

# Supporting Your Child with Anxiety



**The Mental Health Support Team  
South Oxfordshire CAMHS**

# **Introduction**

The information within this leaflet is an introduction to helping your child with anxiety and is an overview of the contents from the one-to-one interventions offered by the Mental Health Support Team. The strategies summarised within this leaflet are based off the book “Helping Your Child with Fears and Worries” by Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts, a self-help guide developed to support parents of primary school aged children experiencing anxiety.

Our parent-led interventions help parents and carers to personalise and apply the strategies detailed in the book to their child and unique family circumstances. This CBT-informed, evidence-based, guided self-help consist of 6-8 individual sessions with parents to support their children to manage their fears and worries. The aim of the programme is to provide strategies that parents can use at home to assist their child to help them overcome problems with anxiety.

# What is Anxiety?

## What is anxiety?

- Anxiety is a normal emotion - we all experience it!
- Anxiety can be shown through our thoughts, behaviours, physical sensations, and emotions.
- Sometimes, anxiety can be useful as it can enhance performance.
- However, it becomes a problem when it is severe, frequent and interferes with everyday life.



## How does anxiety develop?

There is no single factor that causes anxiety, it is typically a number of factors that play a role:

- Genes: Anxiety runs in families, 1/3 of what makes a child anxious is explained by genes (this means anxiety is mostly influenced by the environment). We can inherit particular characteristics (not anxiety disorder per se) i.e. sensitivity.
- Adverse life events: stressful events may have more impact on anxious children.
- Learning by example: picking up fears from parents or others.
- Learning from other's reactions: how others respond to your child when they are anxious.
- Coping experiences: missed opportunities to learn how to face fears and develop skills.

# How is anxiety maintained?

## 1. Anxious thinking/ expectations

- A child thinks something bad is going to happen and thinks they will be unable to cope.
- A child looks out for evidence to support this.

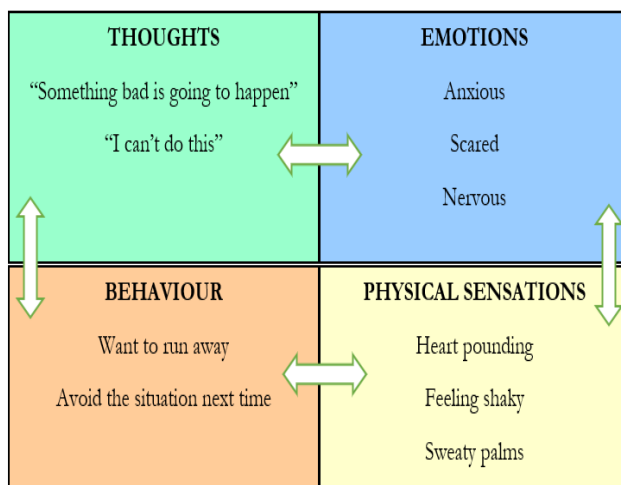
## 2. Physical response (bodily symptoms)

- A child interprets these as a sign that something bad is happening.
- Being aware of physical symptoms reduces confidence with challenges.

## 3. Anxious behaviour

- Avoidance keeps a child's fears going as they never know if the bad thing happens or not and so do not get the opportunity to develop ongoing skills.
- Safety seeking behaviours (things the child does to keep themselves safe)
  - Reassurance seeking is a kind of safety seeking behaviour that can prevent children from learning that they can cope independently.

How are our thoughts, behaviours, emotions, and bodily sensations connected?



### Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) Approach

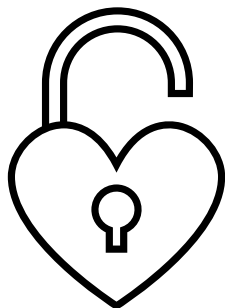
- We can't directly change our emotions or our physical sensations.
- But we can change our thoughts and behaviours to break that cycle.
- CBT is a great way of challenging those thoughts and behaviours that are present in anxiety provoking situations.

# How can parents & carers help?

## Talking & Listening

### What are my child's anxious expectations?

- Anxious children are often on the lookout for threat & 'jump to conclusions' about threat.
- Anxious children may expect something bad to happen if there's uncertainty or they may think they won't be able to cope with what happens.
- Anxious thoughts or expectations can make children feel less able to cope.



### How to understand why my child is worried?

- Some children might find it difficult to explain what they think will happen/what they fear.
- Understanding the child's thoughts from their point of view can help us know what they need to learn to overcome their anxiety.
- Asking questions puts children in control and helps them think for themselves.

1. Empathise e.g. *I can see you're feeling worried, that must be difficult.*
2. Normalise e.g. *I remember feeling scared about ..., it's hard isn't it?*
3. Ask open questions e.g. *What is frightening you? What do you think will happen?*
4. Make suggestions e.g. *Do you think you're worried that ... might happen?*
5. Check your understanding e.g. *I see, you're worried about ... Did I get that right?*
6. Pick your moment - *when* you ask your child can be as important as *what* you ask them.
7. Make it fun or rewarding e.g. *Thank you for sharing your fears with me, that was very brave of you and helped me to understand. Would you like to play a game together now?*

## Reducing Reassurance

- Reassuring your child is a natural response and may reduce distress in the short-term.
- Anxious children often seek out reassurance and unsurprisingly, parents respond.
- However, reassurance doesn't help children feel less anxious in the long run.
- Reassurance can be addictive: the more reassurance the child gets, the more they will think they need it.
- Children need opportunities test out for themselves whether or not their worried thoughts are accurate.
- Reducing reassurance can be attempted gradually as you start to respond differently.

## Worry Time

- If your child worries a lot, worry time might be helpful to reduce the amount of time worrying.
- Gives your child time to properly think through the worries with you.
- Choose a quiet 15 mins in a day where you sit down together to discuss what's on their mind.
- Best not immediately before bedtime.
- At other times in the day encourage your child to write worries down, reassure them you will talk about it later and then distract them.
- Could keep worries in a jar or diary.



## Step by Step Plan

- Children's fears often need to be faced gradually to give them confidence in their ability to cope, increase motivation, and get them used to testing out fears.
- A Step-by-Step plan can be helpful (see resources at the end of the pack).
- Decide with your child on which fear to face first and consider whether any planning is needed prior to your child completing any of the steps.

Ultimate goal (that is achievable and realistic).

Break the ultimate goal down into a series of steps (aim for 8 - 10).

All steps should relate to (and work towards) the ultimate goal.

Problem solve any difficulties your child faces with a step.

Encourage your child to experiment & investigate!

Add rewards for each step (from smallest reward to ultimate reward).

Ask your child to predict what will happen or how she/he will feel before attempting the step.

Agree with your child which step to try first (achievable, something they may have already done once or twice).

**Step 8**

**Step 7**

**Step 6**

**Step 5**

**Step 4**

**Step 3**

**Step 2**

**Step 1**

Ultimate reward.

Rate each step, in terms of how anxious you think it will make your child feel.

Order the steps from least to most anxiety-provoking, finishing with the ultimate goal.

If necessary, break a step down into smaller steps.

Rewards motivate & acknowledge achievement.  
Reviewing predictions will help your child learn.

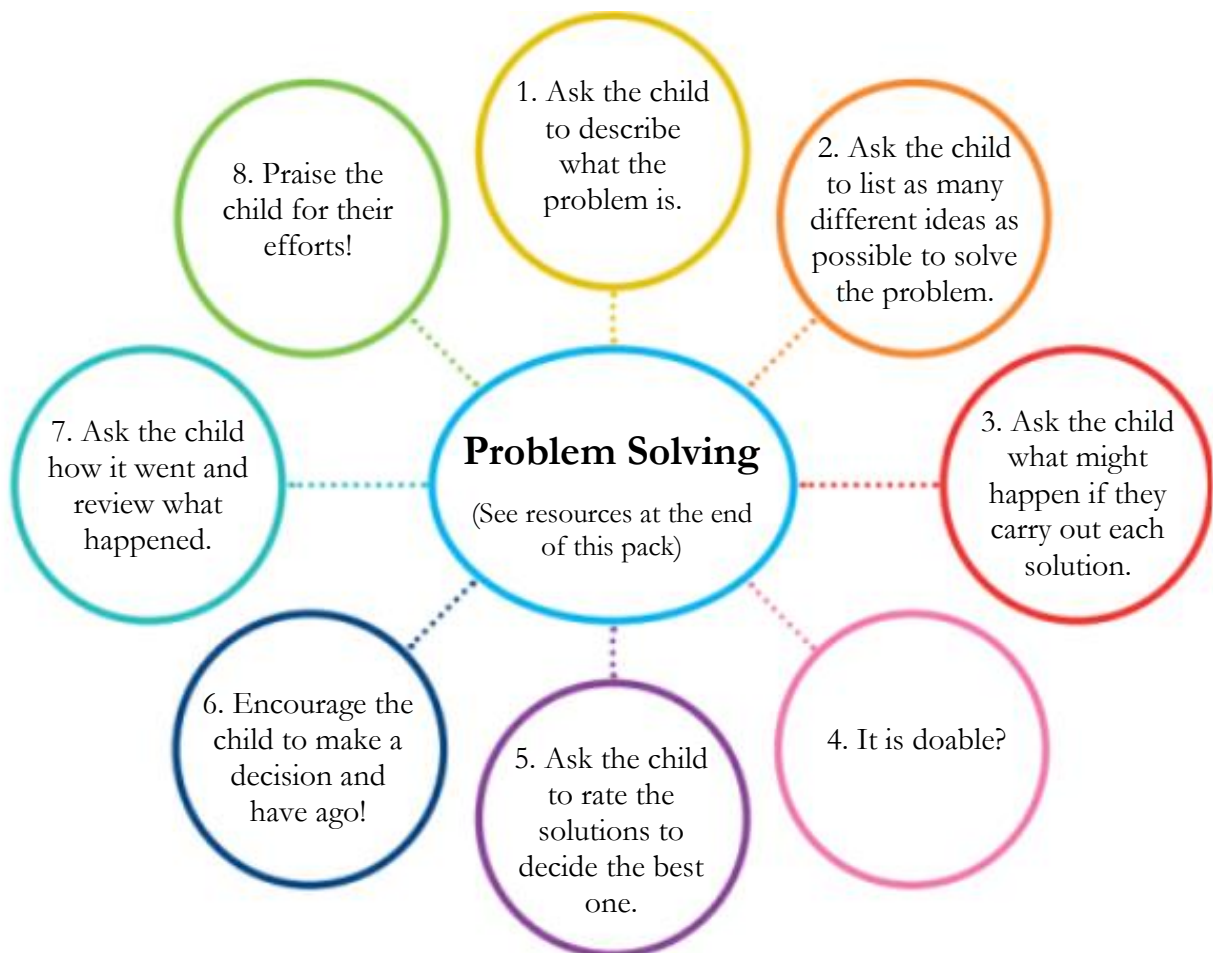
Praise your child for any attempts at conquering a step and provide rewards as agreed.

Review predictions about each step once it has been completed.

... and what the reward will be.

## Problem Solving

- Useful for real-life problems that emerge when trying to help challenge your child's anxious thoughts and for addressing blocks to the Step-by-Step plan.
- Highly anxious children often feel out of control in challenging situations and are not confident in their ability to problem solve.
- This might be their perception or actual 'deficits' in their problem-solving abilities.
- We want to encourage independence and confidence in their ability to overcome problems themselves.
- This does not mean they have to deal with problems alone – seeking help can be a good strategy in many situations.



The problem-solving strategy is described in chapter 11 of Cathy Creswell's book "Helping Your Child with Fears and Worries", detailing when and how to use this template (see next page) in the context of other techniques described.



## Problem Solving

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?	LIST ALL THE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS (NO MATTER HOW WEIRD OR WONDERFUL!)	WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF I CHOSE THIS SOLUTION? (IN THE SHORT TERM? IN THE LONG TERM? TO MY ANXIETY IN THE FUTURE?)	IS THIS PLAN DOABLE? Yes/No	HOW GOOD IS THE OUTCOME? RATE 0-10	SELECT PLAN. WHAT HAPPENED?

# Resources & Further Support

Work together with your child's school, share what works and discuss potential referrals to CAMHS for further support if needed.

## **Book:**

“Helping Your Child with Fears and Worries”- Cathy Creswell



## **Websites:**

<https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs/carers/carers-anxiety/> (Videos and parent workbooks)

[Parenting and Family Support - Family Lives \(Parentline Plus\) | Family Lives](#)

OCC Directory of Support for Parents

<https://fisd.oxfordshire.gov.uk/kb5/oxfordshire/directory/results.action?familieschannel=300&sr=0&nh=10>



Thoughts

Behaviours

Feelings

Physical Sensations

## Step by Step Plan

**STEPS**

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**REWARDS**

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