

Emerging Minds.

National
Workforce
Centre for Child
Mental Health

Parent guide two: Supporting your child

Catherine Murphy and Elly Robinson,
Parenting Research Centre

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

There are a number of actions parents can take to help their child decrease and manage their feelings of anxiety. This guide provides some information on strategies that you can try with support from your practitioner. Trying one or two of these to begin with is a good start. Remember that anxiety can get worse before it gets better, so keep persisting to give the strategy time to work.



Validate your child's experience

- Parents can validate and normalise their child's experience by saying something like, "I can see why you would be worried about making new friends at your new school. I know other kids feel worried about making new friends too."

Recognise the opportunities to develop your child's knowledge about anxiety

- Share basic information about anxiety with your child. You could share the information provided in this guide with them, or visit the [MindShift](#), [ReachOut](#), [Raising Children Network](#) or [Beyond Blue](#) websites.

Show hope and optimism that things can be better. For example, "I know it seems really scary now, but we're going to work together to find ways for you to feel calmer, more in control of your anxious feelings and less worried."

- Conversations about anxiety are best had when you and your child have time to talk and are both calm. Knowing how your child likes to express themselves will determine where and when you might talk about anxiety. Some children like to be doing something, like walking or drawing while talking. Other children may prefer to talk during a quiet time at home. For older pre-teens, going for a drive can be helpful – they don't need to make eye contact and you know how much time you have together in the car.

Build your child's skills to cope with anxiety

Gently encourage your child to do what they feel anxious about

While protecting children from feeling anxious can be a natural parenting response, it's important parents encourage their children to gradually do the things that they are worried about. This will help the child to learn effective coping strategies and to understand that things may not be as bad as they imagined. In turn, children will get used to doing things that at first worry them, rather than avoiding these situations (which can cause anxiety to escalate).

Limit the amount of reassurance you provide to your child

Some children will repeatedly seek reassurance from their parent or other adults when they feel anxious. At first, parents think providing reassurance will lower anxiety. However, for children experiencing anxiety this often just leads to more and more questions, until the

This resource was co-produced with:



The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program. The NWC is led by Emerging Minds and is delivered in partnership with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), the Parenting Research Centre (PRC), the Australian National University (ANU) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP).

Visit our web hub today!

**Emerging
minds.
com.au**

October 2019

parent and child find themselves in a never-ending cycle of 'Question and Answer'.

Rather than responding to the many questions, you could use this opportunity to start a conversation about anxiety and how your child is going to handle the situation:

"I'm wondering if you are feeling worried about going on the school camp in a couple of weeks. What do you think? I wish I could answer all your questions. This is going to be one of the situations where we won't be able to predict or plan for everything. Let's just plan for what we know right now, but remembering that things sometimes change – and that's okay".

During this conversation it's important not to get pulled into your child's many possible scenarios or decide to let your child avoid the situation. Instead, focus on what is known and then reinforce the skills your child already has to handle that. For example:

"There are other times you've been to new places. How did you handle those times?"

"If you do start to feel anxious during group time, what can you do to help yourself feel calmer and able to join in with the others?"



Praise and acknowledge your child's efforts

Praise your child for doing something that they were anxious about, such as, *"Good on you for joining the club, even though your friends weren't going."*

Reinforce your child's attempts to use one of the skills listed below. For example, *"That's great that you identified that thought was not helping you."*

Calm the body

Exercise

It's common to have a build-up of tension in our body when experiencing anxiety. Building enjoyable physical activities into your child's and family's regular routine can help your child feel calmer in their body.

Relaxation strategies

Pick a time when your child is calm to introduce these strategies. Let your child know that learning to relax takes practise, just like any other skill. Relaxation exercises are not just for helping you in times of stress; they can be done regularly to help you keep calm and to notice the early physical signs of anxiety.

Introduce your child to relaxation strategies and ways to lower feelings of anxiety. For example: *"These exercises encourage us to pay attention to how stress or anxiety feels in our bodies and help us to gradually feel calmer".*

Examples of relaxation exercises include:

- **progressive muscle relaxation** – gradually relaxing different parts of the body
- **breathing exercises** – bring attention to the breath, gradually slowing and deepening the way we breathe
- **visualisation** – visualising a relaxing and peaceful experience or place.

There are a number of apps and websites that support parents and children to learn these strategies, including [Smiling Mind](#), [MindShift](#) and [Headspace](#). [See a full list in our Resources section.](#)

Gently challenge anxious thoughts

Once you have some examples of your child's thoughts, let your child know that while thoughts are powerful in the moment, not all thoughts are true or helpful. In fact, some thoughts hold us back from doing what we really want to and what is good for our development and wellbeing.

For example, your child may really want to go on a holiday to visit family but is sure that the plane will crash, and everyone will die. They may need some information about how safe flying is and what they will enjoy about seeing family.

Gently encourage your child to look for the evidence for their thoughts

For example, you might say, *"Your thought, 'no-one likes me' – that's a powerful thought. I'm wondering how true that thought is though. You have mentioned the names of some people you spend recess with; I wonder if they may like you. What do you think?"*

Gently encourage your child to think about the helpfulness of their thoughts

Some thoughts may be true, but they don't help us to do what we need to do or act in our best interests. You could ask, *"You're really worried about humans stuffing up the planet and what it means for the future. That's a big worry to carry! I'm wondering what impact that thought is having on you? How much does this worry help you to do things that are important to you?"*

While asking these questions, be genuinely curious about the child's response. Try not to get into a battle over which thoughts are 'real'. Anxious thoughts can be very compelling in the moment, even if they may seem irrational to other people. Over time you will be encouraging your child to be a "detective" and assessing if their anxious thoughts are true, helpful or kind.

This resource was co-produced with:



The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program. The NWC is led by Emerging Minds and is delivered in partnership with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), the Parenting Research Centre (PRC), the Australian National University (ANU) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP).

Visit our web hub today!

**Emerging
minds.
com.au**

October 2019

You may find it helpful to record these thoughts in a table like this:

Anxious thought	How true is that thought on a scale of 1 - 10? What's the evidence for this thought?	How helpful and kind is this thought? Does it help me to the things that are important to me?	Helpful thought
People will stare at me	5/10 I do feel like other people look at me sometimes	It's not helpful at all because it stops me from doing dance and drama which I love.	They are probably thinking about other things, not me. Even if they are looking at me, I don't know what they are thinking. It might be good things.
I'll get on the court and I won't be able to catch the ball, and everyone will think I'm a loser. I should just say that I can't play.	3/10 I haven't actually heard the team calling other kids losers	It doesn't help me and it distracts me from focusing on the game.	I've been practising my skills. Other kids miss the ball too sometimes and I don't think they are losers.

See yourself as a coach to your child and model for them how to cope with anxiety

Parents are important role models for their children when it comes to handling life's challenges and worries. If you are worried about something, share that with your child (if age-appropriate) and then let them know how you are going to solve the problem by not avoiding your anxious feelings. By sharing your experience, you are normalising feeling anxious, but also showing that it's possible to do things we are anxious about.

For example, you could say, *"My boss sent me an email yesterday saying she wanted to meet with me today. I'm a bit worried about it, because she doesn't usually make meetings at late notice and I'm worried I've mucked something up at work.*

The thing is, I've predicted that bad things will happen at these meetings before and I've been wrong every time. So, this time, I'm just going to go in with an open mind and say to myself, 'the last time I met with my boss she was happy with how things were going, so there's nothing to suggest I've done anything wrong.' Even if there is a problem, I'm sure I can work through it."

This resource was co-produced with:



The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program. The NWC is led by Emerging Minds and is delivered in partnership with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), the Parenting Research Centre (PRC), the Australian National University (ANU) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP).

Visit our web hub today!

**Emerging
minds.
com.au**

October 2019