

Parent guide 3: Supporting your child

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

See yourself as a coach to your child

Parents are important role models for their children, acting as examples for how to handle life's challenges and worries. If there is something that is worrying you, share this with your child (if it is age appropriate to do so). Tell them you are going to be brave and not let anxiety stop you.

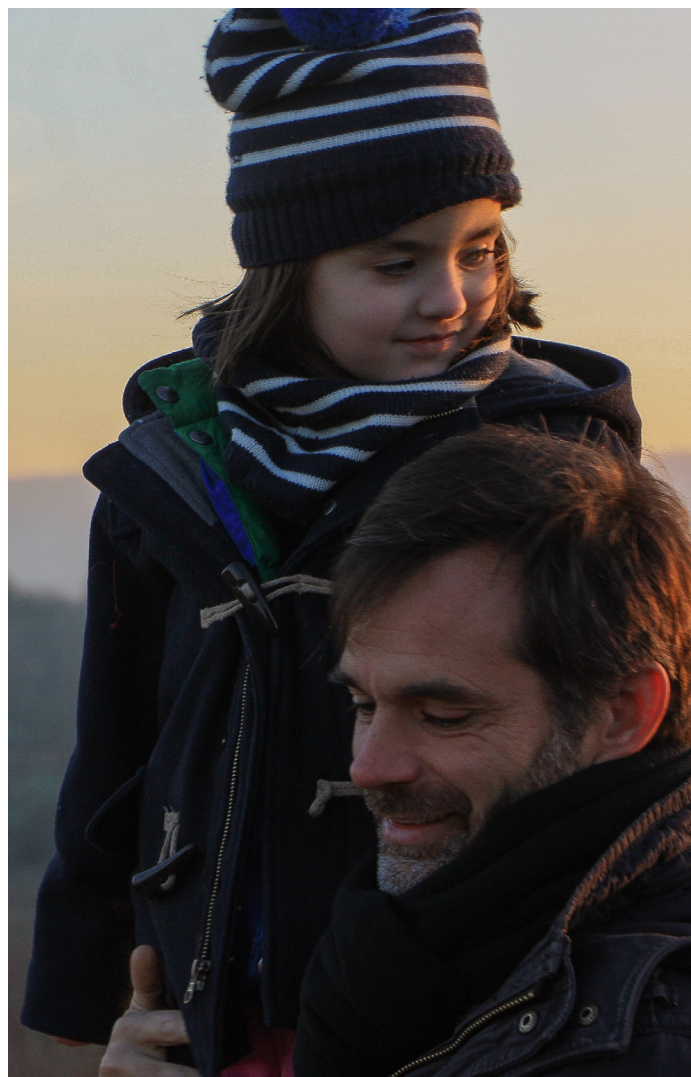
By sharing your experience, you are normalising feeling anxious and showing your child it's possible to do things we are anxious about. For example: *"I get a little nervous going to new places and meeting new people. When I get there, I know I usually have a good time. How about today we both be brave?"*

Validate and normalise 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".

"I know other kids get worried that they might not be able to swim across the pool. With practice, they get better and stronger. Soon you'll be able to make it across too."



Create predictable daily routines

Young children's emotions and behaviour are influenced by daily routines, such as having enough nutritious food, sleep, play time, learning and exercise. Predictable routines provide a stable base for children, particularly in times of stress. Sleep has a big impact on children's emotions, so check they are getting enough sleep for their age. For ideas on establishing sleep routines, visit the [Raising Children website](#).

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Build your child's skills to cope with anxiety

Gently encourage your child to 'have a go'.

- During everyday activities, notice the opportunities for your child to do new things and learn new skills. Children who experience anxiety are more likely to seek reassurance and support from you to do things they are capable of doing for themselves. With your encouragement, your child will gradually build their skills and confidence to undertake these tasks independently.

Everyday opportunities will be different for every child and could include the child being more independent at home e.g. getting dressed by themselves, brushing their teeth, packing their school bag, helping prepare meals, helping with grocery shopping, etc.

Promote physical activity and relaxation.

- Some children who experience lots of worries have a build-up of tension in their body. Incorporating enjoyable physical and relaxation activities into your family's regular routine can help your child burn off excess energy and feel calmer in their body.
- Choose physical activities that your child enjoys doing – e.g. playing on the playground, jumping on the trampoline, swimming, bike riding or running races in the backyard.
- Relaxation activities may help some children to feel calmer in their body. Learning to relax is a skill that needs practice, so it is important children practice relaxation while they are calm, before they are in situations they are worried about. To help your child to build their relaxation skills, set a time in their daily routine to practice.
- In discussion with your child, identify and write down/draw the relaxation strategies they are going to try. Simple strategies include taking five deep breathes, tightening and relaxing muscles five times, etc.

- There are a range of apps and websites, such as [Smiling Mind](#) that step through guided relaxed breathing exercises and guided meditations for children.
- Once your child has some practice with relaxation strategies that work for them, you can remind them to use these strategies during times that they feel worried, so that they can stay in the situation rather than avoid it. Over time, and as you child grows in confidence, they won't need to use the relaxation strategy for those situations.



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'Step ladder' approach

- Once you are familiar with what situations cause anxiety, you are in a good position to gently encourage your child to face their worries. A 'stepped approach' or 'step ladder approach' helps children learn the skills to face their worries gradually, so your child learns the skills and confidence to cope with anxious feelings over time.

Following these steps can help:

- Choose one worry to focus on. Even though your child might be worried about a few different situations, choose just one to begin with. This might be the one having the biggest impact or the one you feel your child will most likely succeed at initially.
- With your child, agree on a goal that you will both work towards. While your child may feel apprehensive, the goal is something that your child would like to achieve e.g. doing a two-minute talk about their favourite TV show in front of their class.
- With your child, break down this worry into different situations your child will gradually get through to help them reach their goal.
- Once you have listed all of the situations, ask your child to rate the level of worry from 1-10.
- List the situations from the smallest worry level (1 or 2/10) to the highest worry level (8 or 9/10). Successfully completing each situation helps build your child's skills and confidence to reach the next situation – like steps on a ladder. Each step will be a little bit more difficult than the last (see below for an example).
- Check that the worry levels go up in units of two or less. If there is a big jump in worry levels, your child may not take the next step as it's likely to be too scary.
- In discussion with your child, list the rewards your child will receive when they successfully achieve each step. As the worry levels rise, the reward significance also rises. For example, if a child has a worry rating of 3/10 for answering a question by the teacher, she might receive a choice of song to play on her way home from school. If her worry score is 8/10 for doing a short talk in front of the whole class, her reward might be to have a friend over for dinner.

Goal: For Lily to let a cat sit on her lap for five minutes

Steps	Worry level	Reward
9. Hold the cat in her lap.	9/10	Lily gets to choose a movie to watch with her family.
8. Pat the cat.	8/10	Lily has a friend over for a playdate.
7. Pat the cat while it is sitting on the friend's lap.	7/10	Lily gets to choose her favourite meal for dinner.
6. Sit next to the friend while they are holding the cat.	6/10	Lily makes cupcakes with her Grandad.
5. Go inside the friend's house, with the cat sitting on the friend's lap.	5/10	Lily can play at the park on the way home.
4. Go to the front door of a friend's house, while the friend is holding the cat.	4/10	Lily can watch one episode of her favourite show when she gets home.
3. Go the front of the friend's house and the cat is in the front window (but stays inside).	3/10	Lily listens to her favourite songs on the way home from the friend's house.
2. Go to the front door of a friend's house who has a cat inside the house.	2/10	Parent gives Lily specific praise.
1. Look at video clips of cats walking and playing.	1/10	Parent gives Lily specific praise – e.g. "That's great you stayed and watched the cats playing Lily!"

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Tips on the step ladder approach:

- Your role as a parent is to lead the discussion, ask questions and break down each step for your child to reach the goal.
- It's important your child is involved in the process and feels they have some control. You can do this by asking them to rate their worries and to provide suggestions for rewards.
- Prepare before you undertake each step. Are the things you need close by? People you need to prepare and talk to? For example, preparing your child's teacher for any steps your child is going to make.
- Before each step, briefly prepare your child for what they need to do. Do not give too much warning, as often this can cause anxious feelings to escalate.
- Remind your child to use their calming strategies if they need them. For example, "Take a deep breath in and out", or "Notice what you can see and hear around you".
- Be ready to give specific and enthusiastic praise for when your child is successful. Your child has faced a fear and your encouragement makes a big difference.
- Your child moves to the next step in the ladder when they no longer feel worried at their current step. This means that children may need to practice each step a few times before they are ready to move to the next one.

Tips on rewards:

- Rewards need to be rewarding for your child – something they'll get excited about receiving.
- Ask your child about their ideas for rewards and then agree on what's possible for each step.
- Rewards don't have to cost money. Young children often want special time with their loved ones as a reward.
- Make sure the reward selected is something that is doable and that you can provide. It's important for children to be rewarded for being brave, so they are likely to keep trying to face their worries.

Remember:

While protecting children from feeling anxious can be a natural parenting response, it's important to gently encourage your children to gradually do the things that they are worried about. That way, they can learn effective coping strategies and see that things might not be as bad as they imagined.

More on the step ladder approach:

If you would like to know more about the stepped approach, see:

- [Online Brave Parenting Program](#)
- *Helping your Child with Fears and Worries* by Creswell and Willets, 2019
- *Helping your Anxious Child* by Ron Rapee and colleagues, 2008



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Praise and acknowledge your child's efforts

- It's important that children's efforts to try new situations and face their fears and worries are acknowledged and reinforced.
- Providing specific praise immediately after your child has completed the anxiety-provoking activity makes it more likely they will try it again in the future. An example of praise is, *"That's great that you put your hand up to say something in class today. Good on you!"* or *"You were really brave today when you asked a friend to play."*

Limit the amount of reassurance you provide

- Some children will repeatedly seek reassurance from their parent or other adults when they feel anxious. Children are seeking reassurance when they repeatedly ask 'what if...' questions, such as, *"What if my friends aren't there?"* or *"What if I can't find you?"*. At first parents think providing reassurance will lower their child's anxiety. Often for children experiencing anxiety, this leads to repeated questions until the parent and child are in a never-ending cycle of 'question and answer'. This is called the 'reassurance trap' and is one of the key factors that keeps anxiety going.
- Rather than responding to their many questions, you could use this opportunity to start a conversation with your child about anxiety and what they expect will happen:

"I'm wondering if you are feeling worried about going to Karate tomorrow. What do you think? What do you think might happen?"

During this conversation, it's important that the parent doesn't get pulled into the many possible scenarios or decide to let their child avoid the situation, but rather focuses on what is known and then reinforces the skills their child has to handle that. For example:

"There are other times you've been to new places – how have you handled that?"

"If worries come up during group time, what can you do to help feel calmer and be able to join in with the others?"

- Giving some physical assurance (e.g. a little touch on the shoulder) when children are about face their worries can be helpful for children and lets them know you are supporting them. It's important however, to be aware of and reduce the special time your child receives from you when they feel anxious. When children are worried or scared, parents sometimes give their children more hugs and cuddles, telling them that "it will be ok" and giving them lots of attention. Often this leads to children avoiding the situation they are worried about, which causes anxiety to persist over time. Use the strategies listed above and give the special cuddles and attention when your child has been brave and successfully faced their worries.



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Use distraction techniques

- Distraction is helpful for small children when they are learning how to cope with being somewhere that is anxiety provoking.
- When a child is already anxious, it may not be helpful to talk about their worries and ask questions about how they feel. During these times use distraction strategies (e.g. diverting your child's attention to something interesting happening nearby) to help your child stay and cope with the situation. For example *"Oh, look at the kids over there on the soccer field. Are they from your class?"*
- Another distraction technique is making the situation funny by singing a song or making funny noises. For example, a young child scared of loud noises might create a song that they sing to their favourite toys when the rubbish truck or street sweeper comes along.
- When using distraction techniques make sure you are not letting your child avoid the situation. For example, if your child is clinging to you at a large family event and says they want to go home, rather than saying that they'll be fine and answering all their questions about what might happen, you could say, *"let's have a look at the funny clothes people are wearing at this party. What's your favourite outfit? Do you like the shoes that little boy is wearing?"*

Make sure you are supported too

Parenting a young child who is experiencing anxiety can be challenging and tiring, so it's important you are well supported.

- Seek emotional and practical support.
Research shows that children's feelings of anxiety will get worse before they get better when using some of these strategies. Before you try new strategies, consider what types of support you might need so that you and your child have the best chance of succeeding. Ask yourself if it's helpful to have a partner, friend or family member to support you while you are first learning the strategies. They might be able to supervise your other children while you focus on your anxious child; or provide practical back-up while using some of the strategies.

- Recognise the little wins.
Over time, little steps of progress create big changes. Focus on and celebrate the little wins as they happen.
- Practise compassionate self-talk.
If you find that the strategies do not go to plan, be kind to yourself. Practise compassionate thinking such as 'this will take time', 'one step at a time', 'I've tried this before and it helped, we can try again tomorrow' or 'what would I say to a good friend who was experiencing this?'
- Make time for relaxation.
If possible, plan to do activities that you enjoy and that help you to feel calmer e.g. relaxed breathing, exercise, undertaking a hobby, or spending time with friends. **Smiling Mind** is one place to find relaxed breathing exercise for adults and children.

Consistency of support and working with others

Working as a team with other adults in the child's life is important. Consistent support and use of strategies can make all the difference in helping children to feel confident to face their worries.

If your child is feeling worried at school or their early learning centre, raise your concern with the educators. Let the educators know that you'd like to work together as a team. Visit the [Raising Children website](#) for tips in solving problems with educators.



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More information for parents

Online program for parents

Brave is a free online interactive program for children aged 3–7 years experiencing anxiety, and their families: <http://www.brave-online.com/>

Child development

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/development/development-tracker/6-8-years>

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/development/development-tracker/4-5-years>

Child anxiety

<https://childmind.org/article/what-to-do-and-not-do-when-children-are-anxious/>

<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/age-6-12/mental-health-conditions-in-children/anxiety/strategies-to-support-anxious-children>

Tips for looking after yourself as a parent

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/looking-after-yourself/parenting/looking-after-yourself>

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/looking-after-yourself/anger-anxiety-stress>

<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>

Wellbeing screening tools

<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/age-6-12/mental-health-conditions-in-children/child-mental-health-checklist>

Books about anxiety for parents

Anxious kids, anxious parents: 7 ways to stop the worry cycle and raise courageous and independent children – Lynne Lyons & Dr. Reid Wilson.

Helping your child with fears and worries: A self-help guide for parents – Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts.

Helping your anxious child: A step-by-step guide for parents (2nd edition) – Ronald M. Rapee, Susan H. Spence, Vanessa Cobham, Ann Wignall & Heidi Lyneham.

The opposite of worry: the playful parenting approach to childhood anxieties and fears – Lawrence J. Cohen.

Books for children about emotions and anxiety

There are a range of books for children explaining anxiety and worries. We recommend parents read them first to check they are appropriate for their child. Some suggestions are:

Feeling scared – Tracey Moroney

Feeling nervous – Tracey Moroney

Go away Mr Worrythoughts – Nicky Johnston

Hey Warrior: A book for kids about anxiety – Karen Young

What's going on inside my head? Starting conversations with your child about positive mental health – Molly Potter.



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