

# Anxiety



A resource for parents



SACRED HEART  
CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

*'Courage and Confidence' | St Madeleine Sophie Barat*

## **WHY A RESOURCE SPECIFICALLY ABOUT ANXIETY?**

Anxiety is one of the most common emotional struggles for our children and young people, with an increasing number of children and young people struggling to attend school. This resource is designed to support those of you who are living with this challenging scenario in your own homes. We want to acknowledge how difficult and confusing this issue can be for all involved, and hope you find the information within this resource helpful in guiding you through this time of struggle, providing encouragement and hope that things can and do get better.

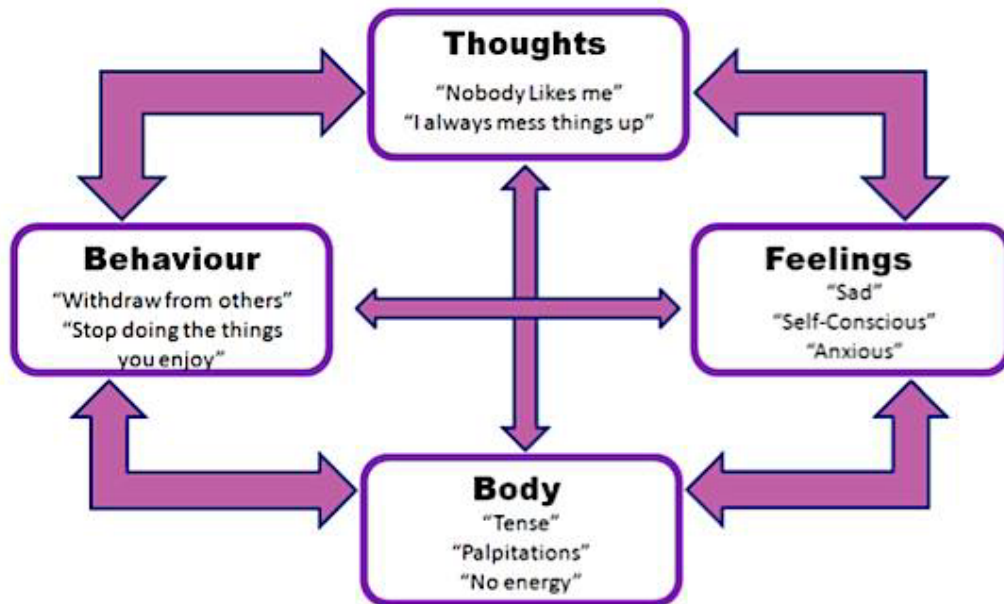
## **WHAT IS ANXIETY?**

All of us can feel worried or scared about things sometimes, and whilst these feelings are uncomfortable, they are not in themselves problematic. Anxiety is also natural and, again, in small doses is not a major problem.

However heightened anxiety, experienced as a combination of our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, can make us believe that something extremely stressful or dangerous is about to happen. This is useful when we are faced with real danger as it is at these times that we need our survival system to kick in. It is, however, potentially debilitating when there is no actual life-threatening danger present.

Feeling uncertain and anxious when faced with new experiences or difficult challenges is to be expected. Some anxiety is useful; it motivates us to do our best, work towards goals, and stay alert and engaged in life. The problem arises when the anxiety is present daily, is relentless and distressing, creating negative thoughts and uncomfortable bodily sensations which in turn influences behaviour. This can make a person feel miserable, full of panic, and end up preventing someone from doing everyday tasks that are part of normal functioning or activities that usually give them pleasure.

As we can see from the diagram below, it can become a vicious cycle of very unpleasant thoughts, feelings and body sensations which then convince the person they must avoid whatever it is that is causing this unpleasantness in the first place.



However, total avoidance is the very thing that feeds the anxiety more than anything, making it worse and ensuring the person moves further and further away from being able to cope healthily with the source of the anxiety.

## HOW TO RECOGNISE ANXIETY IN YOUR CHILD

Every child is different, and as such anxiety will present differently for each individual. Additionally, some children are very good at hiding their distress and putting on a brave face. However, there are some symptoms and behaviours you may notice or can ask your child if they experience:

- ❖ Becoming nervous, clingy or irritable often
- ❖ Difficulty getting to sleep, waking in the night, or having bad dreams
- ❖ Frequent headaches and stomach aches
- ❖ Lacking confidence with new things or even everyday tasks
- ❖ Difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- ❖ Having angry outbursts
- ❖ Being unable to make even simple decisions/choices
- ❖ Lots of negative thoughts and fearing bad things are going to happen
- ❖ Avoiding age-appropriate activities like seeing friends or going outdoors

## WHY IS MY CHILD SUFFERING?

There are likely to be numerous reasons why your child is struggling with anxiety. We are all individuals and as such different things affect people differently. Some common causes of anxiety in children may be:

- **Significant changes such as moving house, parents separating or remarrying, illness of loved ones.**
- **The death of a family member, including their pet.**
- **Having lots of caring responsibilities for other family members, eg: too often having to look after younger siblings or take care of ill or older relatives.**
- **Not feeling safe, eg: being bullied; witnessing or experiencing abuse or other crime; racism, homophobia, or transphobia.**
- **Being around another anxious person, such as a family member (this can lead to 'learned behaviour')**
- **Absorbing family stress around relationships, money, or housing issues.**
- **A family member caught up in crime/being imprisoned.**
- **Feeling different and not understanding why.**
- **Not being understood or having their needs met, eg: if have a physical condition, ADHD or are autistic.**
- **Lack of confidence around schoolwork and their ability to learn.**

## WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO HELP AN ANXIOUS CHILD?

- **Acknowledge** their feelings, even if they seem 'over the top' to you. Say things like "I'm glad you're talking to me about this" or "tell me more" to show you believe this is *difficult for them*.
- **Listen** to what your child is telling you but also avoid getting tied up in the emotions they feel or that stir in you - your child may perceive they are falling behind with their learning, for example, which they may be, but they also may not be, and this needs calm investigation via liaison with school.
- **Regulate** their (and your) physiological responses – using calming techniques such as controlled breathing or tapping (see information at the end of this resource).
- **Relate** to them by empathising with their experience, and expressing that you too at times feel anxious, that it is a normal human emotion and that it passes eventually.
- **Reason** with them only when they are calm – help them think through their experience and offer compassionate guidance about ways to think about it differently and/or manage it.

- **Encourage** them to be physically active – physical and mental health are closely connected, so get them to move their bodies regularly and especially outdoors in green open spaces if possible.
- **Remind** them that all feelings change - your child might not be able to see the light at the end of the dark tunnel they're in. Reassure your child that how they're feeling is temporary, things can/do change and feel better.

## **WHEN DOES IT BECOME AN ATTENDANCE PROBLEM?**

Whilst a child's reason for feeling anxious may not be directly connected with school (although we appreciate that at times it *can* arise from past or current unpleasant school experiences, which do need to be addressed) children often manage their difficult feelings by trying to avoid things they have some semblance of influence over – they can't control whether their loved ones are well, parents are happily together, they are safe from crime or have enough food to eat, but they can vote with their feet about attending school when life feels too much for them to cope with.

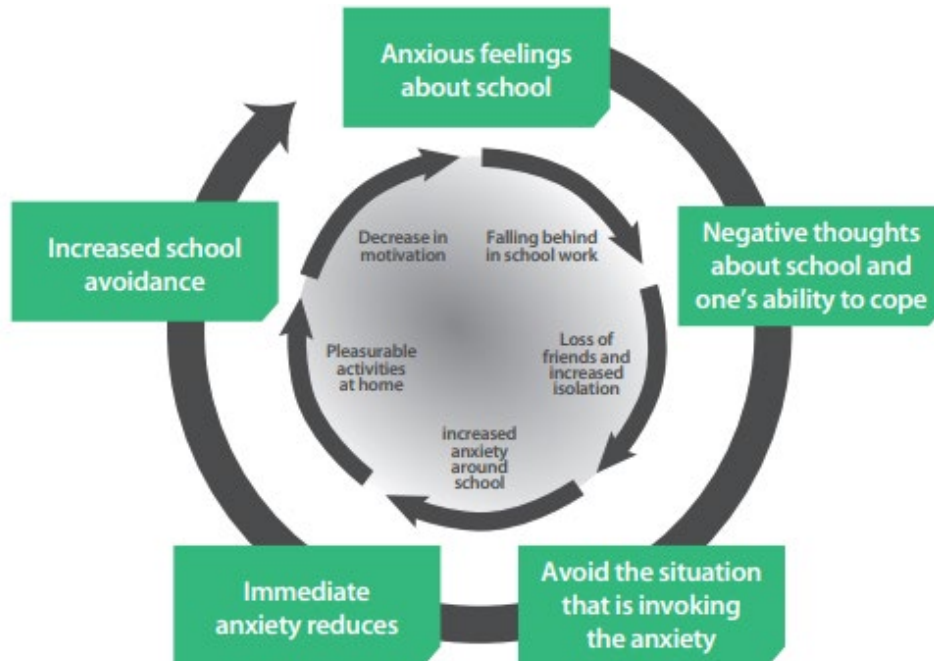
Another important factor to understand when supporting anxious children is that sometimes what the child indicates is the problem (another student, a teacher, the homework, a sibling bothering them, a sore tummy) is often a smokescreen for a deeper, more painful worry which they either haven't yet recognised as being the issue (because they are so used to it and are expected to cope with it) or haven't the words or courage to express it directly, for fear of upsetting someone they love.

This leads the child to internally question why they feel anxious, and to seek an obvious explanation, eg: "I feel anxious, there must be a problem - it could be to do with this person I don't like" which then focusses their mind on that as a problem. Or they do know it is about their sadness at something but worry about upsetting parents with their sadness so say that it's about the work they can't do at school, and usually come to believe it themselves once this issue becomes everyone's focus.

The child may then start to negotiate about not going to school on some days, bargaining about having one day off but promising to attend all other days. This can and often does escalate to becoming distressed before school and refusing to let parents leave them at school or refusing to come to school at all. They may even cause concern in other ways like threatening to harm themselves or refusing to eat if you send them to school. This becomes incredibly distressing for all concerned.

The more time your child manages to avoid school due to their feelings of being unable to cope, the harder it gets for them to re-engage with school and their learning in the future. Absences mean that children miss out on learning, friendships, and opportunities, making it even more difficult when they come back.

By now an unhealthy cycle is at play:



It is very important to try to help children and young people overcome these difficulties as soon as possible, or else they tend to worsen.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- One of the most important ways you can support your child is to calmly listen to them and acknowledge that their fears are real to them, even if you yourself don't understand or share their concerns. Remind them how important it is to attend school and reassure them that you and the school will work with them to make school a happier experience.
- Remind your child of obstacles they've overcome in the past, how proud you were when they coped with certain moments in their life, such as sitting an exam, or moving schools or house. This will remind them of their resilience, their ability to adapt to difficult situations, and that there is evidence they CAN do it this time too.
- Tell the relevant Head of Year/Deputy Head of Year or the SENDCO in school that your child is anxious about school or acting out of character *as soon as*

*possible* and work in partnership with the school to address the issue. A plan should be made with the school to help your child continue to attend successfully.

- Towards the beginning of initiating the plan your child may show more unhappiness and you should prepare yourself for this. It is important that all adults, both at home and school, work together to agree a firm and consistent approach. Any concerns you may have about the plan should not be shared with your child and a positive partnership approach with school is recommended – we are all on the same team, supporting your child to access school as successfully as possible.
- It is likely that there may be difficulties implementing the plan; these should be anticipated and overcome wherever possible. Try not to lose heart if things don't go exactly to plan; if your child fails to attend school on one day, start from scratch again the next day. It is also important to remember there is likely to be more difficulty after a school holiday, period of illness or even after the weekend.

## **TALKING TO YOUR CHILD**

Any child currently avoiding school is likely to become more anxious when they are asked to talk about returning to school. A good place to start is to acknowledge that it may be difficult but that you care about what they think and feel. If they find it difficult to talk, you could ask short specific questions to help them start to sort through their fears and feelings. For example: "What three things are you most worried about"? Or "What three things were you recently worried about and which is the biggest worry of the three"?

It is also important to focus on positives: What are the three best things about school? Sometimes children may find it hard to tell you face to face, perhaps you could ask them to write it down or text you about it. Some children also find it easier to draw how they are feeling or communicate it to someone else who can then share it with you.

You could show them the following diagram to help discuss the impact of their desire to not attend school, highlighting the negative consequences of avoiding something we feel anxious about as it leads to other worse outcomes in the long term.



Talk to your child about the different sources of help that are available, such as helplines, text lines and online chat services. Reassure them it's alright to confide in others and that won't upset you.

However, it's important you don't force them to have a conversation they don't want to have. You can let them know you're available – but don't pressure them to talk. It can be really tempting to ask a lot of questions, but that can feel to them like interrogation. Try to focus on right now and what would help moving forward.

## **WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT SCHOOL TO DO?**

- ✓ Listen carefully to you and your child and acknowledge the challenges faced around anxiety.
- ✓ Work in partnership with you and your child to find out what difficulties your child is experiencing and find ways of making school feel more doable and improve their attendance.
- ✓ Hold meetings to devise a plan in conjunction with you and your child. The plan should include what the next steps will be.
- ✓ Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, dealing with bullying or support with social relationships.
- ✓ Consider the support your child might require upon arrival at school. This might include meeting with a friend at a specific place and time, using a quiet space to settle before school starts, engaging in a preferred activity or being given a specific responsibility to help them feel they have a role in school life.
- ✓ Maintain close contact with you and your child, even during extended periods of non-attendance. An agreed member of staff should be named as a link person.



- ✓ If difficulties persist school will consider requesting involvement from other external professionals to provide even more bespoke support.

## **IMPACT ON PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH:**

There is not a family we have worked with around the issue of anxiety-based school non-attendance whereby the parents' own mental health is not impacted by the child's anxiety and subsequent behaviours. As a parent it can be particularly difficult to see your child unhappy, especially when we feel confused or stuck as to how to help them.

It is vital you make sure that you have someone to talk to too. This could be a friend, family member or an organisation such as those listed at the end of this resource. Don't suffer in silence, as the more distressed you become the harder it gets for all concerned to manage this scenario successfully. You deserve support as much as your child does.

## **REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES:**

*Student A* began showing us her struggles to attend school by being very distressed at leaving her parents when arriving at school. This escalated quickly to running after the parent as they tried to leave or refusing to get out of the car on arrival. They also stopped getting out of bed or getting ready for school.

With the parents' support and Student A's involvement a bespoke plan was devised and implemented, reviewed often, and adapted. Parents remained calm, hopeful and supportive of their child and also about school's accommodations, which led to Student A eventually attending school daily and resuming over time her attendance in all lessons.

What may have looked like defiant behaviour was simply Student A's attempt to communicate that she did not feel emotionally safe in school without understanding and support structures in place. Once she had this, she felt more able to stop avoiding and try to access school, allowing her to gain the evidence that she could cope with school and could be successful once here.

*Student B* communicated to us their anxiety about attending school by turning up in tears and having arguments with parents at home about school. She repeatedly demanded to be transferred to a different school, and if she did attend school would be distressed and unable to attend some lessons.

External support services were involved to provide guidance to parents and help improve dynamics at home, which parents engaged with. Student B was also supported with a bespoke and regularly reviewed plan which helped meet her needs for a more relational experience at home and school, providing a sense of emotional safety. This led to increasing attendance at school and in lessons. She is now enjoying school in a way she didn't think was ever going to be possible.

Neither of these case examples were easy to experience for the parents and children concerned to live through, but both families are now relieved that their perseverance, courage, and patience was worth it.

## STRATEGIES TO TEACH YOUR CHILD TO RELIEVE ANXIETY:

Below are some effective ways you can teach your child to regulate any big feeling that make them feel uncomfortable, especially anxiety.

Both these strategies allow the body to send messages to the brain that the person is safe from threat and can relax.

The **Butterfly Hug** uses alternative tapping on each shoulder and the **Grounding Technique** uses each of the five senses to achieve this.

Do each one for a few minutes at a time or do one then the other and then repeat.



## ANXIETY GROUNDING TECHNIQUE

Focus on your breathing, then identify:

- 5  Things you can SEE
- 4  Things you can TOUCH
- 3  Things you can HEAR
- 2  Things you can SMELL
- 1  Thing you can TASTE

For more resources visit: [www.work2bewell.org](http://www.work2bewell.org)



Also, you could try **Bilateral Stimulation**:

- think about the situation causing the distress/anxiety.
- rate the distress on a scale from 0-10 (0 = fine, 10 = unbearable)
- place an object, like your phone or a pen, in your hand and then stretch both arms out wide
- slowly move the item between hands with arms stretched out in front of you, and watch the item as it moves back and forth
- do this for 2 minutes then re-rate the situation on 0-10 scale
- keep doing this until rating scale number gets to 1 or 0; your attention becomes distracted which has a relaxing effect.

### **LIST OF ONLINE & DIGITAL RESOURCES:**

[www.youngminds.org.uk/parents/parents-helpline/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/parents/parents-helpline/)

**Tel:0808 802 5544**

[www.parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk](http://www.parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk)

[www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parent-a-z-mental-health-guide/school-anxiety](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parent-a-z-mental-health-guide/school-anxiety)

[www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/information-for-parents/](http://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/information-for-parents/)

[www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/](http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/)

[www.parentingmentalhealth.org](http://www.parentingmentalhealth.org)

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

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