

Parent guide 2: Gathering information about your child's experience of anxiety

The more you know about your child's experience of anxiety, the more informed you are to make decisions about how best to support them. It's ok if you don't gather all the information or implement all the strategies listed below. Remember, the aim here is to learn about your child's experience so you can support them.

General tips for learning about your child's experience:

● **Listen** to your child when they talk to you about anxiety and seek to understand their experience. 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.

● **Ask** questions about their worries. For example, "what do you think might happen?"

When your child says that they are scared, nervous or worried, acknowledge their fears and worries rather than dismissing or minimising their experience. In a warm tone you could say something like, "You were worried that no one was picking you up from kinder today and that made you feel sick in your tummy."

● **Notice and recognise:**

- when your child may be feeling anxious – for example, at certain times, places or around certain people. Keep a note of these as it will help to identify a pattern to your child's experience of anxiety.
- how you respond to your child when they're feeling anxious. For example, do you prompt your child to be brave and give the situation a go, reassure them that everything will be okay,



or help them to leave the situation they feel anxious about? Or do you gradually support them to complete the activity they are worried about?

● **Working together with others**

To learn more about your child's emotional world and how it is impacting on them, it's important to work with the people who also care for your child. These people might be an educator, partner, or other families. In addition to observing your child and asking them about their experience, other adults can offer important insights too. They may also be able to support you to implement any strategies outlined in [Parent Guide 3](#).

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Use toys, role play and storytelling to gather information

Young children often find it easier to talk about events happening to someone else (Creswell and Willets, 2019). Some children will spontaneously play with toys and through their play, describe their worries. Join in and play along with this, be curious, and ask your child questions to better understand their experience. Playing with children often provides very important insights into how they see themselves, other people and the events happening around them.

For example, your child may talk about how Charlie, the toy puppy, is worried about going outside alone. This gives you an opportunity to ask Charlie about this worry, what he thinks might happen if he goes outside alone, and where Charlie feels worried in his body.

Children who enjoy colouring and drawing may like to draw a picture of their worry and give it a name. This helps children to see the worry as something outside of them and not in control of them. This is what mental health practitioners call 'externalising' the worry. Some children will then tell a story of their worry, which gives you an opportunity to be curious and ask your child questions about their experience.

Ask your child questions

The next section outlines some suggestions of ways to ask questions and encourage your child to share their (or their toy's) experience of anxiety. Some children will be able to answer these questions and others may not. Try to use words that your child will understand.

If your child is unable to describe their experience, or asking questions is not helpful or makes their anxiety worse, just make a record based on your observations.

When asking questions about your child's (or their toy's) experience, you are interested to learn about four main areas:

- 1 When they experience anxiety.
- 2 How anxiety feels in their body and how intense their feelings are.
- 3 Any thoughts they have when feeling anxious.
- 4 Actions they take when feeling anxious.

The next section outlines how you might learn this information.

1 When your child experiences anxiety.

Getting a picture of when your child feels anxious tells you about the situations that are anxiety-provoking for your child. Knowing when your child feels anxious is important for knowing how you can support them (more information on this can be found in Parent Guide 3).

You could ask them:

- "What happened just before you started to feel sick?"
- "What was happening around you?"
- "Can you tell me what other people were doing or saying?"

2 How your child feels anxious in their body.

The physical experience of anxiety can be overwhelming and scary. It's children's efforts to avoid these feelings that leads them to continue to experience anxiety in the longer term. Following these steps helps you to get a better understanding of their experience.

1. **You may start off by saying,** *"The last time you (or their toy/character) 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 on them where you feel nervous in your body?"*



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3. **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 (scariest situation possible). You could say:

“When are you the calmest? Let’s rate that at a 0. What is the scariest thing you could think of? Let’s rate that at a 10. The last time your heart was beating really fast, how big was the feeling on a scale of 0-10?”

4. **Some children may find it hard to rate their feelings on a scale of 1-10**. One option is to ask them to point to the feeling on a ‘feeling scale’ like the one below. Alternatively, you could ask them to rate their worries as big, medium or little, using an example that they can relate to. For example: *“Is your worry a little worry like a grape, a medium worry like an orange or a big worry like a watermelon?”*



5. **Ask how often they have these feelings and how long they last for**. You could say:

“How long does your body feel like this? How long does it take for you to feel calm again?”

“Does your body still feel like this when we are in the car going home from kinder?”

3 Anxious thoughts your child experiences.

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 about what may happen to other people (particularly beloved 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**. Your child may be able to answer questions or draw a picture that represents their worrying thoughts. It’s helpful to start with a recent specific situation when the child felt anxious and go from there. Some example questions:

“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 did you think/worry might happen?”

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

Parents are children’s most important teachers – they learn many skills by watching their parents and copying them. Sharing your own little worry and how you cope with it, can help your child feel that you understand them. For example:

“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:

- ‘What if 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 silly?’

The last time you felt worried, what types of thoughts did you have?”

It’s important you don’t share a big or scary worry with your child, such as, “I’m worried Papa will fall and hurt himself on his trip”, as this will likely increase your child’s worries.

3. **Share the experience of other children**.

“I know that other kids sometimes have worries about asking a question in front of their class. They might think, ‘What if the other kids think I’m stupid?’ or ‘What if the teacher gets angry?’ What do you think might happen if you ask the teacher a question?”

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