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# **Supporting A Child With Anxiety**

## **Summer 2022**

# Context

- We are not mental health specialists – we are educationalists who have completed training to support young people
- We are aware of the challenges of accessing external support
- There are no magic wands

We may provide tonight collective support?

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# Understanding how stress and anxiety can grow

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KYC5SsJjx8>

This video helps to visually show how different levels of stress can affect someone

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# School context

- Increasing number of students presenting with 'Anxiety' - overwhelmed over time
- Affecting relationships – school and home
- Impact on school attendance
- Impact on academic outcomes

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# What is anxiety?

- Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear that is experienced as a combination of physical sensations, thoughts and feelings.
- All children and young people feel worried sometimes, and this is a normal part of growing up. At certain points, such as on your first day of school or before an exam, young people may become more worried, but will soon be able to calm down and feel better.
- Anxiety can become a problem when a young person feels stuck in it, or when it feels like an overwhelming, distressing or unmanageable experience. If this kind of worrying goes on for a long time, it can leave a young person feeling exhausted and isolated, and limit the things they feel able to do.
- If you know someone who is struggling with anxiety, there are things you can do to help them – including providing emotional support, working on practical strategies together and finding the right professional help if they need it.

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# What makes young people anxious?

A young person may feel anxious for a number of different reasons, depending on the individual. If you are feeling unmanageable amounts of worry and fear, this is often a sign that something in your life isn't right and you need support to work out what the problem is.

***The following kinds of things can make some children and young people feel more anxious:***

- experiencing lots of change in a short space of time, such as moving house or school
- having responsibilities that are beyond their age and development, for example caring for other people in their family
- being around someone who is very anxious, such as a parent
- struggling at school, including feeling overwhelmed by work, exams or peer groups
- experiencing family stress around things like housing, money and debt
- going through distressing or traumatic experiences in which they do not feel safe, such as being bullied or witnessing or experiencing abuse

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# Symptoms of anxiety

Anxiety tends to affect a young person's body, thoughts and feelings. They may also behave differently, including turning to certain coping behaviours to try to avoid or manage their anxiety.

## Physical symptoms:

- panic attacks, which can include having a racing heart, breathing very quickly, sweating or shaking
- shallow or quick breathing, or feeling unable to breathe
- feeling sick
- dry mouth
- sweating more than usual
- tense muscles
- wobbly legs
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), diarrhoea or needing to pee more than usual
- getting very hot
- Tearful

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## Thoughts and feelings:

- preoccupied by upsetting, scary or negative thoughts
- nervous, on edge, panicky or frightened
- overwhelmed or out of control
- full of dread or an impending sense of doom
- alert to noises, smells or sights
- worrying about being unable to cope with daily things like school, friendships and being in groups or social situations
- worrying so much that it is difficult to concentrate and/or sleep

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## Coping behaviours:

- withdrawing or isolating themselves – including not wanting to go to school, be in social or group situations, be away from parents or try new things
- repeating certain behaviours, actions or rituals (often called ‘obsessive compulsive behaviours’)
- eating more or less than usual
- self-harming



<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-mental-health/>

This clip gives a summary of strategies to support a child who is anxious

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# How to help your child in an anxious moment

When your child is in the middle of a very anxious moment, they may feel frightened, agitated or worried about having a panic attack. The important thing to do in the moment is to help them calm down and feel safe.

*These strategies can help:*

- **Breathe slowly and deeply together.** You can count slowly to five as you breathe in, and then five as you breathe out. If this is too much, try starting with shorter counts. If it works for them, gradually encourage your child to breathe out for one or two counts longer than they breathe in, as this can help their body relax.
- **Sit with them and offer calm physical reassurance.** Feeling you nearby, or holding your hand or having a cuddle if it's possible, can be soothing.
- **Reassure them that the anxiety will pass and that they will be okay.** It can be helpful to describe it as a wave that they can ride or surf until it peaks, breaks and gets smaller.

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- **Ask them to think of a safe and relaxing place or person in their mind.** If you haven't tried this before, agree with them when they're feeling calm what this place or person is. It could be their bedroom, a grandparent's house, a favourite place in nature or somewhere they've been on holiday. Sometimes holding a memento of a relaxing place, like a seashell or pebble, can help.
- **Try using all five senses together.** Connecting with what they can see, touch, hear, smell and taste can bring them closer to the present moment and reduce the intensity of their anxiety. You might think together about five things they can see, four things they can touch, three things they can hear, two things they can smell and one thing they can taste.
- **Encourage them to do something that helps them to feel calmer.** This could be running, walking, listening to music, painting, drawing or colouring-in, writing in a journal, watching a favourite film or reading a favourite book.
- Remember that everyone is different, and that over time you and your child can work together to find the things that work best for them in these moments.

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# How to help your child manage their anxiety

*Outside of moments when your child is feeling particularly anxious or panicky, there are things you can do over time to help them manage their anxiety and feel better. A lot of these strategies are about helping your child to understand themselves and find out what works for them. The more confident they feel about helping themselves when things are hard, the more they will believe in their ability to cope – helping to reduce feelings of panic.*

- **In a calmer moment, talk with your child about their anxiety.** Ask them what it feels like in their mind and body, and what things make them feel that way. It can be tempting to dismiss their worries because you want to reassure them, but it's important to empathise with their experience and validate their feelings.
- **Think together about whether there's anything in particular that's making them feel anxious.** This could include a friendship, a relationship with a family member, their schoolwork or a combination of things. Are there changes that could be made at home or school that would make things easier? If your child is worrying about things that are outside of their control, it might help to name together who is responsible for managing the problem – for example, you might say, “worrying about money is the parents’ job”.

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- **Help your child to recognise the signs that tell them they're getting anxious, so they know when to ask for help or help themselves.** Anxiety might make them feel sick or make their heart race. Getting to know these signs can make them less frightening and overwhelming when they happen.
- **Think together about the activities that help them to express themselves and reduce their anxiety.** Your child could try doing exercise, drawing or painting, writing in a journal, watching a favourite film, talking to friends or cooking and baking. These kinds of activities can help them to feel calmer.
- **Try activities that help us to relax, such as mindfulness, yoga or meditation.** Teenagers might like to use a mindfulness or meditation app such as Headspace or Calm. Remember that some people find these activities more helpful than others, so encourage your child to decide what works for them.
- You may wish to explore EFT Tapping – there are youtube tutorials available on line

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# Questions I wish my parents had asked me

YOUNGMINDS

#Take  
20

Who are the people you feel safe with?

Is there anything you want to talk about?

When was the last time you were very happy?

What makes you feel calm?

If you could change anything in your life what would it be?

What difficulties are you facing now?

What can I do to help?

I can tell that you really like  
\*insert video game/  
app/tv show/fossil collection\*,  
what about it do you love so much?

Where is a place you feel safe?

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Do you have any worries about starting a new school?

What are you most looking forward to this week?

It's okay to keep stuff private, but did you want to tell me more about \*insert subject\*?

How are you coping since your dad died?

What are you worried about when you lie in bed and can't sleep?

What are you most dreading this week?

How do you feel about things changing?

Is there a lot of picking on people at your school?

Is there anyone who is upsetting you?

How do you feel about growing up? What's exciting, what's scary?

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# Practical suggestion

**Make a worry box or self-soothe box.** It might help your child to write down their worries and put them in a worry box, giving them a physical place where their worries can be 'held'. Or they might prefer a self-soothe box, which they can fill with things that help them when they feel anxious – like photos, fidget toys, scented oils and positive quotes.

Click on the link advice on how to create the box

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/how-to-make-a-worry-box-a-guide-for-parents/#step-1:-explaining-the-worry-box-to-your-child>

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<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/>

This clip explain show children and young people use their worry box or self soothe box

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- **Help them do the things we know are important for our mental health: physical exercise, sleeping well, eating healthily, drinking water and spending quality time with loved ones.** Regular exercise is particularly important for anxiety because it can help to reduce the symptoms in the body. It doesn't have to be strenuous – walking or gentle yoga can help.
- **Encourage them to cut out stimulants.** Reducing or stopping drinking coffee, caffeinated drinks and alcohol can help because these can all trigger the physical symptoms of anxiety.
- **Spend quality time together and talk about other things.** Even if it's just for a little while, you can help your child take their mind off their worries by having fun, relaxing and laughing. Activities like playing a sport, sewing or playing musical instruments are great for focusing the mind on the moment.
- **Seek professional help if you're worried about your child's mental health and things aren't getting better.** Some children and young people with anxiety will need professional and specialist help to feel better. They may benefit from a specific diagnosis or a treatment such as medication or talking therapy.

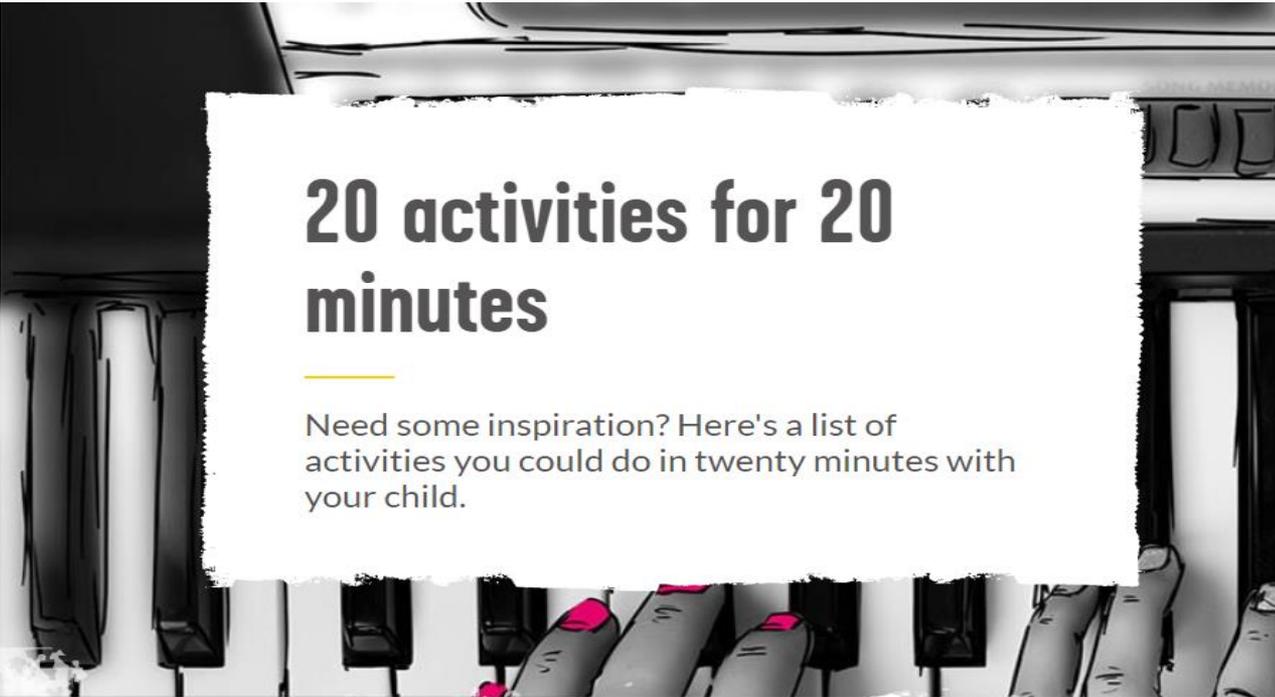
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## 20 activities for 20 minutes

Need some inspiration? Here's a list of activities you could do in twenty minutes with your child.

<https://youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/20-activities-for-20-minutes/>

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## Young people tell us it helps to:

- find positive activities you enjoy
- think about something you're looking forward to
- do physical exercise
- learn mindfulness and yoga
- imagine your thoughts leaving your brain and floating off into the sky
- keep yourself occupied
- have time out
- reflect on how you're feeling
- talk to other people you trust
- remind yourself you're not alone – odds are someone in your friendship circle has anxiety or depression too

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# What young people would like parents to know about school

- We're under high pressure and stress over our grades
- It feels like we have to be the same as our peers
- It's okay for us to do stuff that isn't school work – other interests are important
- We need space to breathe and unwind after school
- I'd like it if you made time to chat to me and ask me how my day was when I get home
- I need you to be on my side, and listen to me as well as my teachers
- You can support me better if you really get to know me and what I need
  - Trust me, and don't assume you know what school is like

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# What can I do if my child's feeling anxious about school?

- Ask them about what's worrying them. Focus on listening and providing emotional support, and reassure them that you can work together to make things better. You can find our tips on starting a conversation with your child here: [www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child)
- Think with your child about changes that could be made at school, at home or in their daily routine to help them feel less worried. You can use some of the ideas we've listed later in this guide.
- Reach out and communicate with the Pastoral team and other key staff to raise awareness

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- Talk with your child about strategies that help them to express and manage their anxiety. This could be spending time with particular friends, listening to music, reading, playing sport, drawing, cooking or watching a favourite film.
- Plan a regular morning routine that can be followed each day – from getting up to having breakfast, getting dressed, leaving the house and arriving at school. This will help to create a sense of security.
- Consider using a worry journal if your child feels particularly anxious while they're at school. They can carry this with them and write down a worry when it comes into their head, helping to keep anxious thoughts from becoming overwhelming.

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# What can I do if my child doesn't want to go to school?

- Ask them what it is about school that makes them not want to go, and validate their experience of finding these things difficult. Stay as calm as you can, taking your child's worries seriously and listening to how they're feeling.
- Even though the situation may feel stressful, don't shout, tell them off or physically force them to go to school. This is likely to increase their anxiety.
- Speak to your child's teacher or form tutor as soon as possible. Have they noticed any changes in their behaviour, or in their friendship group or class? Tackling the problem early can be really helpful, as the longer your child is out of school, the harder it can be to go back.
- Ask their teachers if there are particular moments when they seem to struggle. For example, it might be during the journey to school, lesson changeovers, break-times, particular subjects, or through the whole day. This can help you identify triggers.

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- Keep in regular communication with key staff at the school, and work with them to make changes that will help. You can use the tips below to help you.
- Make a log of the days when your child doesn't want to go to school. This will give you a better sense of when and how often they feel like this, and can also help you raise it with the school.
- Be consistent with the strategies you try to help them get back to school. Let your child get used to them and remember that it might take a while for something to work. Changing between lots of strategies quickly can be confusing, so only move on when you've tried something for a while without it helping.
- Try to stick to the same routine and praise your child for every small step they take. This could be getting out of bed at the right time, eating breakfast, washing and brushing their teeth, getting dressed and eventually leaving the house. If things are difficult and have already been going on for a while

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Watch this clip to get tips for advice on getting your child to attend school

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/school-anxiety-and-refusal/>

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# How can I support myself?

- Supporting your child when they're feeling anxious and don't want to go to school can be really difficult and stressful for you as a parent.
- It's important that you keep looking after yourself by talking to friends, family and anyone else in your support network.
- If you're struggling, you can also ask what the school can do to support you.
- If your child is regularly not going to school, it may be having an impact on your work and other areas of your life. If this is the case, remember to ask for help so you can take time out.
- You can also speak to your employer about how they might be able to support you, such as by offering flexible work hours or letting you work from home sometimes.

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# Help available

- Young Minds

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-mental-health/>

- NHS

<https://www.nelft.nhs.uk/>

- GP

- Kids Inspire

[https://www.kidsinspire.org.uk/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMIImc-y1tvH9wIV5YFQBh3RYwkpEAAAYASAAEgLhx\\_D\\_BwE](https://www.kidsinspire.org.uk/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMIImc-y1tvH9wIV5YFQBh3RYwkpEAAAYASAAEgLhx_D_BwE)

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