

## Parent guide 1: Anxiety in children

Anxiety is our body's normal response to a perceived threat. There are times when feeling anxious can be useful and helpful. For example, someone worried about being late for a job interview may set their alarm to get out of bed earlier than usual, choose the clothes they are going to wear to the interview the day before, and allow extra time to travel to the interview. This is a time when feeling a bit anxious gives us the focus and energy to plan ahead.

Feeling anxious can also protect us from danger. For example, when someone sees a snake, feeling anxious may mean that they move far away from the snake to protect themselves or stay very still until the snake moves on. This is called the 'flight, fight and freeze' response, and our bodies activate this response when we are in danger. While this response is important for our survival when we are in danger, for some people this response is activated when they are not in immediate threat, impacting on their wellbeing.

Experiencing anxiety every now and again is a normal part of the human experience. Most of the time these feelings come and go, and do not last long. Anxiety becomes a problem when the feelings persist, impacting on our wellbeing and preventing us from doing things that are important to us.

Children also experience anxiety. Feeling anxious occasionally is a normal part of growing up and learning about the world; as children develop, it's common for them to feel anxious about a variety of situations, objects and people. Pre-school aged children may be anxious about changes in their routine, separating from their parents and spending time with unfamiliar people. In the early school years, children may feel anxious about the dark, monsters and ghosts.

When children have worries that don't go away, get worse or interfere with their daily life, it could be a sign they are having problems with anxiety.



If these problems persist and are not addressed, these children are more likely to experience anxiety issues during adolescence and later in life (Wehry et al, 2015).

The good news is there are techniques that professionals, parents and children can use that improve anxiety in young children. Some of these strategies are shared later in this resource.

### What are the signs of anxiety?

When we experience anxiety, our body, feelings, actions and thoughts are affected. Children experience anxiety in a range of ways and at first it can be hard for adults to recognise. Sometimes children's experience of anxiety will be interpreted as 'naughty' or 'defiant' behaviour. When adults are curious about their child's emotional world, they seek to understand the purpose of their child's behaviour. Behaviour that appears to be 'defiant' might be a child's attempt to escape/avoid an anxiety provoking situation. Learning about how a child experiences anxiety will give parents clues on how they can support their child, as well as when additional help may be needed.

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The boxes below provide some examples of how young children may experience and show anxiety.

### Thoughts

“What if...?”

- “...the door is unlocked and the ghost takes me away?”
- “...Mum or Dad don’t come to tuck me in and check I’m OK?”
- “...I don’t get this right and the teacher yells at me?”
- “...no one likes me?”
- “...the dog jumps up and bites me?”
- “...my friends aren’t there and I’m all alone?”
- “...Dad is late dropping me off at school and I’m late for the test?”
- “...the plane crashes and my grandma dies?”
- “...I won’t have anyone to play with and the other kids laugh at me?”

### Feelings in the body

- Breathing fast (hyperventilating)
- Tiredness
- Racing heart
- Difficulty concentrating
- Needing to use the toilet
- Stomach aches
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Difficulty getting to sleep
- Suddenly feeling hot or cold
- Sweating
- Feeling shaky
- Butterflies in the stomach



### Words children may use

- “I don’t want to.”
- “Can I stay with you?”
- “I feel sick.”
- “My tummy hurts.”
- “I think we should go now.”
- “I’m scared.”
- “My head hurts.”
- “I can’t do it, you do it.”
- “I need you here.”
- “When can we go home?”

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## Actions

### Common characteristics of anxious actions:

- Avoiding or withdrawing from situations, objects or people that bring on anxious feelings.
- Seeking re-assurance from adults.
- Trying to control people or the situations that bring on feelings of anxiety.

### Examples

- Repeatedly seeking assurance from adults by asking lots of questions, such as “What’s going to happen?” or “What are we going to do if ... happens?”
- Making attempts or creating reasons to leave activities/situations early.
- Saying they cannot participate in activities or events because they feel sick or are in pain (when there is no medical explanation).
- Refusing to do some activities that other children their age feel comfortable and confident doing (e.g. spending time with familiar family members such as grandparents; playing with children their age without constant adult support), even when encouraged.
- Preferring to watch others do activities, rather than participate, even in familiar situations and with people they know.
- Asking other people to do an activity/task they don’t want to do for them.
- Crying, screaming, clinging to their parents, biting, yelling, swearing or throwing things when others insist the child participate in an activity or task.
- Holding their feelings together during a play date, at school or early learning, but then letting them out when they’re at home. The way these emotions are expressed can vary from being withdrawn (i.e. spending most of their time alone in their room); to spending all their time with others (i.e. following their parent or siblings around the house); to strong emotional behaviour (i.e. fighting with siblings or parents, swearing, yelling, crying).
- Talking about things that make them worried or scared.



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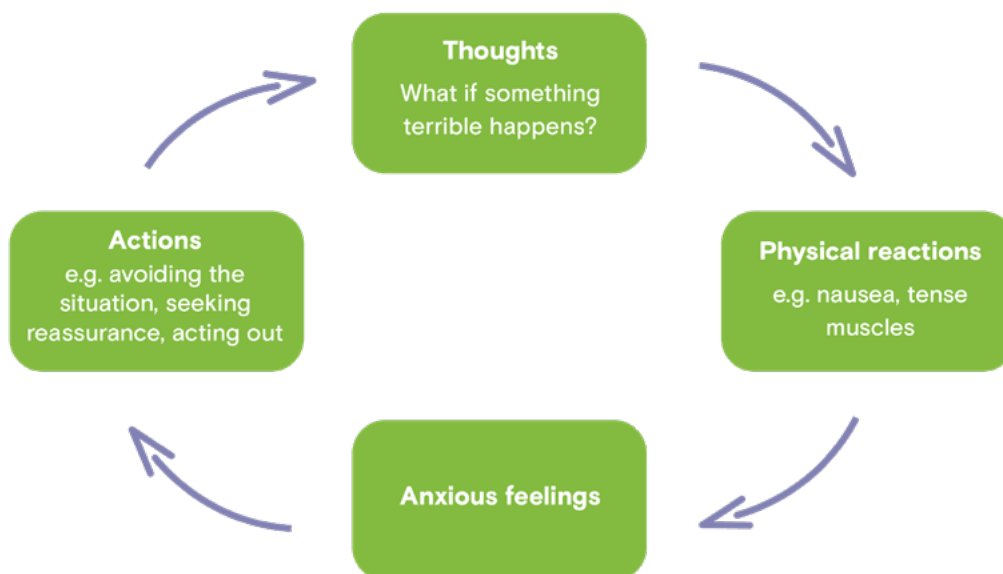
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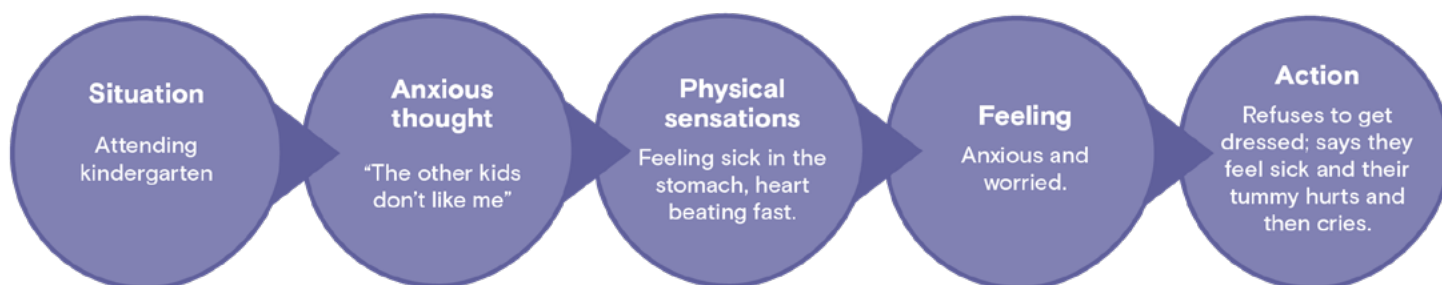
## What does anxiety involve?

How we think about an event, situation, person or object significantly influences our emotional experience and how we act. The image below illustrates how our thoughts, physical sensations and actions are linked to the experience of anxiety.

### Example 1: Components of anxiety



### Example 2: Attending kindergarten



### Example 3: Time away from parents



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