

Midlothian Educational Psychology Service

ANXIETY IN CHILDREN ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

Midlothian



Anxiety in Children - Advice for Parents and Carers

Anxiety is a normal, common and usually temporary part of childhood. Anxiety is not necessarily harmful or to be avoided.

In some situations, it can improve performance: for example, when running a race, playing at a music recital, presenting in class, or sitting an exam. At times, however, anxiety can become more intense and interfere with daily routines and activities.

The best support for children and young people with worries and concerns comes from those closest to them. Signs of anxiety in children include:

- lacking the confidence to try new things or being unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- excessive shyness, timidity and clinginess
- finding it hard to concentrate
- constantly seeking reassurance
- difficulties mixing with other children
- difficulties with sleeping or eating
- being prone to angry outbursts
- repeated nightmares
- bed-wetting
- repeated complaints of headache or tummy ache, being pale, clammy, shaking, feeling as though they will pass out
- disproportionate fears
- adherence to rigid routines
- difficulty accepting change

Some children hide their anxiety and can find it difficult to express their feelings in words, so that it is not always possible to know the causes of the child's distress. Sometimes challenging behaviour is the result of underlying anxiety rather than being intentional defiance.

Anxiety can be maintained by a vicious circle of thoughts, behaviours and feelings.

Why is your child anxious?

Children can be anxious and insecure after;

- a change in their lives, such as a house move, or starting a new school
- a distressing or traumatic experience, even if they observed someone else, particularly a family member, go through this experience
- frequent family arguments and conflict
- being reminded of past experiences which have been stressful or traumatic

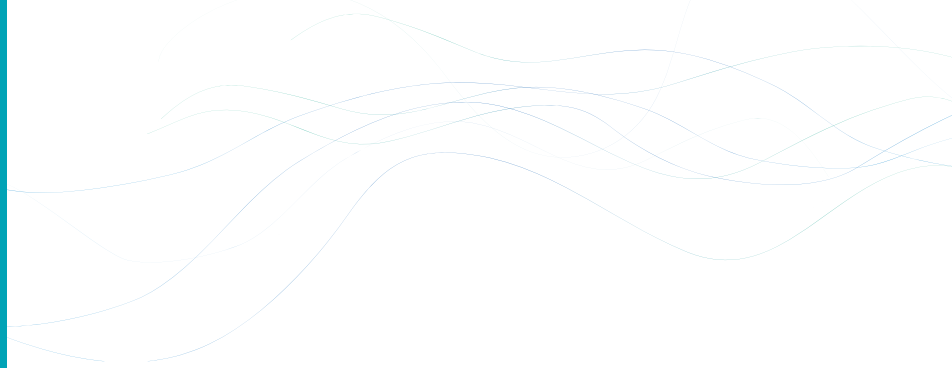
Anxiety can be maintained by a vicious circle of thoughts, behaviours and feelings. Thinking something bad will happen leads to physical changes in the body such as a faster heartbeat, sweating etc. and a feeling of being afraid and unsafe. This affects behaviour as the child tries to avoid the event or experience.

Avoidance of the thing the child fears helps to maintain anxiety over time. Increasing the exposure to what they fear gradually and in a safe way, helps children to overcome the anxiety. If you know beforehand that your child might be anxious about something (e.g. go into hospital or to the dentist), you can lessen the chance of your child being very distressed by giving positive experiences about the same situation first, e.g. letting them have a play in the dentist chair, looking at developmentally appropriate books or videos on the subject together, and listening non-judgementally if they are able to verbalise their worries.

Anxious children can appear irritable and demanding, older children can be provoking and/or withdrawn. You may need lots of patience and remind yourself that behind the difficult behaviour there could be high levels of anxiety and uncertainty. Adults too can present in some of these ways when they are feeling anxious. Even very able children who can discuss the situation and their feelings when calm, may not have the skills to cope so well when distressed.

Anxiety and attendance at school

Being in, near or thinking about school can trigger anxiety for a child or young person. It is important to approach the school with any concerns early on. The sooner a school and family work together to address the issues, the easier it is to intervene with a child showing signs of anxiety.



Sometimes, a child may complain of health problems when they are reluctant to attend school or lessons. It can be helpful to start a diary noting when the child is unwilling to attend school or complains of being unwell. This could identify patterns in behaviour which might help to understand any barriers to attending.

School staff will consider the following issues amongst others;

- where the child is most comfortable sitting in class
- which teachers or other members of staff the child feels most comfortable with
- how and when the child finds it easiest to enter school/class
- who forms part of their circles of support
- whether they can cope with being asked questions in class
- the child's need to use the toilet
- eating/moving around the school
- whether there is one subject, topic or activity which causes more anxiety than others (such as unstructured time, PE, maths)
- where they feel most comfortable in school if they cannot get into class
- put in a place an 'after the holidays return to school' plan
- ensure regular monitoring and review
- how to empower the child to take an active role in working with adults to make things better

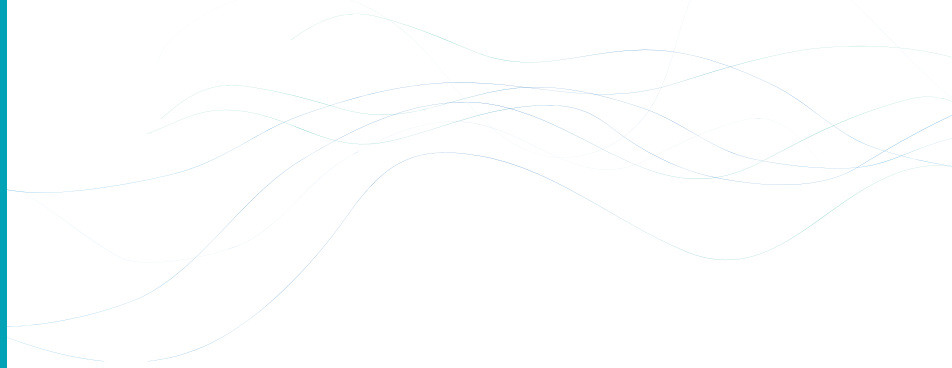
Meetings at school will include you, and sometimes your child. The focus will be on putting a plan together to address the sources of your child's difficulties. Keeping in mind that avoidance of the anxiety trigger maintains the anxiety itself, your child will be supported to be safely and gradually exposed to the things they fear.

Try to remember that what looks like challenging behaviour can stem from anxiety, and respond accordingly

What you can do to support your child

Relationships are key to managing emotional difficulties. As parents and carers, you are closest to your children and so your response is critical to helping them through it. The following general tips may be helpful;

- Try to remember that what looks like challenging behaviour can stem from anxiety, and respond accordingly
- Help your child return to a calm state when distressed, before starting any conversations about what happened and why. These talks should be aimed at your child's age and stage, remembering that when individuals are distressed they may 'regress' to an earlier stage and require communication pitched at that level
- Show your affection and love by being warm with your child. This will help them to feel safe. 'Happy' chemicals in the body are released as the result of regular, safe, physical contact between parents/carers and children
- Spend time with your children, giving them attention and feedback on what interests them, while encouraging them to consider new possibilities and interests. Play with them, one-to-one, and try not to let yourself be distracted by other things like work or electronic devices. Children feel confident knowing that they have parents' or carers' undivided attention, even if it is only for a short period of time, regularly and frequently
- Provide clear boundaries and expectations. This will help your children to be and to feel more secure
- Children of all ages find routines reassuring, so try to stick to regular daily routines where possible
- Follow through on your promises, and provide explanations on why sometimes a promise cannot be kept
- Be open to talking and listening with your children, even if this is difficult at times. Empathise and show you understand how they feel
- By listening actively and non-judgementally, and by acknowledging and validating their emotions, you will learn a lot from your child about their lives. If you are not critical, it will be easier for children to involve you



in their world and to share with you their thoughts and experiences

- If your child struggles to talk about their thoughts and feelings, it may help for you to commentate aloud about your own, their, or others' emotions in a similar situation
- Help your child create a worry character, or a worry box into which your child can put their concerns. This helps children to separate anxiety from themselves. It can also help to reduce the frightening physical responses children experience when they worry. It can support children to 'switch on' more rational thoughts
- If the child is old enough to understand, it may help to explain what anxiety is and the physical effects it has on our bodies. You can describe anxiety as being like a wave that builds up and then ebbs away again. Teach your child to recognise signs of anxiety in themselves and to ask for help when it strikes
- Telling your child not to be anxious does not stop them from being so. Instead, create a space and time for worrying so that your child can worry openly. This could be a regular activity lasting about 10-15 minutes (for example in the morning prior to coming to school; or at night-time before going to bed) when your child can release his/her worries in writing, or by drawing. These can then be put in a worry box. During 'worry time' there are no rules on what makes something a real worry – anything goes. After those 15 minutes, together you close the box and say good-bye to the worries for the day
- Once your child is calm, you can help them to plan and find solutions. This is better than avoiding the scary situation. An example of what parents can say is 'I hear that you're worried about this. What can you do that's going to help?' Create a plan which your child can refer to with your support or independently. This plan can include activities they can

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engage in to calm down (e.g. mindful breathing) and also activities which they do to cope with the anxiety-provoking situation

- Distraction can be helpful for young children. If they are anxious about going to nursery, playing games on the way there can help, for example 'Who can spot the most red cars on the way?'
- Children who experience anxiety which interferes with their daily function at school can be discussed with the school link Educational Psychologist. Where the child is experiencing severe physical symptoms, an initial consultation with the child's General Practitioner is recommended. If the symptoms are severe and persist in affecting life at home and at school, a decision might be taken to refer to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

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