[www.moodcafe.co.uk/for-children-and-young-people/relaxation-for-children.aspx](http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/for-children-and-young-people/relaxation-for-children.aspx)

#### **Mindfulness**

Being mindful is about being fully aware of living in the present moment and can help calm the mind.

- Cosmic Children Zen Den, mindfulness films:  
[www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8snGkhBF7ngDp1oJtx5VcjwatxZn8xLK](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8snGkhBF7ngDp1oJtx5VcjwatxZn8xLK)
- New Horizons, guided meditation:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWOHcGF1Tmc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWOHcGF1Tmc)
- Smiling Mind, app for mindfulness:  
[www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-ap](http://www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-ap)

#### **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

This is used to help notice the difference between tension and relaxation in different parts of the body. At first it may feel uncomfortable or strange for the child or young person to be focusing on their body, but this will become easier and can become enjoyable over time.

- GoZen, progressive muscle relaxation exercise:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDKyRpW-Yuc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDKyRpW-Yuc)

## **Signs of Anxiety in Young Children:**

### **Physical Signs**

- Frequently complains of headaches or stomach aches, even though there's no medical reason for them
- Refuses to eat snacks or lunch at school
- Will not use toilets except at home
- Constantly tenses their muscles
- Can become restless, fidgety, hyperactive or distracted (even though they don't necessarily have ADHD)
- Starts to shake or sweat in intimidating situations
- Has trouble falling or staying asleep

### **Emotional Signs**

- Cries often
- Acts extremely sensitive
- Becomes grouchy or angry without any clear reason
- Is afraid of making even minor mistakes
- Has extreme test anxiety
- Has panic attacks (or is afraid of having panic attacks)
- Has phobias (about bees, dogs, etc.) and exaggerated fears (about things like natural disasters, etc.)
- Has obsessive thoughts or compulsive behaviours (finger tapping, hand washing, etc.)
- Is afraid people will find out about their learning and attention issues (more so than other kids with the same issues)
- Worries about things that are far in the future (for example, a third grader might worry about starting middle school)
- Is worried or afraid during drop-offs (at school, relatives' homes, etc.)
- Has frequent nightmares about losing a parent/carer or loved one
- Gets distracted from playing by his worries and fears
- Is starting to have meltdowns or tantrums

## **Behavioural Signs**

- Asks “what if?” constantly (“What if an earthquake happened?”)
- Avoids participating during circle time or other class activities
- Remains silent or preoccupied when he’s expected to work with others
- Refuses to go to school
- Stays inside, alone, at lunch or playtime
- Refuses to speak to peers or strangers in stores, restaurants, etc.
- Avoids social situations with peers after school or on weekends (extracurricular activities, birthday parties, etc.).
- Becomes emotional or angry when separating from parents or loved ones
- Constantly seeks approval from parents, teachers and friends
- Says “I can’t do it!” without a real reason