Supporting Your Child With Anxiety and Worries

Information for Parents and Carers

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), NHS Lothian

V1.0 Approved by NHS Lothian Patient Information Apr 24, Review: Apr 27

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You can find information sessions from CAMHS, NHS Lothian, relating to the content of these workbooks by clicking on the links below:

1. What is anxiety and when does it become a problem
https://vimeo.com/943593737?share=copy

2. The CBT model of anxiety – What keeps anxiety going
https://vimeo.com/943594679?share=copy

3. Supporting your child with anxiety
https://vimeo.com/943596442/9ab61b8641?share=copy

4. Managing anxiety – Body Tools
https://vimeo.com/943597579/079e3abff4?share=copy

5. Managing anxiety – Thinking Tools
https://vimeo.com/943598450/0caa0e20f6?share=copy

6. Managing anxiety – Changing Behaviour
https://vimeo.com/943599966?share=copy

NHS Lothian

Part 1

Understanding and Talking about Anxiety

Information for
Parents and Carers

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), NHS Lothian

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is an emotion that we all feel from time to time. It is a **normal response** to a situation we find threatening.

Other words for feeling anxious are:

- **Stressed**
- **Worried**
- **Afraid**
- **Scared**

When is anxiety helpful?

Anxiety can be helpful:

- **When we face a situation that threatens our physical safety.** It prepares us to take action and keeps us safe (like quickly leave the building when the fire alarm sounds, jump out the way of a car, fight off an attacker).
- **When we need motivation to do things that we might not want to do** (like study for a test)

Can you think of a time where anxiety has been helpful for you or your child?

When does anxiety become a problem?

We all feel anxious for short periods of time or in certain situations, but for some people anxiety takes over.

Anxiety becomes a problem when:

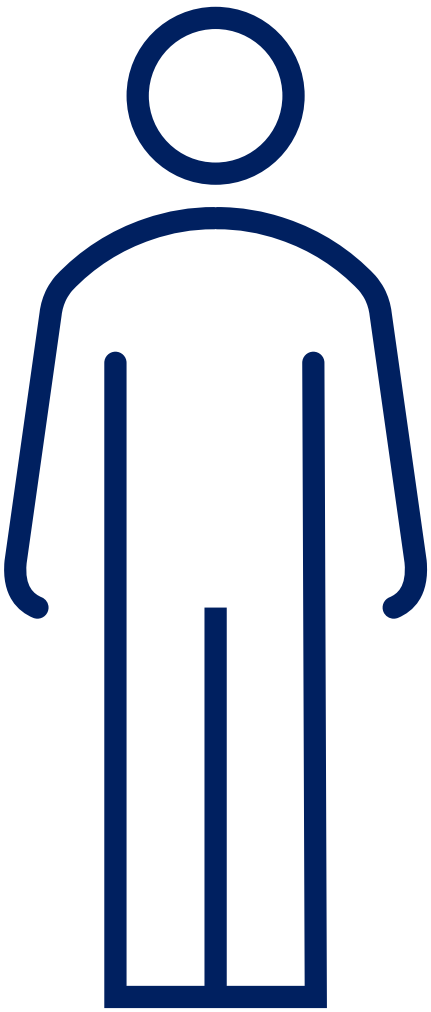
- Someone feels anxious **all the time**
- It causes a lot of **upset or distress**
- It **interferes with everyday life** (stops you from doing things you want or need to do).

When anxiety becomes a problem there are things you and your child can do to help them learn how to cope.

Body Signs of Anxiety

When we feel anxious it can make our bodies feel different. This is called the Fight or Flight response. These physical signs can be scary and confusing and this can make your child more anxious. But they are not dangerous. They help prepare the body for action. You might notice:

Try to watch the Shine Fight and Flight video by Dr Paul Stone with your child to learn more: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaIkD2Gc08M



- Sore head
- Feeling hot or sweaty
- Dry mouth or tight throat
- Heart beating faster or harder
- Breathing faster or feeling like it's difficult to breathe
- Feeling sick, having a sore tummy or having 'butterflies'
- Needing to go to the toilet more often
- Legs feeling like jelly or shaky

Everyone feels anxious from time to time. Take a moment and think about how you feel when you get anxious. Do you recognise any of the body signs mentioned above? Are there any other signs you notice?

It can be helpful for children to know about the physical signs of anxiety and to learn that they are not dangerous. You could ask your child if they notice any of these signs and share what signs you notice in yourself and/or them. You might want to talk about the Fight and Flight response and how it helps keep us safe or watch the video mentioned above together.

If you need further help with discussing the physical symptoms of anxiety and to check there are no underlying causes, speak to your GP.

Recognising your child's anxiety

- People of all ages feel anxious but we tend to feel anxious about different things as we grow up.
- Children often feel anxious about their physical safety, or the safety of those close to them. They might worry about scary creatures, being hurt, or other people hurting them.
- Teenagers often feel anxious about the future, friendships, relationships or worry about school or exams. They might also worry about their wellbeing.

My child gets anxious about:

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Understanding and Expressing Emotions

You can help your child to become better at understanding and expressing their emotions.

Why is it important to help children understand and express emotions?

Emotions can be overwhelming and daunting for children and young people. They can feel scary and isolating.

When your child understands how they feel and is able to tell others how they feel, their emotions become less scary and overwhelming. They might feel more in control and more able to learn coping strategies to manage their feelings. Learning how your child feels, can also help you and others to better understand what they need and how to best support them.

Sometimes it is hard to understand why a child feels anxious. Your child may think their feelings are bad or that they shouldn't feel this way and try to hide their anxiety. If we ignore emotions they may build up and get worse. Talking about them helps both adults and children to understand them better.

How to support your child to understand and express emotions

Have conversations with your child about emotions

It may feel strange to talk to your child about emotions at first, especially if it is something you don't usually do. It will feel more natural over time. You could try using Talk Time (page 9).

Talk about all emotions, not only 'negative' or 'positive' ones. Ask your child how they feel but also explore how they think others might feel and what makes them think that. It can be helpful to talk about the feelings of characters in books, TV shows, films or games to start the process.

Children model parents' behaviour and learn from how parents show and manage their emotions. Sharing your own feelings and talking about what makes you feel like that helps your child learn about emotions. Modelling will be explored in more detail in Part 2 of the workbook.

Listen

When your child is trying to talk to you about their feelings, try to make time to listen. If this is not possible at that particular moment, let them know when you will be free to talk to them; maybe once you finished a task or at a certain time later in the day. Taking time to listen can encourage your child to talk to you more.

Try not to solve problems

Sometimes children need someone to understand what they are feeling. Try to resist the urge to ask questions, give advice or soothe it away. This may stop your child from telling you more about their thoughts and feelings and takes away the opportunity to work out what to do for themselves.

Accept emotions

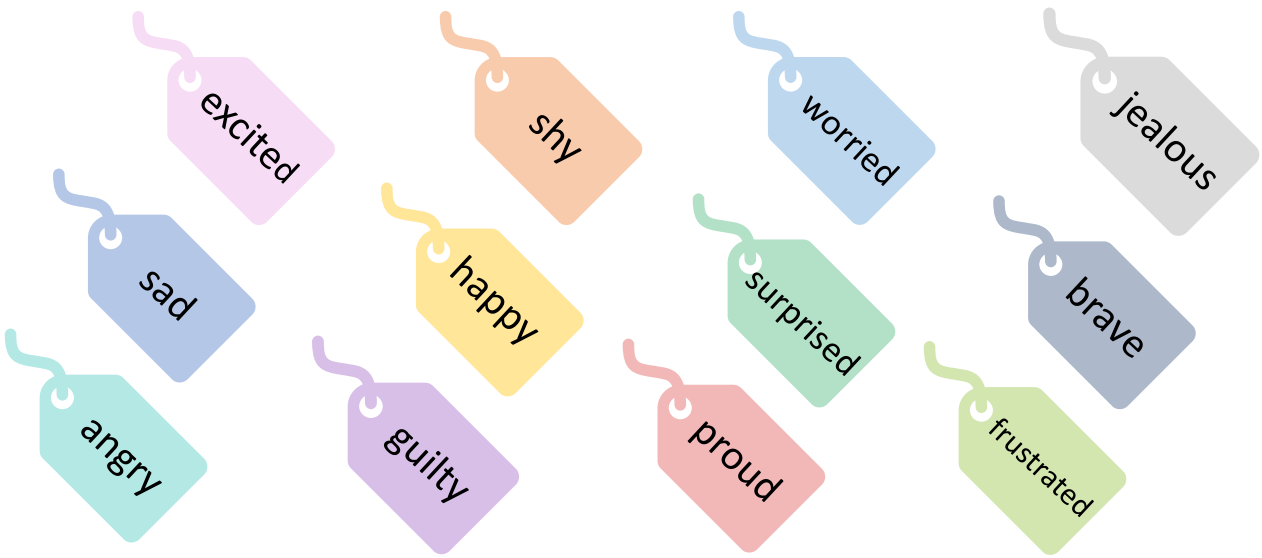
It may make you feel uncomfortable to hear about some of your child's emotions. That's understandable. However, try to take an accepting rather than critical stance. Validate their feelings: *"It sounds difficult to feel so angry".* Separate emotions and behaviours. It is okay to have clear rules and boundaries about behaviours. *"It is ok to feel angry and anxious but hitting is not allowed in this family"*. Suggest another way of managing emotions like jumping on the trampoline, squeezing a ball etc.

Label emotions for them

You can label emotions you notice in your child. You may pick up on signs in their behaviour or body language. Make a suggestion or wonder about how they are feeling.

"You have been really quiet today. I wonder if you feel worried about school?"
"You are shouting and stamping your feet. It looks like you are frustrated that we can't go to the park today"
'You seem to be feeling kind of sad about that.'

This helps your child learn how to recognise and label their emotions.



Talk Time

Talk time can help contain your child's anxiety. You don't have to talk about anxiety immediately – any conversation is useful. It's about providing a regular, safe space for your child to talk and problem solve with you. This can help build a closer relationship and over time may encourage your child to open up and share their feelings and worries.

You can talk while engaging in an activity, like drawing, having a snack or doing a puzzle or while you walk/drive them to an activity. It helps when Talk Time becomes a routine so your child knows there is a designated time they can talk to you.

Talk Time can also be helpful when you find that your child talks a lot about their worries throughout the day. Rather than discussing their worries every time they pop up, you can delay talking about them to Talk Time. For example, *"I hear you are worried. Let's talk about this at Talk Time".* Then encourage your child to get on with their day or the task they were engaged in. Over time your child may be more able to put their worries aside. They may even find that they are no longer worried when Talk Time comes around.

Aim for about 10 minutes every day. Make sure it is a good time for both of you to talk and listen to each other.

When is a good time to talk?

Come up with a time that works for both you and your child.

It is best to avoid times when either of you are tired, upset, anxious or hungry. This can make it much more difficult to have a calm conversation.

Bedtime can be a good time to have a chat but be mindful that talking about worries too close to bedtime can interfere with your child's sleep.

Whilst it is good to have a set time, it is okay to be flexible if you find that either of you are not calm and ready to talk at the arranged time. Talk about it and come up with a plan to have a conversation when you are both ready.

As well as talking about your child's and your own feelings, reading books with a character who experiences anxiety can be beneficial. It's a way **for children to learn that lots of other people also worry and that they are not the only one who experience anxiety.** It can also provide an opportunity to talk about ways to cope with anxiety. Maybe you could try out a strategy that works for the character. Maybe how the character manages their anxiety inspires other ideas how to manage anxiety that work for your child.

- ☐ Ruby Finds a Worry by Tom Percival
- ☐ The Worry Box by Suzanne Chiew & Sean Julian
- ☐ Me and My Fear by Francesca Sanna
- ☐ Jack's Worry by Sam Zappardi
- ☐ Don't Feed the Worry Bug by Andi Green
- ☐ 100th Day Worries by Margery Cuyler
- ☐ How Big Are Your Worries Little Bear? By Jayneen Sanders & Stephanie Fizer Coleman
- ☐ The Very Hungry Worry Monster by Rosie Greening
- ☐ The Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside

If you can't get hold of a book, there are many videos on YouTube of people reading them out loud. You could watch the videos together and pause at different points to discuss what is happening in the story and what your child is thinking and feeling as they listen.

If you feel like your child is too old for storybooks, you could talk about the chapter books they are reading or discuss the feelings of characters in a film, TV programme, video game or YouTube clip.

Key questions to ask:

- *"How do you think [this character] is feeling right now?"*
- *"How do you know they're feeling like that?"*
- *"What happens when you feel like that?"*
- *"What do you think they'll do next?"*
- *"What makes you think that?"*
- *"What would you do?"*
- *"How would that make you feel?"*

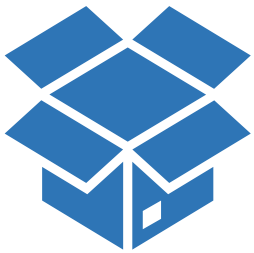
When Talking About Emotions is Hard

Talking about emotions can feel really tricky, especially when we're not used to it.

Sometimes it can be easier for children to write down or draw how they're feeling and show it to you, rather than speaking about it.

Worry Boxes

Sometimes it can be tricky to talk about worries. We may be anxious what others might think or the worries feel too overwhelming to talk about.



You can encourage your child to write down or draw what they worry about. They can then put their 'worries' inside the worry box and you can look at them together later, for example at Talk Time.

It doesn't have to be a box—it can be anything! A jar, a small bag, a drawer or special space in the house. If your child wants to, they can decorate it.

Once you talked about the worries and have come up with a plan to cope with them, you may want to ask your child to rip up the worries.

Younger Children

The ability to recognise emotions and the understanding why we might be feel the way we do is a skill that develops as children grow.

Younger children can find it harder to work out how they are feeling and why this might be. Talking about emotions helps your child develop this skill. It is important to be patient. New skills take time to develop like riding a bike or learning to play an instrument. It needs practice to get good at it.

Children & Young People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Children and Young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can find it particularly difficult to recognise and understand emotions.

It might take more time for them to be able to identify different emotions in themselves and others, and to make links between these emotions and what is going on in their life and the lives of others.

As a parent, you can help them develop this skill using all the different strategies we discussed so far. But be mindful that some children and young people with ASD may always find it trickier to recognise emotions.

You can find links to more ASD resources on:

- Pines Website: thepineshighland.com
- CAMHS, NHS Lothian website: https://services.nhslothian.scot/camhs/
- Nest Learn Zone website: www.nest.scot/learn-zone

NHS Lothian

Part 2

Anxiety Traps

Information for Parents and Carers

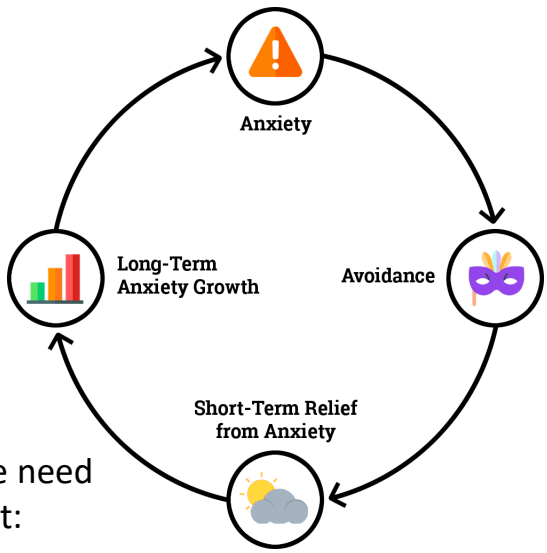
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), NHS Lothian

Anxiety Traps

Children and young people who struggle with anxiety, often engage in behaviours to protect themselves against danger or to prevent a feared event. These behaviours can include **escaping** or **avoiding** feared situations, seeking reassurance from people around them, or using '**safety behaviours**'. A safety behaviour is any behaviour that your child relies on to be able to go into or stay in a situation that makes them anxious. For example, they go to the park but only if you go with them.

All of these behaviours are known as '**anxiety traps'.** They are traps because they **reduce anxiety in the short-term but keep it going in the long-term**. If your child is falling into these anxiety traps, you may have noticed that their anxiety has got worse over time or that they have become less confident they can cope.

When children are distressed, they turn to their parents/carers for comfort and support.
As parents/carers you notice the signs that your child is upset and understandably want to protect them and make them feel better.
It is hard for any parent/carer to see their child distressed.



Yet to overcome anxiety, children and young people need to **face feared situations**. This helps them learn that:

- *What they worry about may not happen. There is no actual danger.*
- *What they worry about isn't as bad as they thought it would be.*
- *Even though they might feel anxious, they are able to cope.*
- *Anxiety naturally reduces when they stay in the situation.*

As parents/carers you can help your child overcome their anxiety by:

- *Noticing your child's anxiety traps*
- *Not unintentionally reinforcing these anxiety traps*
- *Not falling into these anxiety traps yourself.*

It is easy to be tricked by anxiety and to get stuck in anxiety traps. Please don't be hard on yourself if you realise that you or your child have fallen into an anxiety trap. There are things you and your child can try to break the vicious cycle of the anxiety.

Research tells us that when parents change their responses, it can break an anxiety trap and help reduce the child's anxiety.

Common Parent Anxiety Traps

Reassurance

When children and young people learn something new, they often ask a trusted adult for their feedback. This includes asking questions about potential dangers and safety. It is normal and helpful for adults to provide reassurance and to support children to learn.

Limited amounts of reassurance are normal and can be helpful. It can encourage your child to do something they haven't done before.

However, children who experience anxiety often seek lots and lots of reassurance and ask the same questions over and over again. Some examples of reassurance seeking are:

- *"Are you sure you locked the front door?"*
- *"Did you wash your hands before you cooked this?"*
- *"What if I go to the party and am sick in front of everyone…?"*
- *Asking you to check their homework repeatedly.*

This can be frustrating and time consuming for parents/carers and they can easily get drawn into:

- Making promises that things will or won't happen
- Providing examples of when things did or didn't happen
- Telling them that everything will be okay.

Providing lots of reassurance can be unhelpful because:

- Your child keeps needing more and more. It's never enough
- It relieves their worries only in the short-term but doesn't change or stop them in the long-term
- It keeps your conversation and your child focussed on the worry.

It is not about not responding, it is about responding differently by:

- *Limiting the amount of reassurance you give*
- *Asking your child questions, rather than giving answers*
- *Showing empathy by validating your child's feeling*
- *Suggesting a more helpful way of coping with their worries and anxiety.*

You can learn more about reducing lots of reassurance seeking at **Anxiety Canada:**
www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/Reassurance_Seeking.pdf

Avoidance and Escape

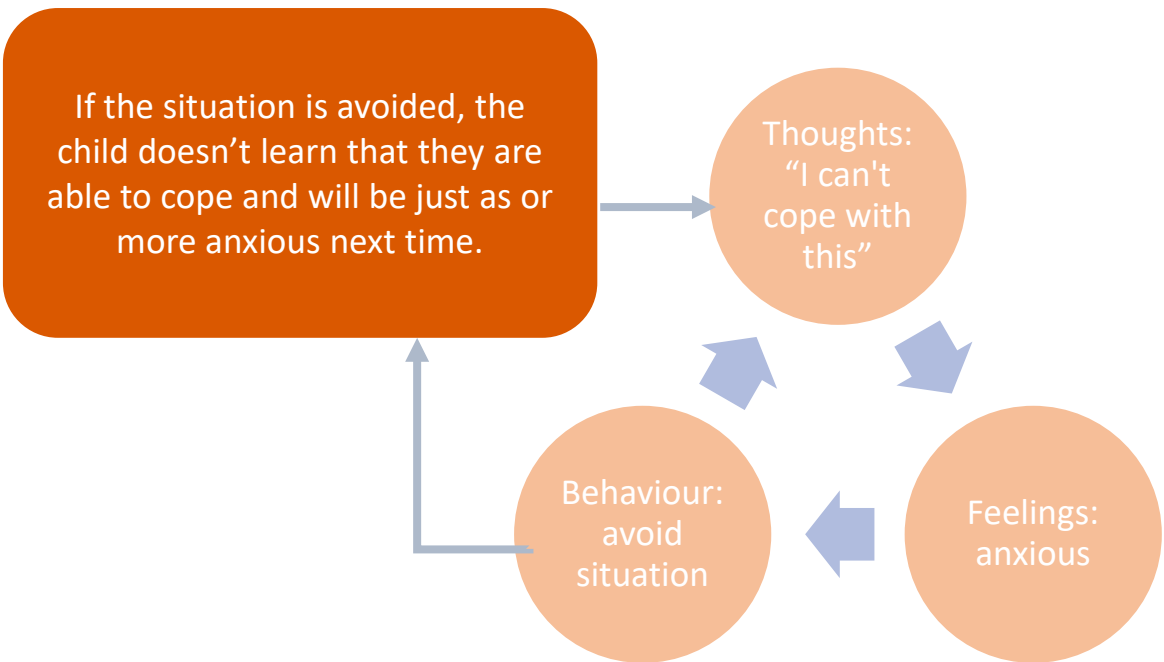
Let's think back to the Fight and Flight response. Our brain is designed to alert us to possible threats and dangers and to keep us safe by getting us ready to run away or fight. Avoidance is a natural, instinctual flight response that is common for both children and adults.

As a parent/carer, it is natural that you don't want to see your child distressed. You want to protect them from situations that make them feel anxious and may therefore unintentionally end up helping them avoid.

However, when we avoid situations we do not have the chance to learn what the situation is really like and that we are able to cope. We are also not able to learn and practice coping strategies that help us to get through situations we find anxiety-provoking.

Some common ways parents/carers unintentionally fall into the avoidance anxiety trap with their child:

- *Taking on responsibilities that would otherwise fall to the child*
- *Changing family routines so the child doesn't have to do something*
- *Picking up their child early*
- *Letting their child stay home/not go to things that make them anxious.*



Safety Behaviours

Safety behaviours are subtle behaviours that your child uses to prevent their fears from coming true or to feel more comfortable in situations they feel anxious about.

Some examples of safety behaviours:

- Frequent hand washing or asking parents/carers to wash their hands
- Sitting near the door so they can escape if needed
- Overpreparing for tests
- Taking a soft toy or other object like a water bottle with them.

In the short-term these behaviours can help your child to face or get through an anxiety provoking situation. It makes them feel less anxious and appears to reduce their worries.

Why are safety behaviours unhelpful?

When your child uses a safety behaviour and their fears don't come true, they might believe the safety behaviour 'prevented' their fears. Over time your child can become dependent on safety behaviours and feel even more anxious when they can't use them.

Safety behaviours also stop your child from directly testing their fears and worries will continue to pop up in the future.

As with avoidance, you might unintentionally help your child to use these safety behaviours or become part of their safety behaviour.

Managing Anxiety Traps

To help reduce your child's anxiety, it is important to identify any anxiety traps you and your child might have fallen into.

This can help you to come up with a more helpful plan for managing your child's anxiety in feared situations. It may also prevent you from falling into anxiety traps in the future.

What anxiety traps might you be falling into?

Making a Plan to Avoid Anxiety Traps

STEP 1: Make a clear plan

Before you start reducing anxiety traps such as reassurance or avoidance, it is important that you have a clear idea of what you want to do and how you plan to do it.

Think about what specific behaviours you want to change or stop and what you plan to do instead.

For example*: I want my child to stop asking me whether I am sure I locked the front door at night. I won't provide reassurance when they ask me. I will remind them that providing reassurance keeps anxiety going and ask them to use a coping strategy instead (deep breathing, a coping statement, a relaxing activity). I will praise them for trying something new.*

Write down your plan:

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STEP 2: Discuss the plan

Discuss your plan with other important adults in your child's life and get them on board so you all respond in the same way. Ask if they have any suggestions to add to the plan.

Discuss your final plan with your child. Make sure they understand the plan and its purpose.

How will I explain the plan to my child

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STEP 3: Follow through with the plan

Once you have explained the new plan to your child and checked they understand what is going to change, it is important to consistently follow through with it.

It can be tricky at first to change our behaviours, especially if we have been doing them for a long time.

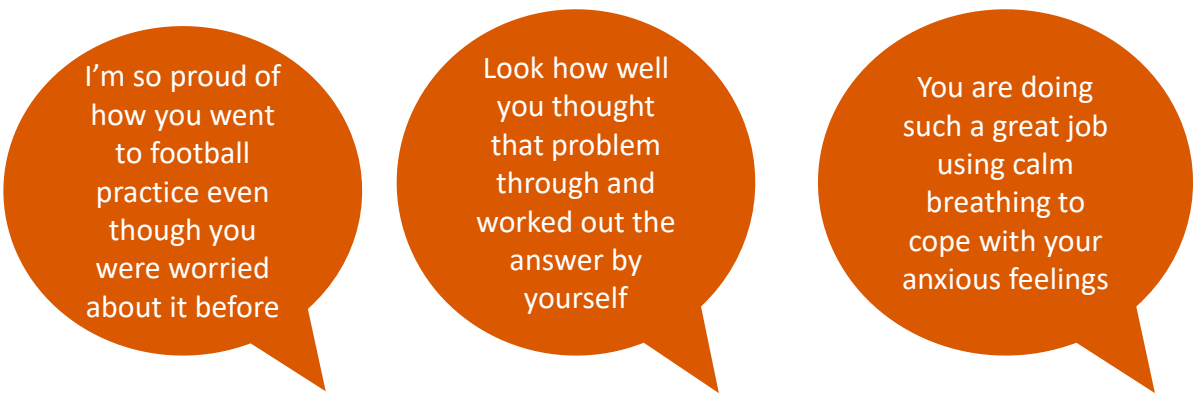
You might need to remind yourself and your child of the plan at first but it will get easier over time as they learn that they can manage their anxiety.

You might also find that your child becomes very anxious when you first start changing how you are behaving. They might also become very frustrated or angry. If you stick with it however, they will break the anxiety traps and you will support them to learn how to cope with their anxiety in helpful ways.

STEP 4: Praise and positive attention

It might feel like a big change for your child at first and they might need to work very hard to stick to the new plan.

Whenever you notice something your child is doing well, give them lots of praise and draw attention to what you think they have done well or the progress they have made. It helps them to learn what to do more of if you are very specific about what you think they have done well.



Helpful Tips

1

Be consistent:

The most effective way of overcoming anxiety is sticking to the personalised plan you have made, and being consistent with this approach across different situations, even when it becomes more challenging!

Often when children cry, shout or delay a task that needs to be done (such as going to school), parents/carers switch back to how they were behaving before. While this might work in the short-term it is the same anxiety trap. It also means that children learn that if they cry, shout or delay the task that this will make you give them reassurance or that they can avoid what they are anxious about. This means that they will be more likely to behave like this in the future and it does not help them to learn to manage their own anxiety.

If you stick with the plan then your child will learn other ways to cope with anxiety.

2

Make sure everyone acts in the same way:

Similarly, it is important to include adults and older children in the house in the plan to ensure a consistent approach. This is to make sure that others are not accidently falling into the anxiety traps, for example, by providing reassurance or helping the child to avoid situations. If you change your behaviour, it may be more likely your child may look to others for short-term relief from anxiety symptoms, e.g. seeking reassurance.

If everyone acts in the same way it is easier for your child to understand the plan and learn how to cope with anxiety.

3

Give lots of praise and attention to coping skills:

When your child feels anxious, encourage them to use their coping skills rather than trying to distract them.

Once they have tried out a coping skill or have calmed down, it is important to reinforce this behaviour with lots of praise, attention, and rewards.

Managing Your Own Responses

Children learn by watching how others react and manage situations. This means we need to be aware of what our children are learning from adults around them.

Research has shown that even if you are the calmest, most relaxed person and parent if you are looking after an anxious child, it is very likely you will start feeling anxious too. As a parent it is our job to protect our children and seeing them upset is understandably very difficult. It makes sense that sometimes we will do anything to help them feel better. However, as we have just seen, avoidance is one of the biggest anxiety traps.

Research also tells us that children who are anxious are more likely to pick up on other people's reactions than those who are not. They are more on the lookout for signs that there is something to worry about.

Sometimes our responses unintentionally send messages that there is something to be worried about. This can make anxiety worse.

How adults react can break the anxiety trap and reduce anxiety.

It is important to be understanding and caring, but do not let the anxiety trick you into thinking that something is too hard for your child. For example, thinking it's too hard for your child to sleep alone. Yes, it might be challenging, but it can be done!

Common responses that can keep anxiety going:

- Adults stepping in and taking over
- Avoiding or leaving situations
- A child hearing about adult worries
- Worried facial expressions
- Checking if they are ok lots
- How adults cope with their own anxiety

Adult responses can unintentionally send messages that a child is not OK, can't cope or there is something to be worried about.

When a child's anxiety gets bigger, adults want to do more to help them feel better and protect them.

If adults change their responses, it can help break the anxiety trap.

Modelling Your Responses

Children learn from the behaviours of others. They learn how to recognise, show and cope with emotions from the way their parents and carers do.
It is ok to feel anxious yourself, after all we know everybody feels anxious from time to time. Feeling anxious can give opportunity to demonstrate or **model** to your child how to manage the feeling.

Show your child how you cope with anxiety. Remember, feeling anxiety sometimes is normal. Show your child when you are facing a situation that makes you feel anxious. Show them that you feel it and can cope with it.

"I feel worried about my job interview today, but I will take some deep breaths and do my best."

Other tips for modelling:

- We all have things we worry about or are scared of but if we frequently talk about our own worries in detail, it might give a child the idea that they need to be scared too. Naturally being able to predict possible threats is an important survival skill but try to avoid doing this all the time. For example, saying out loud "I hope there won't be scary dogs at the park." **Try to send positive messages about coping.**

- Think about what your body is saying. Even if you are keeping your worries inside make sure your facial expression isn't saying something different. **Try to use an encouraging and neutral facial expressions** when possible. We know this is not always easy, especially if you are not feeling this inside.

- Be aware of conversations that are had around your child, some topics can actually add to fears, rather than reduce it. Hearing about adult worries can increase anxiety in a child. Try to **limit what scary or upsetting information your child gets** from the news, TV or games they might find scary. This might mean not having some conversations in front of your child. Little ears can be very sensitive!

Demonstrate having a go and confident behaviour –
even if inside you are feeling unsure.

Managing Your Own Responses

What makes you anxious? What are your tell-tale signs?
You could ask a friend or family member how they know you are anxious.

How do you cope with anxiety? Does your child know this?
What does this tell them?

What messages do you or other adults send to your child about their anxiety?

- ☐ Worried Faces
- ☐ Sharing worries about how they will cope
- ☐ Checking they are ok too much
- ☐ Sharing adult worries (e.g. money, arguments or health)
- ☐ Helping them avoid
- ☐ Helping them leave/escape
- ☐ Seeing too much news
- ☐ Seeing scary films, TV or games

Is there anything you might try differently?

NHS Lothian

Part 3

Overcoming Anxiety

Information for Parents and Carers

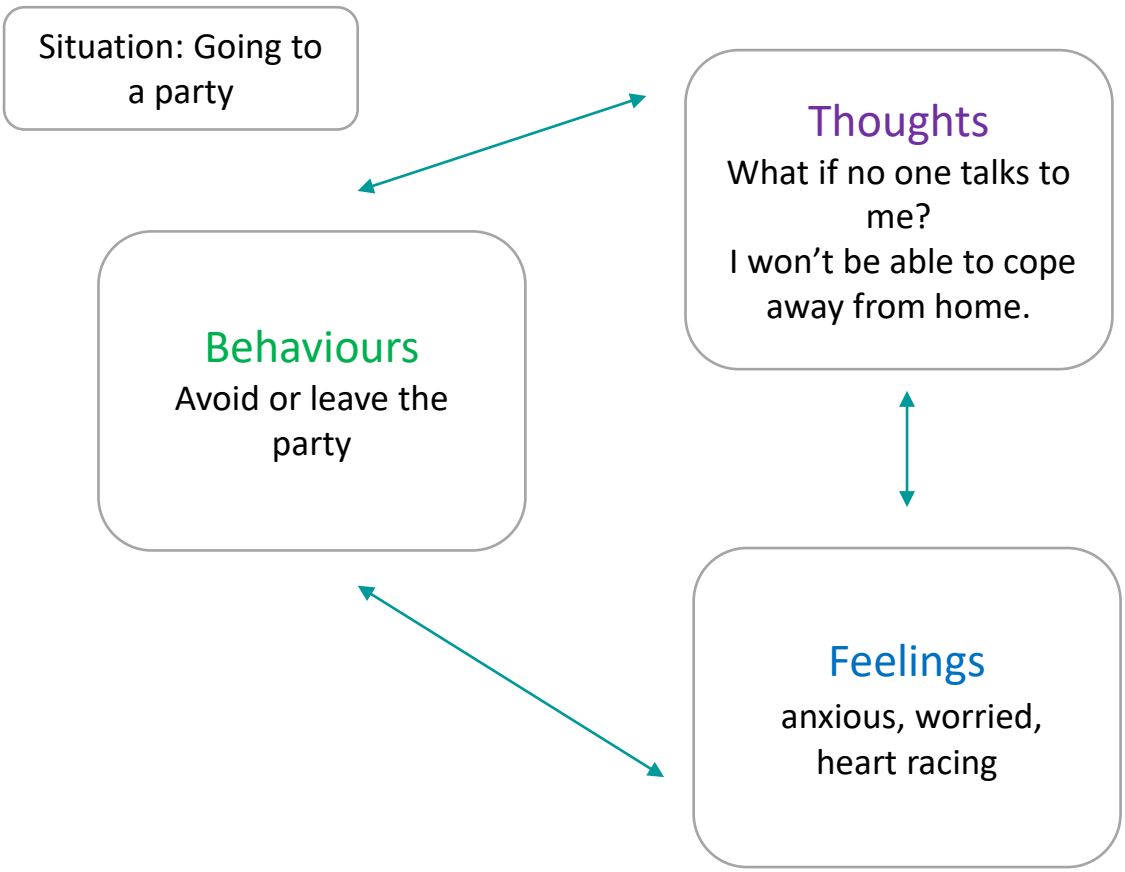
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), NHS Lothian

Coping Strategies

Sometimes children and young people get caught in an anxiety trap. We do things to try and make anxiety go away, but sometimes this can make it anxiety worse (see Part 2 on anxiety traps).

It is easy to get caught in the anxiety trap. An example of this is shown below. The good news is we can break this trap with coping strategies.

If we change one part of the trap, it can help change the other parts too and break the vicious cycle.



This booklet covers some strategies you can do with your child that can help break the cycle of anxiety:

- Using relaxation to manage anxious feelings
- Managing anxious thoughts and worries
- Breaking tasks down to help reduce avoiding situations.

Relaxation

Relaxation exercises can help to manage the body signs of anxiety (see Part 1) which can be scary and uncomfortable.

Learning how to relax the body allows young people to turn down the physical signs of anxiety. When they are more relaxed, they are calmer and their mind quietens too. This can help with sleep and concentration.

There are some examples of relaxation exercises that might be helpful:

- Calm Breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Calm images.

You might also have other ways of relaxing, for example:

- Going for a bath
- Listening to music
- Reading a book
- Yoga
- Have a hot drink
- Walk outside.

Calm Breathing

One of the best tools to turn down anxiety is calm breathing. It is great because we can use it anywhere.

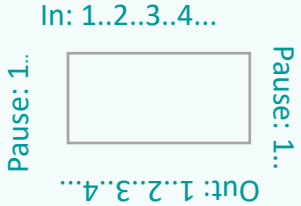
When we feel anxious, the fight or flight response goes off. This makes our breathing faster. This is to get lots of oxygen to our muscles to help us fight or flight. However, if we don't need to fight or flight then we can end up having too much. We might feel dizzy or lightheaded. Calm breathing helps us slow down our breathing, get the balance right and turn down the anxiety alarm.

Breathe in slowly through your nose (1..2..), pause, then breathe out through your mouth (1..2..3..4..)

You could try asking your child to imagine there is a balloon in their tummy getting bigger and smaller as they take slow deep breathes.

They could try imagining they are smelling a birthday cake (breathe in) and blowing out the candles (breathe out).

You could also imagine tracing a shape in your mind.



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Our muscles get tense when we are anxious. Stretching and relaxing our muscles can help turn down anxiety.

You can work through each of the main muscle groups, tensing each one for 5-7 seconds and then let go and relax.

There are lots of helpful scripts to guide you through this. Try the Hospichill app with younger children or Safespot 'muscle relaxation' in the audio section.

Calm Images

Imagine a place that is calm and relaxing. This could be a real or imaginary place or a happy memory.

It might be a garden, tropical island, forest or their bedroom. Make it really detailed by imagining it in lots of detail.

What would you see?
What would you hear?
What would you smell?
What would it feel like?

Calm images can be used anywhere. It turns down the physical signs of anxiety and takes our attention away from anxious thoughts.

Tips for practicing relaxation

You can help your child learn how to relax by encouraging them to practice relaxation exercises on a regular basis.

It is best to start by practicing when your child is not feeling distressed. Once they have learned the exercises, they can be used when they are feeling anxious.

You might want to practice with them.

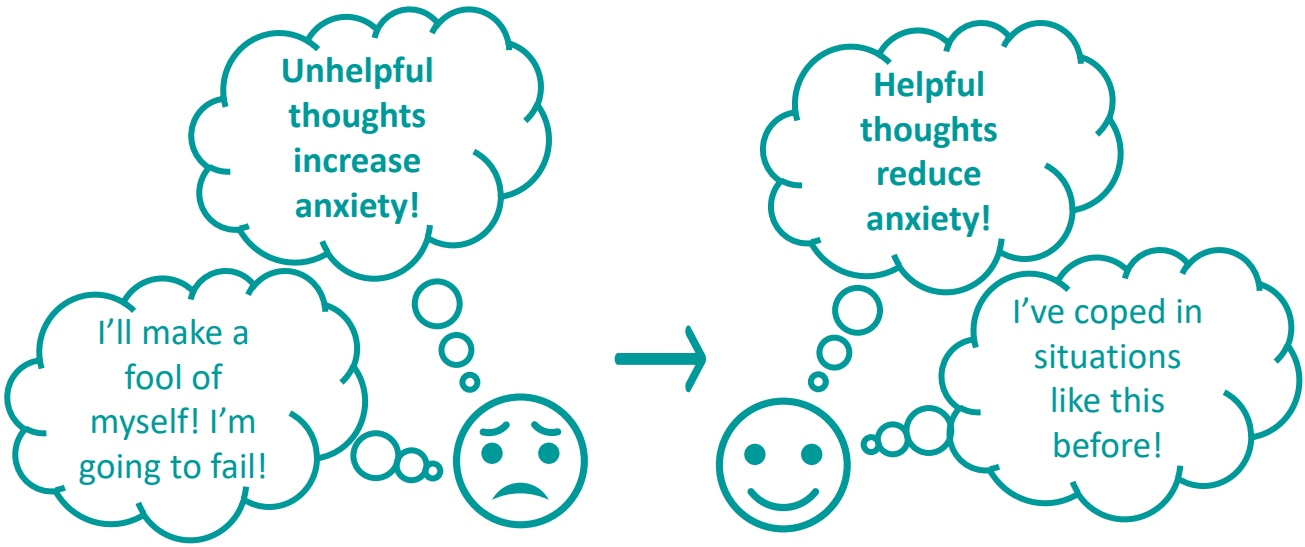
Different relaxation methods may be useful at different times. It is important that your child finds out what works best for them!

There are lots of different Apps available offering guided relaxation exercises. Some suggestions are included in the list of resources at the end of this booklet.

Managing Anxious Thoughts and Worries

When we are anxious we often have unhelpful thoughts and worries. We listen to these thoughts because they are automatic and seem true even though they are not always facts.

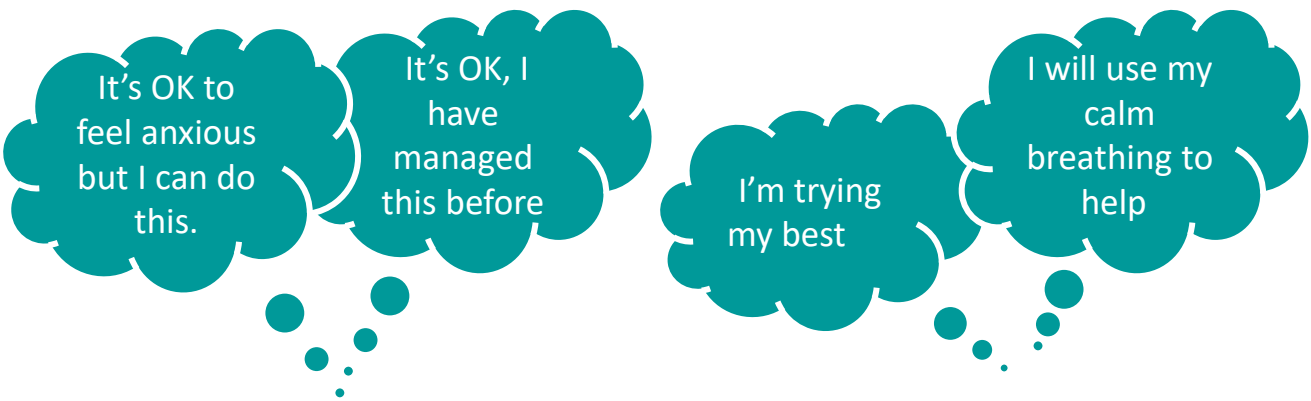
Our thoughts can have a big impact on our feelings and can increase anxiety and anxious behaviours.



You can help your child identify their anxious thoughts by using some of the tips in Part 1: Understanding and Talking about Anxiety.

Try Using Coping Thoughts:

When anxious thoughts pop into our head we can balance them with coping thoughts. Coping thoughts encourage us to keep going and telling ourselves that we can manage.



Distraction

Young people can also try distracting themselves for a moment. This can stop them from getting stuck on anxious thoughts.

Distraction means keeping your mind busy.

This can help for a short time to get through situations that make us feel anxious. It is important we use distraction along with other strategies too.

Ideas for Distraction:

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Distraction suggestions:

- Counting backwards from 50 in 3's…50, 47, 44
- Naming all the characters in your favourite TV series or football team
- Thinking of an animal or country that begins with every letter of the alphabet
- Talking to someone
- Playing with friends
- Listening to music or watching TV
- Drawing or painting
- Playing a game on a phone/tablet

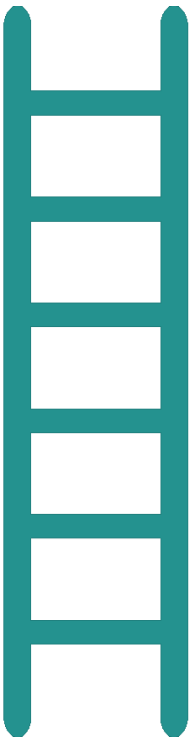
Breaking Tasks Down

Facing your fears can be really hard. As well as using coping strategies, it can also help to break down feared situations and build up to face them in smaller steps. This is called Graded Exposure.

This means you don't try too much in one go and find it too scary. Taking small steps helps children learn they can cope with feeling anxious. It helps them build confidence in scary situations. They can also start to learn that what they are worried about may not happen or be true.

Remember, avoiding situations keeps anxiety going!

You can help your child break their fears down into small steps and build up slowly. For example:



Goal: To sleep in my room alone all night, every night for one week.

Step 5: To sleep in my room alone with one of my parents checking on me every 30 minutes until I am asleep, for one week.

Step 4: To sleep in my room alone with one of my parents checking on me every 20 minutes until I am asleep, for five nights in a row.

Step 3: To sleep in my room alone with one of my parents checking on me every 10 minutes until I am asleep, for two nights in a row.

Step 2: To sleep in my room alone with mum or dad upstairs while I settle to sleep.

Step 1: To sleep in my room all night with my friend staying over with me.

It is important to recognise small steps when overcoming anxiety. It is hard work so celebrate effort with praise and rewards.

Watch a YouTube video on Graded Exposure by Dr Paul Stone to learn more:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHfUdOM8QIQ

Try breaking a situation your child finds anxious down into steps. It is best to do this with them, so they have control over the plan to overcome their anxiety.

What would your child like to do:

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Plan in rewards and praise for each step!

Building confidence and independence

Encourage children to take on new tasks. It can be helpful to start with day-to-day activities rather than anxiety-provoking activities e.g. feeding pets, watering plants, making their bed or making a purchase in a shop. This will give your child a sense of being able to do new things and to feel 'grown up' and in control.

If your child has not tried this activity before, demonstrate each step and check they understand what to do. Let your child have a go and show confidence in them, letting them know you think they can do it and staying calm. If they feel overwhelmed, it can be helpful to share your own experiences of learning a new skill. You can also offer a small reward as encouragement if your child is reluctant to have a go.

This confidence can give the child an opportunity to develop independence to do things, by and for themselves, in order to learn that they can cope, and succeed, even if it doesn't always work out well the first time.

Hints and Tips for Graded Exposure

- Post-it notes allow for flexibility when making your ladder
- Let your child lead and tell you what the hardest steps are. Be guided by your child in designing and ordering steps from least anxiety-provoking to most anxiety-provoking. You could rate them out of 10 (10 = most scary)
- Ask your child what they think will happen. Do this as your child comes to each step. Their prediction is likely to change as they learn new information and gain confidence. This will help them to learn new ways of thinking and question whether their worries are true
- Start small and build on the momentum of success
- Be aware that some steps may take longer to do
- Don't be afraid to review steps if the 'jump' feels too big. Be flexible and adapt the plan. If a step has been too big or overwhelming, it is important that it is not experienced as failure. Consider if it is worth trying again or if the step needs broken down further
- Get creative! Make the steps fun where possible
- Plan ahead with rewards and make them appropriate for short, mid and long term goals. And Praise! Praise! Praise!
- Where possible create situations, and find opportunities, to try steps
- Consider making your own ladder to show overcoming anxiety is normal and model.

Reflect

After the child has completed a step, it is really important to check out exactly what did happen. Here are some useful questions:

- What happened?
- Was it the same as you thought? Did your predictions come true?
- Did something else happen? What was it? Were you surprised?
- How did you cope?
- What have you learned from doing this step?

Reward, Repeat and Adapt!

Rewards and Praise

We know people of all ages respond well to positive feedback. Children and young people are no exception.

The attention rules tells us that children will do more of a behaviour that we pay attention to, whether the attention is good or bad. Try focusing on what you want to see more of through praise and reward.

If a child receives praise, they will be more likely to show that behaviour again in the future. Children love praise – especially from their parents or carers.

It can be easy to focus on the anxious behaviour and accidentally ignore them trying to face their fears. Try to focus on praising brave behaviour and trying to cope.

How do you feel about giving praise?
For some it might feel unnatural or forced, for others it might be hard to find praiseworthy moment.

How does your child respond to praise?
Some children soak it up, while others get embarrassed or reject the praise. Reflect on how you receive praise.

Check out our **Praise Points** on the next page.

You might also want to look at a **'Guide for parents on using praise and rewards'** on the NHS Lothian CAMHS website:
https://services.nhslothian.scot/camhs/wp-content/uploads/sites/55/2023/01/Praise-and-Rewards.doc

Write the praise points you feel confident using and the ones that you would like develop below.

Great job!!

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Keep going!!

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Praise Points

Focus on what you want more of, not what you want less of.
Rather than praising for "not fighting with your brother", flip it round. Be positive and specific, "It makes me smile to see you playing nicely with your brother".

Give praise as often as possible.
Give praise whenever you see a behaviour you like. For anxious children, you should be watching out for both good behaviours (e.g., doing homework, tidying up toys) and confident behaviours (e.g., stroking next door's dog, saying hello to an unfamiliar shopkeeper).

Do not wait for perfection.
Many anxious children (and sometimes their parents) are perfectionists. You can praise your child for their efforts and for each bit of progress they make.

Give praise straight away.
When should you praise? Now? Next week? When we get a minute? Praise should be given as soon as possible after your child has done the desired behaviour, especially with younger children - too late and the praise may lose its impact.

Sound really positive when giving praise.
Praise needs to be believable; think about your facial expressions, tone of voice and body language. It is important to convey your enthusiasm.

Don't follow praise with a criticism.
It's all to easy to say "Well done! I knew you could be brave…why can't you do that more often?" Which bit of the statement is a child more likely to remember? The praise is less effective and might actually stop a child from trying the good/brave behaviour again.

Use specific, labelled praise.
If your child doesn't know which behaviour they are being praised for, then they won't know which behaviour they need to do in order to get praise next time (e.g., praising your child for playing quietly with their sister, but they think they are being praised for the lovely drawing that they have just done on the wallpaper).

Rewards

- What's your favourite reward? 15 minutes to yourself? Chocolate? Quality time with a friend?
- What motivates your child? Having control of the TV remote? One-to-one time with you? Getting to stay up later at the weekend?

What do you think makes a good reward?

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The ideas of praise and reward are very similar:

Give lots of specific, labelled praise along with the reward so the child knows what behaviour is being rewarded.

Give the reward after rather than before. Incentives often work better than bribes. If the child has already had their reward, they have no reason to do the expected behaviour.

Rewards should be given as soon as possible so the child can make the link between the behaviour and the reward.

Don't forget - if rewards aren't consistent the child may lose motivation as they may or may not get a treat!

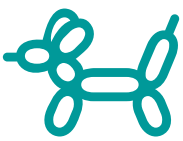
Rewards

Circle the ideas you think your child might like:

Choose what is for dinner
Art project
Movie night
Special activities
Community events
Time in nature
Trip to the park
Later bedtime
Playing a game with you
Crafts
Messy play
Bonus technology time
Play time with a friend
Tokens or stickers
Baking
Bike ride
Family dance party
Building a pillow fort

Other ideas: .....

Rewards don't need to be fancy or expensive, they might be things you were already going to do. Time and attention can be some of the most meaningful rewards.



They should be things the child likes rather than what you like. Have a chat with your child about possible rewards and agree them beforehand!

Food rewards are ok but go easy on these, especially with junk food. It can link emotions and eating.

Never take rewards away. It's tempting to remove a reward if there is difficult behaviour. If your boss came in to work one day and said, "you did some good work last week, but you made some mistakes yesterday, so I've decided that you're not getting paid", you would be angry. Would you turn up to work the next day?

NHS Lothian

Part 4

Looking After Yourself & Further Information

Information for Parents and Carers

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), NHS Lothian

Parenting a child who is anxious can be hard. It can make you feel stressed or anxious too. Sometimes when adults feel stressed, it is hard to react in the same way that we would when calm, or to cope with everyday life.

It is really important to look after yourself too. Some ideas for doing this include:

- Be kind to yourself
- Find moments of alone time
- Connect with others
- Maintain energy levels
- Give yourself permission to take a break
- Take a social media break
- Get outside in nature
- Move your body
- Use to-do lists
- Treat yourself.

Ideas to help me look after myself:

You can find further information on self-care here: www.annafreud.org/resources/family-wellbeing/self-care-for-parents-and-carers/

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Sometimes when you are finding a situation difficult, it can make feelings of stress or anxiety build up. This might be particularly true if you already find it difficult to manage your mental health and well-being. It is ok to ask for help.

What are your signs that you are finding things hard?

Who can help?

For more advice about **adult mental health and well-being**:

- NHS Inform: www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing
- Wellbeing Lothian: https://services.nhslothian.scot/wellbeinglothian/
- Healthy coping strategies to deal with distress: https://services.nhslothian.scot/wp-content/uploads/sites/133/2024/02/Dealing-with-Distress-guide-GSH.pdf

You might also want to speak to your GP about how you are feeling.

More hints and tips about parenting can be found under 'Parenting' at the NHS Lothian CAMHS, NHS Lothian website: https://services.nhslothian.scot/camhs/resources/

A directory of further supports for parents/carers can be found at www.parentclub.scot/family-support-directory

WEBSITES

Anxiety Canada Online, self-help and evidence-based resources on anxiety	www.anxietycanada.com	
Anxiety UK Support and advice for those with an anxiety disorder	www.anxietyuk.org.uk	
Breathing Space Scotland A free and confidential helpline for anyone experiencing low mood or depression	http://breathingspace.scot/	
Get Self Help Education on how to manage stress (parents and 14+)	www.getselfhelp.co.uk/stress.htm	
Hands On Provides advice for supporting children and young people's mental health	http://handsonscotland.co.uk/	
Mental Health Foundation UK-based charity with advice about how to manage stress and links to podcasts (parents and 14+)	www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stress	
Moodjuice Learn more about anxiety and skills to cope with it	www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/anxiety.asp	
NHS Choices NHS Health Information Website about causes of stress and how to manage this (parents and 14+)	www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/low-mood-stress-anxiety.aspx	
NHS Fife Mood Cafe Website produced by NHS Fife educating about stress and providing links to external resources (parents and 14+)	www.moodcafe.co.uk	
NHS Lothian CAMHS Various online resources	https://services.nhslothian.scot/camhs/	
NHS Lothian: Managing School Anxiety Advice for parents and carers	https://services.nhslothian.scot/camhs/wp-content/uploads/sites/55/2023/05/EBSR-Parents.pdf	
Penumbra A mental health charity working to improve mental wellbeing across Scotland	www.penumbra.org.uk	
Young Minds National charity and champion for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing	https://youngminds.org.uk/	
Young Scot Aye Feel Information about how to look after your emotional wellbeing, support from organisations and tips on how to promote a positive mindset	https://young.scot/campaigns/ayefeel/Young Scot	

BOOKS

Available at various libraries as part of the Healthy Reading Scheme

- **Blame my brain: The amazing teenage brain revealed (2007) by Nicola Morgan**
- **Helping your child with fears and worries: A self-help guide for parents (2019) by Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts**
- **How to step worrying (2009) by Frank Tallis**
- **The anxiety survival guide for teens: CBT skills to overcome fear, worry and panic (2015) by Jennifer Shannon & Doug Shannon**
- **The huge bag of worries (2004) by Virginia Ironside**
- **Think good, feel good: A CBT workbook for young people (2002) by Paul Stallard**
- **What to do when you're scared & worried: A guide for kids (2004) by James J. Crist**
- **Willy and the wobbly house: A story for children who are anxious or obsessional (2003) by Margot Sunderland**

APPS	
Headspace	App for guided meditation and relaxation
Hospihill	Provides relaxation exercises such as visualisation and helps to prepare for hospital visits
Mindshift	Helps recognise physical symptoms and learn to use relaxation strategies, problem solving and challenge thinking patterns
Mood Kit	Provides distracting activities, a mood journal and aids thought challenging
Mood Tools	Provides guided meditations, an activity tracker and information about depression
Pacifica	App for anxiety including mood tracker, thought record, daily challenges, relaxation
Self-Help for Anxiety Management	App with relaxation guides for physical relaxation and breathing. Divides anxiety into thoughts, feelings, sensations
Smiling Mind	App for relaxation exercises, breathing exercises and mindfulness
Stop, Breathe and Think	Contains mindfulness meditations for teenagers
Virtual Hope Box	An app which aims to reduce stress and anxiety, by providing distracting games, guided meditation and controlled breathing.
What's Up?	App to help with breathing, recognising thinking patterns, keeping thought diaries and includes positive quotes
Worry Box	Helps you learn to manage worries through problem solving, coping statements, self-talk and mindfulness

FURTHER INFORMATION

NHS EDUCATION FOR SCOTLAND RESOURCES

Back to school: Activity pack	https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/34127/psychosocial-mental-health-and-wellbeing-support/taking-care-of-other-people/working-with-young-people-and-families/back-to-school-activity-pack
Back to school: Resource pack	https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/34128/psychosocial-mental-health-and-wellbeing-support/taking-care-of-other-people/working-with-young-people-and-families/back-to-school-resource-pack
It's OK to worry about going back to school: Resource pack for parents	https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/34129/psychosocial-mental-health-and-wellbeing-support/taking-care-of-other-people/working-with-young-people-and-families/it-s-ok-to-worry-about-going-back-to-school-resource-pack-for-parents
It's OK to worry about going back to school: Resource pack for parents of neurodiverse children	https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/34130/psychosocial-mental-health-and-wellbeing-support/taking-care-of-other-people/working-with-young-people-and-families/it-s-ok-to-worry-about-going-back-to-school-resource-pack-for-parents-of-neurodiverse-children
It's OK to worry about going back to school after Coronavirus: Resource pack for teenagers	https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/34131/psychosocial-mental-health-and-wellbeing-support/taking-care-of-other-people/working-with-young-people-and-families/it-s-ok-to-worry-about-going-back-to-school-after-coronavirus-resource-pack-for-teenagers
Coming out of lockdown – managing worries: A guide for parents/carers of children and young people with long-term health conditions	https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/35081/psychosocial-mental-health-and-wellbeing-support/taking-care-of-other-people/working-with-young-people-and-families/coming-out-of-lockdown-managing-worries-a-guide-for-parents-carers-of-children-and-young-people-with-long-term-health-conditions

If you have any concerns, or are looking for further advice and support, please contact your GP.