

# Information for Parents of Children Who May Be Experiencing Anxiety

## Introduction

In this document we will discuss how to recognise and support a child who may be experiencing anxiety. We will cover the following topics:

- What is anxiety?
- Signs that your child may be experiencing anxiety – Physical, Behavioural, Emotional/Mental
- How can you help your child?
  - Tips for talking to your child about anxiety
  - Additional tools – Breathing/relaxation techniques, distraction/grounding tools, designated worry times as well as general care and information
- When and where to seek professional help for your child?
- Self-care for you

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety can be described as a feeling of fear, worry or dread. The HSE define anxiety as, “a common feeling that everyone experiences at some stage. It can be a normal emotional response to many stressful situations. Anxiety is also a natural, understandable emotional response that can help us prepare for challenges.” Children can experience anxiety and worry for a range of reasons such as changes in their lives e.g. starting/returning to school, a bereavement or even as a result of overscheduling i.e. being involved in too many extracurricular activities. Children may also worry about a future event which may or may not become a reality. Your child needs to know that anxiety is not dangerous but is something they can cope with.

## Signs that your child may be experiencing anxiety:

### Physical

- Feeling shaky, dizzy or faint
- Stomach discomfort (e.g. sick or cramps)
- Breathing difficulties (e.g. breathing too fast or difficulty breathing)
- Irregular or rapid heart beat
- Sweating
- Cold hands and feet
- Tense muscles
- Restlessness

## **Behavioural**

- Out of control outbursts
- Using the toilet often / start wetting the bed
- Sleep problems (e.g. not being able to sleep or waking with bad dreams)
- Not eating properly
- Clinginess
- Always crying
- Being irritable

## **Emotional/Mental**

- Always worrying or having negative thoughts
- Racing thoughts
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Difficulties focusing and recalling information
- Lacking confidence to try new things
- Avoiding everyday activities e.g. going to school, meeting friends

## **How can you help your child?**

### **Talk to your child**

It is important to encourage your child to talk about their concerns or worries. It is possible that they may be trying to hide their thoughts and feelings. Anxious children may have negative thoughts about themselves and/or jump to negative conclusions. Getting them talking about their thoughts can help. Here we have outlined some guidance for you in undertaking this discussion:

- Acknowledge their worries and anxieties – don't dismiss them as it may inadvertently prevent your child from disclosing other worries in future
- Where relevant, explain that they may be right to have a certain level of worry about the situation i.e. validate their worry and their feelings of fear
- Identify their exact fears – which are reasonable or which are unhelpful such as an exaggerated anticipatory fear?
- Reassure them that they will be able to deal with their worry or fear
- Help them to make a detailed plan to deal with their worries – having a detailed plan will provide children with comfort. Use small steps to break down a challenge
- Encourage positive thinking. Help your child think through their worst case scenario e.g. if they missed the bus what other options do they have?
- Teach your child some coping self-talk statements e.g. I am ok, I am feeling confident, I have done this before, I can do it
- You may need to let your child know that some worries are for parents e.g. financial
- If you know there is a change coming up, such as a house move, prepare your child by talking to them about what is going to happen and why

- You could use a traffic light system to help children to deal with their thoughts:
  - **Red** are the unhelpful thoughts that need to stop
  - **Amber** are thoughts that need to be slowed down and considered as to whether they are helpful or unhelpful
  - **Green** are thoughts that are ok
  - You can help your child decide whether a thought is 1) True, 2) Helpful or 3) Unhelpful?

## **Additional tools**

Here we have included a range of additional tools that you can use with your child to address their anxiety. The decision about which tool to use will depend on your child's age and the circumstances. It is suggested that using strategies that focus on bodily symptoms such as relaxation, are more useful with children under ages 7 or 8 who have yet to develop the capacity to think about their thoughts.

## **Breathing / Relaxation techniques**

- Breathing exercises: Breathe in slowly and deeply – in through the nose and out through the mouth. E.g. Breathe in through the nose for about 4 seconds, hold for 1 or 2 seconds, exhale out through the mouth for about 4 seconds, take a short pause between breaths and repeat for at least 5 to 10 breaths
- If your child is lying down when doing a breathing exercise, it may be helpful to place a light toy on their tummy and let them watch it go up and down as they breathe in and out
- Muscle relaxation techniques: Get your child to tense their muscles (e.g. fists, face, shoulders) hold for a count of 5 and relax
- Relaxation techniques: Help your child to find a safe place in their mind that is free from anxiety and worry, a place that helps them feel relaxed and happy
- Notice what things help your child to relax or feel better and work with your child to find strategies – they will often know what works best for them

## **Distraction / Grounding**

Distraction techniques train your child to keep their mind busy doing what they want it to do and helps them to learn to drown out the worry.

- Distract your child by getting them to focus on something else
- Touch: Cuddle your child or hold their hand.
- Give them an object (e.g. a toy) that helps them to feel grounded or provides a distraction
- If your child feels the need to check things or repeat certain actions, suggest they count to ten before doing this – use the count as a delaying tactic
- Help your child to identify 5 things they can see, 4 things they can hear, 3 things they can smell, 2 things they can feel and 1 thing they can taste. Use this as a grounding technique

## Designated worry times

- Have a designated worry time either for the child or the family where you speak about your worries together. Make sure that this time is not too close to bedtime. This gives the message that your child is in control of the worries and not vice versa
- Give your child a worry book where they can write about or draw what makes them anxious or a worry box where they can place their worries. Younger children may enjoy decorating the box. They can review their worries after a specific time period (e.g. a week) and then decide if they are worth worrying about. If not, they can be torn up

## General Care and Information

- If your child's anxiety is related to a distressing event such as a bereavement there may be books/films that will help them to understand their feelings
- Try not to become overprotective or anxious yourself. Try and respond calmly when your child expresses a worry. The more confident and reassuring you can be, the more you will help them cope
- Teach your child to manage their anxiety and ask for help when they need it
- Build your child's personal strength by remembering to praise your child for facing challenges, trying something new or demonstrating brave behaviour. Find examples where they can show they are good at something (e.g. sports, art or music). Make sure your child has age appropriate jobs around the house so they can feel they are contributing to the family
- It is important to let your child do things on their own. Try not to frequently step in to do things for your child. Stepping in frequently gives your child the message that you do not think they can do it themselves, which may cause them to worry
- If there are two of you at home, it is important to have an agreed way of handling your child's anxiety that you both feel comfortable with
- Don't confuse anxiety with inappropriate behaviour. Set expectations and have limits and consequences for inappropriate behaviour. You should have the same expectations of an anxious child as you would any other but understand that the pace may need to be slower and that there is a process involved
- It may take time to address your child's anxiety and if you have more than one child it may be beneficial to spend time with each child individually
- Children of all ages find routines reassuring, so try to stick to regular daily routines where possible
- Help your child to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Ensure they have regular exercise to reduce the levels of stress hormones. Try to encourage good sleeping habits, calm bedtime routines, limited screen time in the evening and a healthy diet with limited sugar, additives and caffeine. Involve them in creative pursuits such as art, writing or music

## When and where to seek professional help for your child?

**Seek professional help if the anxiety is not going away or is getting worse. Start with your General Practitioner (GP). They will be able to advise you and make any relevant referrals.**

### Self-care for you:

Parenting is rewarding but it can also be challenging. Having an anxious child can be a challenge for you as a parent. Your patience may be tested e.g. by difficult behaviours as your child may be acting out in response to what they are finding hard to articulate. It is important that you take care of yourself during this time. Where possible, try to eat a balanced diet, get as much rest as you can, do some exercise and take some time for yourself – even if it is just ten minutes per day. Avail of support for yourself from family, friends, colleagues, management or professionals working with you or your child. Remember, the CSEAS is there to support you if you wish to discuss any concerns you may have. You can contact the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS) by phone at 0761000030 or e-mail [cseas@per.gov.ie](mailto:cseas@per.gov.ie). For individual Employee Assistance Officer's details, click on the 'Meet the Team' photo on our website [www.cseas.per.gov.ie](http://www.cseas.per.gov.ie).

Information sourced from:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/anxiety-in-children/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/mental-health/anxiety-disorders-in-children.html#How-to-help-your-anxious-child>

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/blog/5-things-you-need-know-about-anxiety>

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/blog/coping-anxiety>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3673/anxiety-updated-dec-2019.pdf>