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Mental Health

Parent guide one: Gathering information about your child's experience of anxiety

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*This resource compliments the practice paper,
Supporting parents of pre-teen children with mild-
moderate anxiety.*

The more you know about your child's experience of anxiety, the more informed you are to make decisions about the kind of support and help you choose for them. Information in this guide can be used to help you and your practitioner make decisions and move through the decision tree together.

General tips for learning about your child's experience:

- Listen to your child when they talk to you about their experience of anxiety and seek to understand what it is like for them. When you know the types of situations that your child is worried about, you will be in a better position to help them to cope with these situations.
- When your child says that they are scared, nervous or worried, acknowledge their fears and worries rather than dismissing or minimising them. In a warm tone you could say something like, "Your heart is racing really fast and the anxiety is telling you that other kids will laugh at you when you do your talk today".



Tips for gathering and recording specific information

Below are some suggestions on how you can ask questions and encourage your child to share their experience of anxiety – when it happens, how it feels in their body, what their anxious thoughts are and how they cope with those feelings.

Rather than your child talking about anxiety in general, ask them to describe specific examples of feeling anxious. You can begin this by saying something like, "Tell me about the last time you felt really sick in the stomach. Where were you and what was happening around you?"

Recording a range of experiences over one or two weeks can reveal a pattern of anxiety and helps determine the strategies that may help your child. You can record this information using the following table, or create your own.

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When anxiety happens

Getting a picture of when your child feels anxious is important. To gather this information, ask your child to describe what was happening just before they started to feel anxious. For example:

- "What happened just before you had these feelings in your body?"
- "What was happening around you?"
- "Can you tell me what other people were doing or saying?"

Physical experience of anxiety

The physical experience of anxiety can be overwhelming and scary. However, it's children's efforts to **avoid** these feelings that lead them to continue to experience anxiety in the longer term. Following these steps can help you to get a better understanding of your child's experience.

1. You may start off by saying, *"The last time you were feeling so worried that you thought you needed to run out of the classroom, what did your body feel like?"*

2. If your child is having trouble describing their experience, they may be able to draw it instead.

You could say, *"See this person here? Can you draw where you felt nervous in your body?"*



3. Then ask your child to rate how intense or big that feeling is on scale of 0-10, where 0 is calm (no anxiety) and 10 is terrified (highest anxiety imaginable).

You could say *"When are you the calmest? Let's rate that a 0. What is the most terrifying thing you could think of? Let's rate that at a 10. The last time you felt like you were going to faint, and everything went quiet, how intense was the feeling on a scale of 0-10?"*

Feeling scale



4. Ask your child how often they have these feelings and how long they last for.

You could say:

"When did you first start feeling like this?"

"How long does it take for you to feel calm again?"

"What helped you feel calmer?"

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Anxious thoughts

Children who experience anxiety will often have thoughts about events or situations in the past that didn't go well, or worries about what may happen in the future. The thoughts often start with a "what if..." question and can be about how the child may handle a challenge, about what other people may do, or what may happen to other people (particularly friends and family members).

To understand a child's thinking you could:

1. Ask your child what is going through their mind when they are feeling anxious. It's helpful to start with a recent specific situation when the child felt anxious and go from there.

You could say:

"So, you have told me what happens in your body. Now, what was going through your mind when you were in the library and the kids were looking at you?"

"What thoughts did you have at the time?"

"What did you think might happen?"

"What did your anxiety tell you about those kids?"

"What did the worries want you to believe?"

"What were you saying to yourself at the time?"

2. Share your own (age-appropriate) experience of feeling worried.

"You know how I was telling you how I sometimes get worried meeting new people? Well these are the types of thoughts that I have had before:

- 'People won't like me.'
- 'Everyone will already have friends there and they will be busy talking to other people.'
- 'What if I say something and they think I'm an idiot?'

The last time you felt worried, what kinds of thoughts did you have?"

It's important you don't share a big or scary worry with your child, such as, "I thought grandma might die when she had her operation", as this will likely increase their worry.

3. Share the experience of other children

"I know that other kids sometimes have worries about talking in front of their class too. They might think:

- 'What if I get up there and my mind goes blank?'
- 'What if the video I'm sharing doesn't play?'
- 'What if the other kids think it's stupid?'
- 'What if the teacher hates it and I fail?'

What thoughts run through your mind when you are feeling anxious?"

Understanding how a child is thinking will help you to gently and curiously enquire about the truthfulness and helpfulness of these thoughts. More on this is provided in [Emerging Minds' Supporting your child guide](#).

Anxious behaviour

Anxiety-related behaviour is often characterised by avoidance of the situation that brings on anxiety. Some types of anxious behaviour were outlined earlier in this guide. Your child's experience of anxiety will be unique to them and may be difficult to recognise at first. The behaviour may be your child saying they are too sick to go to school, or spending a lot of time on social media or gaming rather than doing schoolwork they find hard. Or maybe your child is frequently volunteering to help teachers during lunch time, so they can avoid anxious thoughts and feelings around asking peers to hang out with them.

To get a good understanding of your child's experience of anxiety, you could ask your child:

- what they do when they feel worried or nervous
- what has helped them cope with anxious feelings.

Over a couple of weeks record how your child responds to situations that seem to bring on anxiety. This will help you to get an idea of any patterns of behaviour. It is helpful to write down:

- what your child did – what words they used, what they did with their body
- what was happening just before you saw this behaviour – including the people nearby and events taking place
- what other things might have been happening on that day/time that could make your child more likely to feel nervous or anxious.

Rate the level of disruption or intensity the behaviour has on your child on a scale of 1 – 10.

After a couple of weeks, review your notes and see if you notice any patterns in your child's behaviour. Share what you have noticed the next time you see your practitioner.

See [Parent Guide Two: Supporting your child](#) for more information.

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