



Parent anxiety Handout

What are the signs of anxiety in children?

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. **You may notice that they:**

- Become irritable, tearful, or clingy.
- Have difficulty sleeping.
- Wake in the night/have bad dreams.
- Start wetting the bed.

In older children, you may notice that they:

- Lack the confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges.
- Find it hard to concentrate.
- Have problems with sleeping or eating.
- Are prone to angry outbursts.
- Have negative thoughts going around their head, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen.
- Start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or attending school.

Some physical symptoms might be:

- Dizziness
- Tiredness
- A noticeably strong, fast, or irregular heartbeat (palpitations)
- Muscle aches and tension
- Trembling or shaking
- Dry mouth
- Excessive sweating
- Shortness of breath
- Stomach ache
- Feeling sick
- Headache
- Pins and needles
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep (insomnia)



Anxiety 101: What You and Your Child Need to Know About Anxiety

Anxiety is normal!

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. It alerts us to threats, protects us from danger and helps us reach important goals. For example, it is normal to feel anxious when encountering a bear on a hike, or before taking an important exam.

Anxiety is not dangerous.

Although anxiety feels uncomfortable, it is temporary and will eventually decrease. The sensations we experience in an anxious situation are designed to alert and activate us. They are normal and part of our body's natural response mechanism. Our body is smart enough to know when to "amp up" and when to "calm down."

Anxiety is adaptive.

Anxiety helps us prepare for real danger, such as crossing a busy street. It can also help us perform at our best, and motivate us to study for an exam or practice for a big game. When we experience anxiety, it triggers our "fight-flight-freeze" response, and prepares our body to react. For instance, our heart beats faster to pump blood to our muscles, so we have the energy to run away or fight off danger. Without it, we would not survive. We need some anxiety.

Anxiety is part of life.

Trying to eliminate anxiety from your child's life is almost impossible, and even if it were possible, we are not sure you will have created a life worth living for your child. Thus, this website has been designed to provide you and your child with information, tools, resources, and more, to help your child become an expert on coping with anxiety. Since anxiety is everywhere, one of the greatest gifts you can give your anxious child or teen is the confidence and skill to tolerate anxiety whenever it occurs, and to continue living his/her life anyway!

Anxiety can become a problem.

Small doses of anxiety in certain situations are useful. However, when your child is worrying much of the time, avoiding fun activities, or refusing to go to school because s/he is scared or worried, anxiety has become a problem. Think of anxiety like fog: if it covers everything, makes it hard to see, stops you from doing what you usually do, and generally gets in the way, then it has likely become a problem.



Talking to Your Child about Anxiety

Children and teens may not recognise that what they have been experiencing is anxiety. Some youth think the way they are feeling and acting is normal or expected. Often, overly studious, or perfectionistic youth believe it is reasonable to study for hours on end, to keep their bedroom as neat as a pin, or to wash their hands excessively after every activity. Other youth think there is something “wrong” with them. Children may focus on the physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g. stomachaches). Teens may think they’re weird, weak, out of control, or even going crazy! These thoughts might make them feel even *more* anxious and self-conscious. Providing accurate information about anxiety can reduce confusion or shame. Explain that anxiety is a common and normal experience, and it can be managed successfully! You can do this in 3 clear steps. Once your child understands this information, he or she will feel more motivated to address his/her anxiety.

3 step approach:

Step 1: Encouraging Your child to open up about worries and fears

Start by describing a recent situation where you observed some signs of anxiety in your child.

“Yesterday, when Sarah came over, you seemed very quiet and you just sat beside me. It seemed you might have been a bit nervous about having a visitor in our house. What was that like for you?” Or, “I’ve noticed you’ve been hanging home on weekends, and don’t seem to want to go out like your brother does. What’s up?”

It can sometimes help to share with your child some things you were scared of when you were the same age (especially if you shared the same types of fears), and ask if s/he has any similar worries or fears. You can also describe situations that make other kids his/her age anxious, and gently inquire if this happens to your child too. Finally, you can try being direct by simply asking about what worries your child the most. Being specific can help your child sort through confusing fears and feelings. Support him/her by saying you believe your child, and that having these feelings is okay. Show acceptance of worry thoughts and anxious feelings. If you stay calm, it will also help your child stay calm.

Tip: Does hearing “*Don’t worry. Relax!*” help you when you’re anxious about something? It probably doesn’t comfort your child much, either. It’s important to acknowledge that your child’s fears are real. Your empathy will increase the chances that your child will accept your guidance and be motivated to work on reducing anxiety through the tools presented on this website.

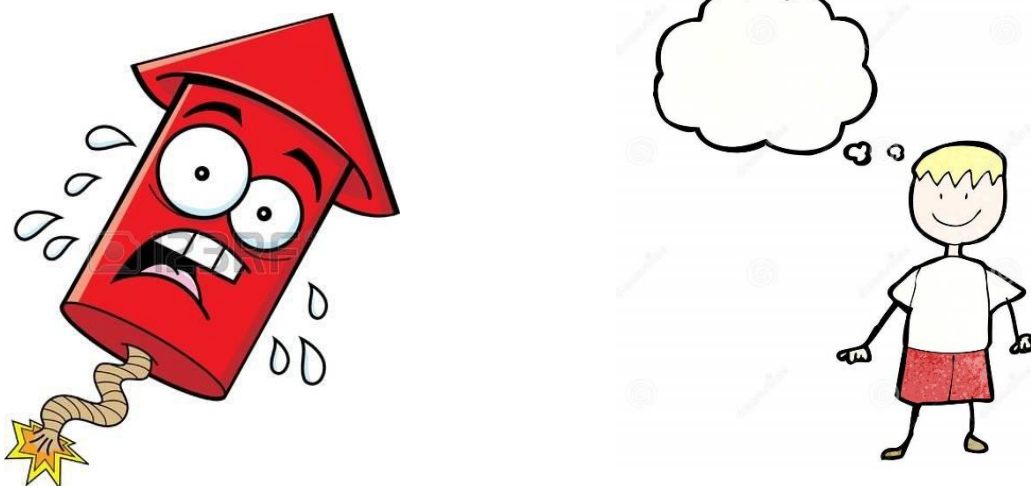


Step 2: Teaching your child about anxiety

If your child has a specific diagnosis, or if you believe that what your child is experiencing is most like one of the disorder descriptions, go to that page and use the information outlined there to educate and inform your child or teen. Share the facts listed under that disorder. If your child's symptoms fit with more than one disorder, share all the facts. Then describe the thoughts, physical sensations, emotions, and behaviours that are common to that disorder. Next present the common situations that can be affected by anxiety, as well as how anxiety looks different at different ages and stages. Finally, encourage your child to read the personalized stories provided in each disorder. Ask your youth whether any of the stories seem familiar, or sound like his/her experiences. As you present all of this information, encourage your teen to share personal examples. If your teen is reluctant, use your own experiences with anxiety, or recall shared examples through movies, stories, fables, etc.

Step 3: Helping your child recognize anxiety

The third and final step in talking with your teen is to help him/her understand the 3 ways that anxiety presents: physical feelings, thoughts and actions. Many youth will be familiar with at least 1 area, immediately recognizing the ways that anxiety has affected them.





Step 4: Addressing Excessive Reassurance Seeking

Children and teens look to their parents, teachers and trusted adults for information about the world around them, enabling them to reach expected milestones and mature into adulthood. However, for some children and teens, knowledge is insufficient; they also want reassurance and comfort that feared outcomes will not occur. Furthermore, they're dissatisfied with simple reassurances, such as "You've studied enough. You'll do fine," and seem to need unending examples, promises, and guarantees. This is called reassurance seeking.

Listening in on Reassurance Seeking...

- "Are you sure you locked all the doors? When exactly? Even the back door? What about the upstairs windows?"
- "Tell me again that it can't make me sick! Please. Just once more."
- "Did you wash your hands before you cooked dinner? How many pumps?"
- Calling mom or dad over and over again on the phone from school to make sure they are okay, and when they do not pick up, sending text messages instead.
- Asking parents to check homework repeatedly to make sure its perfect.
- Reviewing and re-reviewing with friends how the conversation went to ensure no mistakes were made.

Most parents already know that giving reassurance over and over again is not only exhausting but also doesn't work. Reassurance provision is like pouring water through a net; the water simply leaks out and you are left with an empty container. Obviously pouring more water in is not the solution, but what is? Anxiety experts have determined 2 methods that can work for many families:

1) the **all-at-once method**; and 2) the **gradual method**.

The 'all-at-once' method:

This method is also known as the "cold turkey" route. This works best for reassurance seeking that has not been occurring for long or only occurs in a few small areas. You can explain to your child that his or her anxiety bully is bossing him/her around and growing stronger by making your child gather an unending supply of reassurance, only to demand more the next day, and the next, and so on. Your child is being held hostage. Explain that you feel confident you can work together to reduce anxiety's power by eliminating reassurance once and for all. You might say:

"I know this is hard for you, but I don't want to feed your anxiety and help it grow. I'm open to ideas to support you or help you face this but from now on when you ask me _____ I will not answer that question."



The 'gradual' method:

This method works best for reassurance that has been a longstanding problem and occurs in more than one area, or for youth that find the idea of a "cold turkey" approach too hard. You and your child can use the Facing My Fears format to gradually roll back reassurance in a step-by-step, planned and predictable way.

Explain to your child that his or her anxiety bully is bossing him/her around but that you feel confident you can work together to create a multi-phase plan to get rid of reassurance. Starting with Phase 1, you can agree to give only 1 item of reassurance per situation or daily (you decide). But after a few days you need to move to Phase 2 of the *Facing My Fears* plan, which would be no reassurance at all. Each time a situation occurs and your child asks for reassurance, or seeks it out from other sources, you or the other adult (e.g. a teacher or coach) can offer one of these examples:

- *"You already know the answer to that question. I am not going to answer that."*
- *"It sounds like your anxiety is acting up. What could you do to boss it back? Could you try some relaxed breathing? Are there any helpful thoughts that you can tell yourself?"*
- *"What do you think? How could you handle that?"*

Once your child is comfortable at this level, you will then move to the final phase. This is where you generate some anxiety by creating doubt in your child. For example, your child asks, "Are you sure I can't get sick from touching that door knob?" and you respond, "I don't know. Maybe you will. Maybe you won't." Your child may become upset at first but remind him/her that s/he has many tools in the **M.A.P. (My Anxiety Plan)** to help them cope. Other examples of what to say include:

- *"Perhaps you won't be able to fall asleep at Cali's house. What would you do if that happened?"*
- *"Some people don't get accepted into college. Some people do. Life is full of surprises."*
- *"You might fail. But you might not. There is no crystal ball."*



What to Expect:

When you first stop giving reassurance, your child or teen will probably be very anxious. In fact, he or she might become very angry or frustrated and even throw a temper tantrum. This is normal. It is important that if you have decided **NOT** to give reassurance, that you stick with it! Children and teens often get very angry when they do not get the reassurance that they have come to expect. If you keep at it, and stick to the plan, your child will stop seeking reassurance from you and start managing anxiety in more healthy ways. During this early phase it is important that you give your child as much attention and support as possible in other ways. This can help your child when s/he must tolerate your refusal to provide reassurance when the anxiety peaks. It can also help you to feel more confident about what you are doing, if you can recall the fun you had with your child earlier that day when later on s/he is name calling what an awful dad you are for not answering a simple question.

Tips for Success:

To maximise success consider these guidelines:

- **Identify the 4-Ws: What, When, Where, and Who.** Be clear with your child about which fear and related reassurance you are targeting; when you will target it; where; and with which people. For example, “Megan, we have agreed that I will not answer any of your questions about getting sick (what) after school and in the evenings (when), at home (where), and this includes your dad and I, as well as your sisters (who).” Mum and Megan may decide that it is too high up on her Fear plan to tackle this reassurance out in the community, and for those situations, a single reassurance statement will be provided. Once she is doing well at home, then they will tackle community reassurances.
- **Get everyone on board:** If you plan to stop giving reassurance to your child, it is important that everyone in your child’s life agrees. If your child can simply get reassurance from someone else, this strategy will not work.
- **Make sure your child or teen understands and agrees with the plan:** When he or she is calm (not experiencing anxiety), explain what the plan is, and why you are doing it. Include him/her in designing a **My Fear Plan**, if needed.
- **Be consistent:** If you give in to your child’s demand for reassurance even once, your child has learned a powerful lesson: *“If I persist and ask enough, I’ll get the reassurance I want.”* This will strengthen the reassurance seeking. Be strong-stick to the plan!
- **Use rewards:** It can be hard for your child or teen to tolerate a reduction and eventual elimination of reassurance, so providing your child or teen with some extra motivation can help. Review the Rewarding Bravery tool for more ideas.

Coping with Back to School Anxiety

Anxious feelings are normal and expected in children and teens returning to school, changing schools, or for first-timers starting kindergarten. This transition can be stressful and disruptive for the entire family. In the days leading up to school, your anxious child may cling, cry, have temper tantrums, complain of headaches or stomach pains, withdraw, plead or bargain, and become irritable or angry.

Worries are Common

Anxious children and teens worry about many different school-related issues, such as teachers, friends, fitting in, and/or being away from their parents. Some common worries include:

- *Who will be my new teacher and what if s/he is mean?*
- *Will any of my friends be in my class?*
- *Are my clothes OK?*
- *Will I look stupid?*
- *Who will I sit with at lunch?*
- *What if I miss the bus?*
- *What if math is too hard for me?*
- *I can't remember anything I learned last year!*
- *What if something bad happens to mom or dad while I am at school?*



Although it is normal for your child to have worries, **it is crucial to have your child attend school**. Skipping school will only increase your child's fears because s/he never gets a chance to find out if his/her worries are valid. Furthermore, when children and teens stay home because of anxiety, they miss:

- Valuable opportunities to develop and practice social skills
- Important chances for success and mastery
- Being acknowledged and praised for talents
- Fostering close friendships with classmates
- Learning basic skills like reading, writing, and mathematics

5 Steps to Deal with Back-to-School Worries

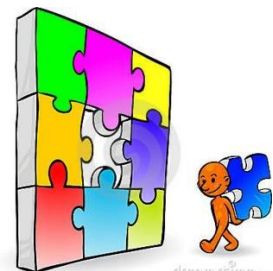
Step 1 Take care of the basics: Ensure your child is getting enough sleep, eating regular meals and healthy snacks and has daily exercise. When your child's mind and body are nourished, tackling school worries is easier. Plus, your child will be more likely to listen to you, and cope better when you insist on school attendance, if s/he has had a good night's sleep and a decent breakfast.

Step 2 Provide empathy: Listen to your child's concerns. *What is s/he worried about? Why does s/he expect that to happen?* Let your child share his/her fears and talk about what's on his/her mind. There may be good opportunities to simply listen to your child when you are in the car, standing in line at the store, at bath-time or during dinner. For some kids and teens this "casual" method of talking feels less intense and makes it easier for them to express themselves. For others, a private time with undivided attention feels better.

Step 3 Problem solve: Once you know what's bothering your child, you can start to develop a coping plan. Anxious youth are often poor problem solvers and doubt their ability to cope. Addressing your child's fear head on, by creating an active plan with concrete solutions, will significantly reduce the worry. For example, *"If (the worst) happens, what could you do?"* or *"Let's think of some ways you could handle that situation."* This gives you the opportunity to coach your child on how to copewith (and interpret) both real and imagined scary situations.

Step 4 Focus on the positive aspects: Once you have an understanding of what your child is afraid of, and a coping plan to address these fears, you can encourage your child to re-direct attention away from the worries towards the positives. Ask your child, *"What are three things that you are most excited about on your first day of school?"* Most kids can think of *something* good, even if it's just eating a special snack or going home at the end of the day. Chances are the fun aspects are simply getting overlooked by repetitive worries.

Step 5 Pay attention to your own behavior: For parents of younger children or children starting at a new school, it can be anxiety-provoking for parents to hand over care and responsibility of their child to teachers. Children take cues from their parents, so the more confidence and calm you can model, the more your child will believe s/he can handle this new hurdle. Be supportive yet firm. When saying goodbye in the morning, say it cheerfully – once! Ensure you don't reward your child's protests, crying, or tantrums by allowing him/her to stay home. Instead, in a calm tone, say: *"I can see that going to school is making you scared, but you still have to go. Tell me what you are worried about, so we can talk about it."*



School Preparation Timeline (You may not need to take all of these steps)

1-2 weeks before school:

- Gradually return your child to a school-day sleep and wake routine. If your child has been going to bed several hours later than usual and sleeping in during the holiday, roll the clock back by 15-30 minutes daily. For example, instead of going to bed at 11pm, help your child get to bed by 10:45pm on day 1, by 10:30pm on day 2, etc. Do this until your child is in bed and asleep at a reasonable time, and is able to get up and out of bed at the expected morning time, consistently. You may also need to ask everyone in the family to adjust to the new schedule, so your child isn't the only one making changes.
- Ask your child to help plan school lunches for the first week. You can go to the store together to shop for these items.
- Create a list of school supplies together and plan a fun shopping trip.
- For younger children, go to the schoolyard and play a few times before the first day of school. This can help your child feel more comfortable in his/her surroundings, making the transition back to school a familiar one.
- Teach and practice coping skills for your child to use to address specific worries. A complete list of tools can be found in the Complete Home Toolkit.

2-3 days before school:

- Go to school several times – walking, biking, driving, or taking the bus. For young children taking the school bus, describe and draw out the bus route, including where the bus goes and how long it takes to get to school. Talk about bus safety.
- For new students, take a tour of the school. Most schools are open a few days before the official first day as teachers are setting up their classrooms. "Peek in" and ask for a quick look around. Show your child the classrooms, the cafeteria, and the bathrooms. If possible, meet your child's teacher with your child present.
- Ask your child to help choose what s/he wants to wear on the first few days.
- Together with your child, pack up the schoolbag the night before, including a special toy or comfort item for younger children who are nervous about separating. A reassuring note in a child's lunch can also help ease separation anxiety.



The first day of school:

- Prepare a favourite breakfast to make the morning more fun.
- Decide who will take your child to school if this is an option. Having your child go to school with a friend for the first couple of days may feel less scary, or driving your child for the first week until s/he feels confident to take the bus.
- If your child has a history of separation anxiety in other settings, tell the teacher. Most teachers are experts in this area and have years of experience! You can also watch this helpful animated video about the *do's and don'ts* of managing separation anxiety:
- Most importantly, praise and reward your child for brave behavior. You might plan a fun meal at the end of the first day or week to celebrate your child's success. Use this time to listen to all your child has experienced in his/her first day/week.



When Anxiety is a Problem

Anxiety is a normal emotion that is essential for survival. Specialists in child development have noticed that certain fears are more common at certain ages and stages of life. Most parents are familiar with stranger anxiety, a common response in infants and toddlers when meeting new people. In addition, it is normal for some young children to be afraid of the dark or starting a new school/club, and for older children and teens to experience some performance anxiety in front of peers. However, for some youth it is as if they never grow out of the stage, and/or they become *more* rather than *less* afraid as they mature. As a result, this ongoing and excessive fear can begin to cause considerable distress or interference in everyday life. It can prevent them from engaging in age-appropriate activities or meeting expected developmental milestones. It is this combination of excessive anxiety **and** disruption in life that helps us understand that anxiety is no longer normal and has become a problem.

Common examples of **excessive anxiety and distress** include:

- Complaints of an upset stomach or other physical woes
- Constant reassurance seeking
- Crying before going to school, and often more difficulty returning to school after weekend breaks or school holidays
- Crying and tantrums when the child is worried
- Lashing out or screaming
- Trouble going to sleep or staying asleep

Common examples of **interference and disruption** include:

- Academic failure
- Keeping isolated or failure to join in and make friends
- Refusal to go on school field trips
- Resisting participating in new activities or trying new things
- School refusal

What to do if you are concerned:

- Talk to your child's class teacher or school SENDCo
- Talk to your GP

Resources

You may find the following resources helpful in supporting your child with anxiety:

- "Coping with an Anxious or Depressed Child" by Dr Sam Cartwright-Hatton
- www.anxietybc.com
- www.youngminds.org.uk
- www.anxietyuk.org.uk

References

please note the content of this handout has been derived from the following resources:

- www.anxietybc.com
- NHS.co.uk

