



Supporting Children Who Experience Anxiety





Aims of the session:

- Understand anxiety
- Understand factors that create and maintain anxiety
- Strategies to help support children to manage their anxiety and worries





What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety is an emotion that we all feel from time to time.
- It is a normal response to a situation we find threatening.

When is Anxiety helpful?

- When we face a situation that threatens our physical safety. It prepares us to take action and keeps us safe (like quickly leave the building when the fire alarm sounds, jump out the way of a car)
- When we need motivation to do things that we might not want to do (like study for a test)

Other words for feeling anxious are:

- Stressed • Worried • Afraid • Scared

When does anxiety become a problem?

- Someone feels anxious all the time
- It causes a lot of upset or distress
- It interferes with everyday life (stops you from doing things you want or need to do).





Physical signs of anxiety

- When we feel anxious it can make our bodies feel different. This is called the Fight , Flight or Freeze response.
- These physical signs can be scary and confusing and this can make your child more anxious.
- But they are not dangerous. They help prepare the body for action.

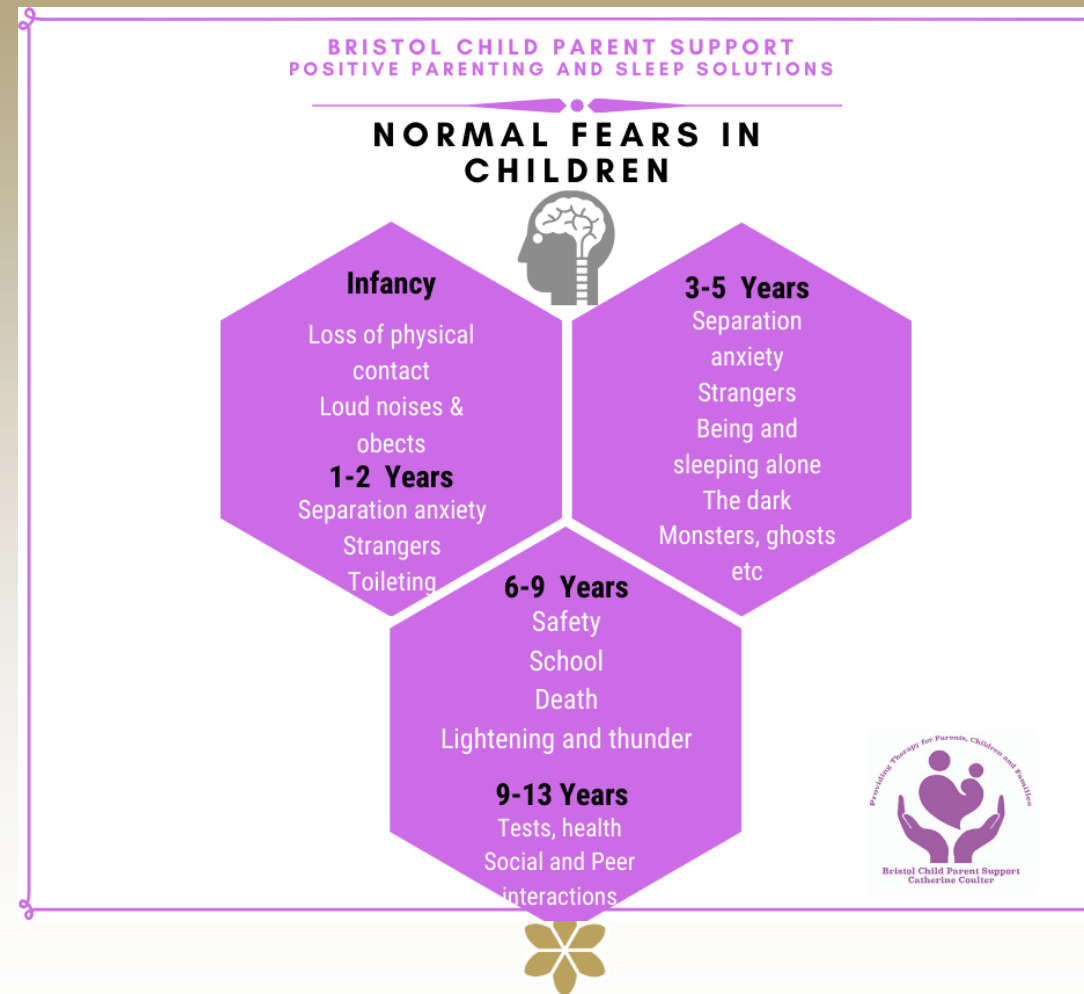




$$\text{Anxiety} = \frac{\text{Overestimation of threat}}{\text{Underestimation of ability to cope}}$$



Common Childhood Worries by Developmental Age





Signs of Anxiety in children

- Irritable, tearful or clingy
- Difficulty sleeping
- Wake in the night
- Bed Wetting
- Bad dreams
- often have stomach aches or headaches

In older children you may notice that they:

- lack confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping or eating
- have angry outbursts
- have a lot of negative thoughts, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or going to school





Discussion

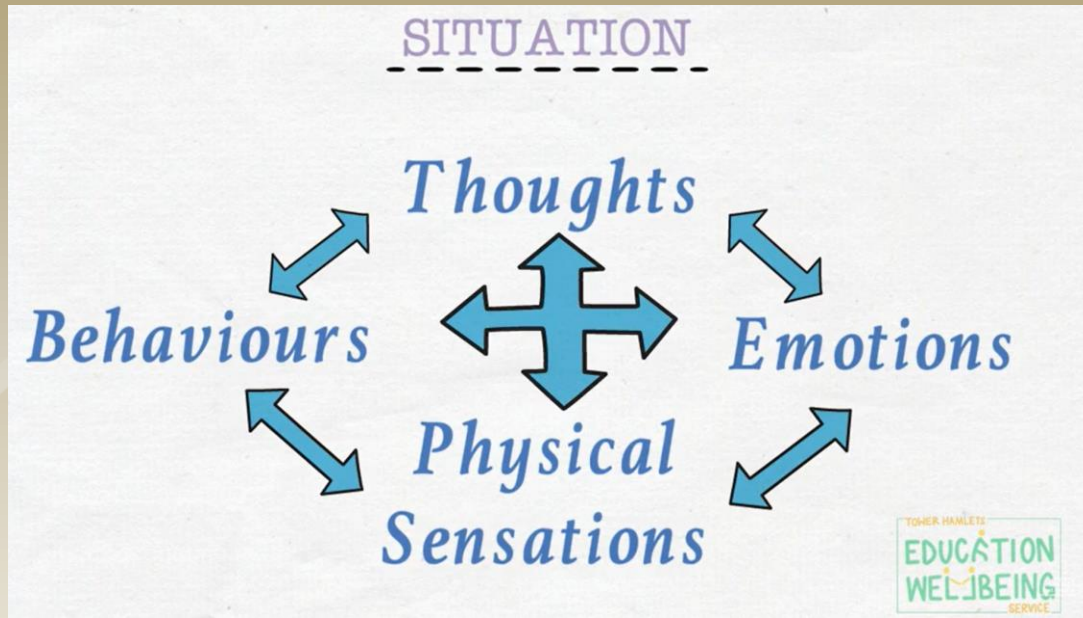


- What makes your child anxious?
- Are they specific or general worries?
- What signs/behaviours do you see?





The Anxiety Cycle





Managing Our Own Responses

Common responses that can keep anxiety going:

Adults stepping in and taking over

Avoiding or leaving situations

A child hearing about adult worries

Worried facial expressions

Checking if they are ok lots

How adults cope with their own anxiety

Adult responses can unintentionally send messages that a child is not OK, can't cope or there is something to be worried about.



When a child's anxiety gets bigger, adults want to do more to help them feel better and protect them.

- Body Language
- Anxiety can lead to big emotions and behaviours - Give Time and Space.
- Anger Firework
- Draw or write the worry
- Worry Time

Anxiety Traps



When we see our children worried or upset we understandably want to protect them and make them feel better.

We can unintentionally reinforce their anxiety

Children may engage in behaviours to protect themselves against danger or to prevent a feared event.

- Avoidance or Escape
- Reassurance
- Safety behaviours



To overcome anxiety, children need to face feared situations.

This helps them learn that:

- What they worry about may not happen. There is no actual danger.
- What they worry about isn't as bad as they thought it would be.
- Even though they might feel anxious, they are able to cope.
- Anxiety naturally reduces when they stay in the situation

Reassurance




- Asking a trusted adult for their feedback. This includes asking questions about potential dangers and safety.
- It is normal and helpful for adults to provide reassurance and to support children to learn.
- **Limited amounts of reassurance are normal and can be helpful. It can encourage your child to do something they haven't done before.**

Children who experience anxiety often seek lots and lots of reassurance and ask the same questions over and over again.

Providing lots of reassurance can be **unhelpful because:**

- Your child keeps needing more and more. It's never enough
- It relieves their worries only in the short-term but doesn't change or stop them in the long-term
- It keeps your conversation and your child focussed on the worry.

It is not about not responding, it is about **responding differently:**

- Limiting the amount of reassurance you give
- Asking your child questions, rather than giving answers
- Showing empathy by validating your child's feeling
-  Suggesting a more helpful way of coping with their worries and anxiety.



Avoidance and Escape

Avoidance is a natural, instinctual flight response

As a parent/carer, it is natural that you don't want to see your child distressed. You want to protect them from situations that make them feel anxious and may therefore unintentionally end up helping them avoid.

Some common ways we unintentionally fall into the avoidance anxiety trap :

- Taking on responsibilities that would otherwise fall to the child
- Changing family routines so the child doesn't have to do something
- Picking up their child early
- Letting their child stay home/not go to things that make them

- When we avoid situations we do not have the chance to learn what the situation is really like and that we are able to cope.
- We are also not able to learn and practice coping strategies that help us to get through situations we find anxiety-provoking



Safety Behaviours



Safety behaviours are subtle behaviours that your child uses to prevent their fears from coming true or to feel more comfortable in situations they feel anxious about.

Some examples of safety behaviours

- Frequent hand washing or asking parents/carers to wash their hands
- Sitting near the door so they can escape if needed
- Overpreparing for tests
- Taking a soft toy or other object

When your child uses a safety behaviour and their fears don't come true, they might believe the safety behaviour 'prevented' their fears.

Over time your child can become dependent on safety behaviours and feel even more anxious when they can't use them.

Safety behaviours also stop your child from directly testing their fears and worries will continue to pop up in the future.



Discussion





Strategies for Managing and Overcoming Anxiety







Creating an emotional wellbeing toolbox

Play with a fidget toy

Do some colouring

Stretching



5 Finger Breathing



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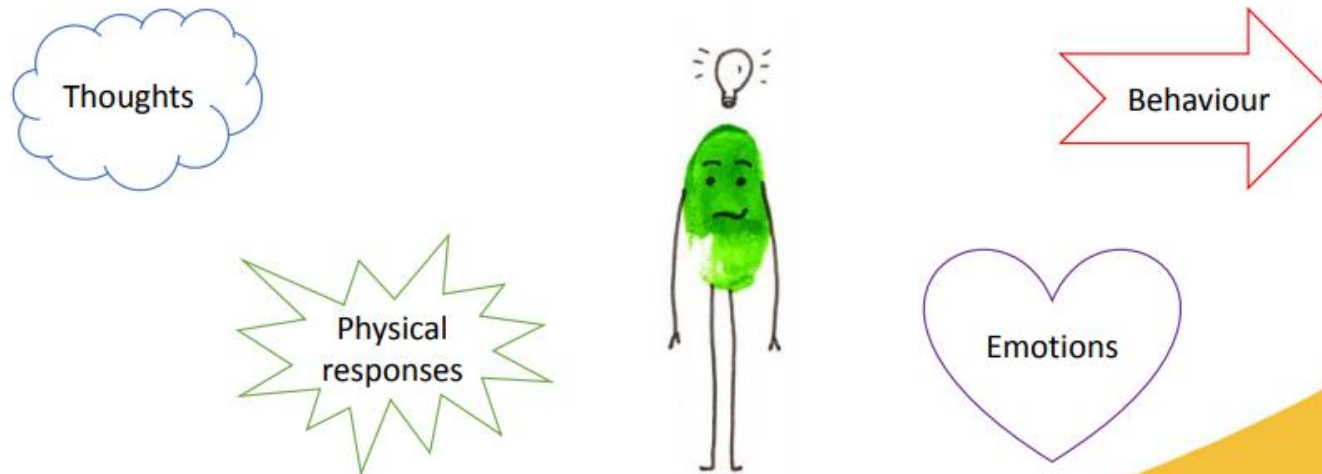
Play with playdough (aroma dough)



Thinking back to the Hot Cross Bun



We can help by intervening at all 4 levels...

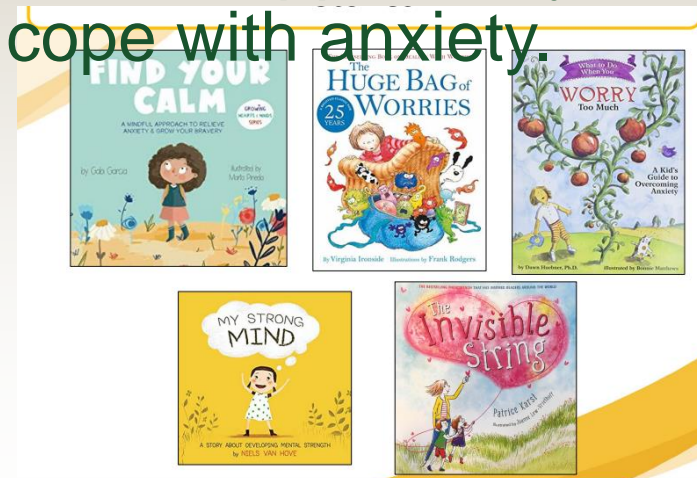




Emotions

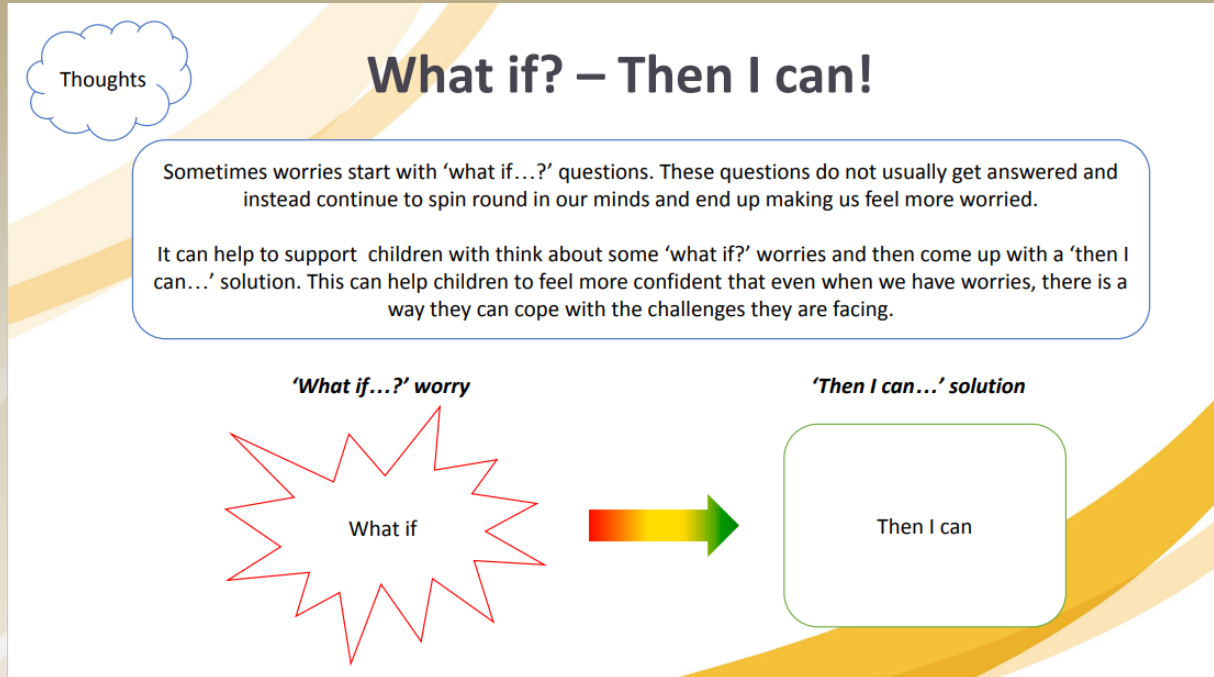
- Have conversations around emotions
- Time to Talk – maybe while doing an activity
- Listening is the best support you could offer
- Wonder aloud about what might be happening for the child
- Name feelings around events if they approach you to talk.
- Encourage to draw or write down their worries

As well as talking about your child's and your own feelings, reading books with a character who experiences anxiety can be beneficial. It's a way for children to learn that lots of other people also worry and that they are not the only one who experience anxiety. It can also provide an opportunity to talk about ways to cope with anxiety.

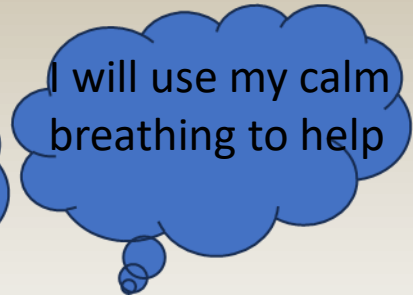
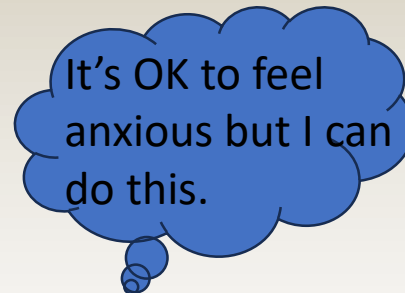




Thoughts



- Take your thoughts to court!
- Remind of previous success
- Reframe Thinking using Coping Thoughts



Physical responses

Relaxation is important because if our bodies are calm and relaxed, this makes it easier for our minds to recognise we are safe, we are not in danger, and therefore frees us up to think more helpful thoughts



Physical responses

Deep breathing

Deep breathing is another excellent way to help re-set our bodies and keep them calm when we are feeling worried. Giving children something concrete to focus can make this easier.

5 Finger Breathing

Remember to remind them to breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth

Calm Images

Imagine a place that is calm and relaxing. This could be a real or imaginary place or a happy memory.

It might be a garden, tropical island, forest or their bedroom. Make it really detailed by imagining it in lots of detail.

What would you see?
What would you hear?
What would you smell?
What would it feel like?

Calm images can be used anywhere. It turns down the physical signs of anxiety and takes our attention away from anxious thoughts.

Physical responses

54321 Grounding

When we are feeling worried we tend to be worrying about something that has happened in the past or jumping way in to the future. It can be helpful to reconnect to the present moment and environment. One way to do this is through our senses.

The 5 4 3 2 1 exercise is a grounding activity that invites us to notice:

- 5 things we can see
- 4 things we can touch
- 3 things we can hear
- 2 things we can smell
- 1 thing we can taste

We like to focus on other things!

Distraction

DIXIE & DEXTER

Search the room:

Think of a category and search the room for it. For example, look for:

- Everything that is a ... colour,
- Everything that is a ... shape,
- Things that feel of...
- Things made of...

Stating facts:

Think about and name facts about what is going on right now. For example, think:

- My age is...
- My name is...
- I am wearing...
- The weather is...

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

	Take 3 Deep Breaths
	Squeeze your foot for 5 seconds, Relax
	Squeeze your leg for 5 seconds, Relax
	Squeeze your stomach for 5 seconds, Relax
	Shrug your shoulders for 5 seconds, Relax
	Squeeze your arm & hand for 5 seconds, Relax
	Squeeze your whole body for 5 seconds, Relax
	Take 3 Deep Breaths





Behaviour

- Facing your fears can be really hard. As well as using coping strategies, it can also help to break down feared situations and build up to face them in smaller steps. This is called **Graded Exposure**.



Ultimate goal: To pat Grandad's dog

Step	Fear Rating	Reward
Put down some food for the dog, watching him close by	8	Watch favourite TV programme
Sit in the same room as the dog	6	Pizza night with family
Watch Grandad's dog in the garden through the window on my own	5	Cycle ride with Dad
Look at a dog from a distance in the park, with mum	4	Bake a cake with Mum
Watch a video of a dog	3	Ice cream

What did I learn?



Hints and Tips for Graded Exposure



- Post-it notes allow for flexibility when making your ladder
- Start small and build on the momentum of success
- Be aware that some steps may take longer to do
- Review steps if the 'jump' feels too big. Be flexible and adapt the plan. If a step has been too big or overwhelming, it is important that it is not experienced as failure. Does the step need to be broken down further
- Get creative! Make the steps fun where possible
- Plan ahead with rewards and make them appropriate for short, mid and long term goals. And Praise! Praise! Praise!
- Consider making your own ladder to show overcoming anxiety is normal and

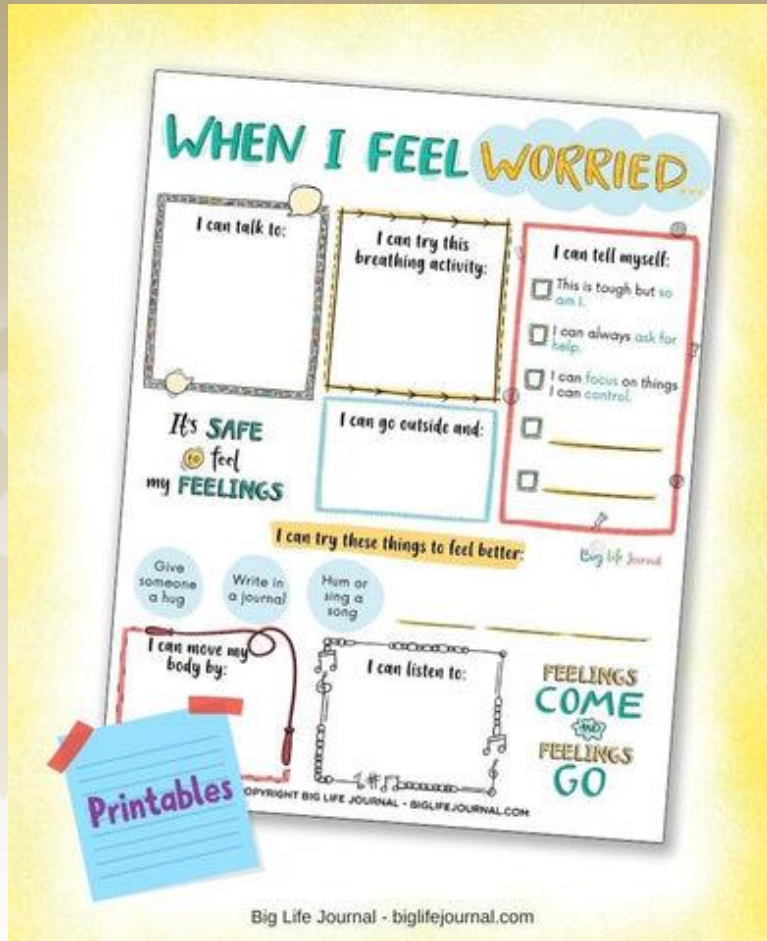
Reward, Repeat and Adapt!

Discussion





Make A Plan



M.A.P
My Anxiety Plan

I know I'm anxious when...

Ways to keep myself and my space safe...

Ways to distract myself...

Things that help me when I feel this way...

Some safe people I can reach out to are...

www.anxietymedic.info



Thank you for coming!

