



## Is your child showing signs of anxiety?



We all get anxious at times and children and young people are no exception. Getting anxious at times is a normal part of emotional development as children grow up and develop their 'survival skills', so they can face challenges in the wider world. We all have different levels of stress we can cope with - some people are just naturally more anxious than others, and are quicker to get stressed or worried.

There are many ways you can help your child to manage their anxiety. If you feel your child's anxiety is not getting any better or is getting worse, and your efforts have not worked, contact your GP to get professional support.

### Things that can really make a difference:

1. Talk to your child about anxiety, what is happening in their body and why it happens. Many children and young people don't know what they are feeling when they are anxious, and it can be very frightening and overwhelming. They might even think they are very ill or that they are having a heart attack.
2. Help them to recognise anxious feelings so they can tell when they are becoming anxious and can ask for help. Encourage your child to notice what makes them anxious. Talking it through can help but your child could also try keeping a diary or a 'worry book'.
3. Tell your child it will be okay, and the anxiety will pass. It can be helpful to describe the anxiety as a wave to ride or surf that gets smaller after it peaks.
4. Get your child to breathe deeply and slowly, in through their nose for three counts and out through their mouth for three counts.
5. It can help to talk to your child about finding a safe place in their mind - somewhere that they feel relaxed and happy. It may be a grandparent's or friend's house or a holiday beside the sea which they can picture when 'wrong thoughts' come into their head or they are feeling anxious. Sometimes holding a memento, like a seashell or pebble, can help.
6. Work on positive-thinking. Name their worst case scenarios and think through together how to sort out the situation if it happens, e.g. 'I'm worried that we'll miss the bus.' 'What do you think we could do if that happens?' 'We could get the next bus'.

## Fairway Pastoral Newsletter July 2020



7. Make a 'worry box'. Your child can write each worry down and post it in the box out of sight. Small children will enjoy decorating the box too. They can leave the worries in there for, say, a week to see if they were worth worrying about (if not they can be torn up). Alternatively, you could designate a specific 'worry time' for around 10 or 20 minutes, (but not too close to bedtime, or when the child is in bed), so worries can be saved up for that time. This gives the message that we are in control of their worries and not vice versa.
8. Help your child maintain a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise to reduce the levels of stress hormones, good sleeping habits, calm bedtime routines, limited screen or computer time in the evening, and a healthy diet.

### Managing your child's aggression or violence



Sometimes, despite our best efforts to the contrary, anxiety and arguments in the home can escalate to physical violence and aggression – especially if this is something your child was struggling with before the lockdown started. If your child is physically aggressive towards you or other members of your family, it is important that you take steps to keep yourself safe and minimise the risk of harm.

Here are some tips for if your child's aggression escalates to violence:

- Remove yourself and anyone else present from the situation as quickly as possible. This could help to prevent anyone from getting hurt. You may want to step outside or go to another room, and it's a good idea to stay there until things have calmed down. It is natural for you to feel angry, frustrated, frightened or overwhelmed in this situation. Try to remain as calm as you can, and avoid raising your voice or retaliating aggressively in any way.
- It's a good idea to try to engage your child in a conversation about what's happened, however it is best to do this only when your child has calmed down and they are no longer behaving violently.
- If you feel that the aggression or violence is putting you or anyone else at risk of serious harm or you have had to leave your home and it is not safe to go back, contact the emergency services by dialling 999 as soon as possible. You may worry that the emergency services are stretched at this time, but seeking help is the right thing to do – your safety is most important.



While having some angry feelings is normal at all ages, some children and young people struggle more than others to control these feelings and to sort the problems out. Angry feelings and aggressive behaviour can be very hard to deal with and can have a big effect on family life, but there are ways you can talk to your child about how they're feeling and work out coping strategies together.

## Things which can really make a difference:

1. If your child doesn't know why they are feeling angry, try and work out together what might be causing their feelings. If they aren't ready to talk, try saying you are there to listen whenever they are ready.
2. Say that you have noticed they don't seem happy and ask if anything is worrying them or stressing them out.
3. Don't change your usual rules. When teens are angry they can also be frightened about how out of control they feel; this is the very time they need family stability, so be consistent.
4. Give yourself and your child some time to allow things to resolve. Sometimes children just need parents to notice and acknowledge that things are hard for them.
5. Help them to recognise patterns of when and how they get angry.
  - Help them to work out ways of channelling their anger differently, for example, you could try encouraging them to:



- try some simple controlled breathing techniques. Visit <https://copingskillsforkids.com/deep-breathing-exercises-for-kids>
- do some physical activity or sport
- plan some 'time out' doing something they enjoy
- get creative to communicate their thoughts in a different way e.g. drawing, writing, texting, painting etc.

**And remember to look after yourself and keep yourself strong. Parenting can be tough, so do talk to friends or family for support, and try to find a bit of time out for yourself.**



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### How can I respond when my child gets angry?

1. Separate your child's feelings from their negative behaviours; feelings are valid, bad behaviour is not. It is important to try and make your child understand that you are not rejecting them and their feelings, but that you do not accept their behaviour. When children and young people act irrationally, they don't always understand your reasoning, and this can be when difficult situations escalate and get out of hand. Keep explanations calm and simple to avoid misunderstandings.
2. Don't mirror the anger. Keep a calm manner, neutral voice and open body language (no folded arms).
3. Limit your questioning. Acknowledge they are feeling angry. Say you would like to talk through how they are feeling and what they are communicating once they've calmed down.
4. Hold boundaries and be consistent in how you set consequences. They might not like it, but this helps a child feel contained; it helps them in their development and their understanding of what is acceptable behaviour and what is and isn't okay.

### You and Your Child

- Make sure they know you love them and are proud of them. Even when things are busy or stressful, and it feels like you are in survival mode, a word or a hug can reassure them a huge amount. Praise them for what they do well, and encourage them to try new things.
- Be honest about your feelings - you don't have to be perfect. We all get things wrong and shout or say unkind things from time to time. If this happens, say sorry to your child afterwards and explain why it happened, They will learn from you that it's OK to make mistakes and that it doesn't make you a bad person.
- Be clear about what is and isn't acceptable - and tell them why. Children need to know what is OK and what isn't, and what will happen if they cross the line. Follow through on what you say as otherwise they may get confused or stop respecting the boundaries.
- Own your own role - you are the parent, so don't be afraid to take tough decisions. If your child sees you are scared of their reaction and always give in to them, it can make them feel very powerful, which can be frightening. Children need to know that you are there to keep them safe.

# Fairway Pastoral Newsletter July 2020

## Helping Your Child



Worrying or difficult behaviour might be short-lived, so give it some time. All children go through stages of feeling anxious or angry and they can show this in lots of ways, for example, tantrums, crying, sleeping problems or fighting with friends or siblings. They might be adapting to a change in the family or in their school life, or just trying out new emotions, and will generally grow out of worrying behaviour on their own or with family support.

Talk to your child: Even young children can understand about feelings and behaviour if you give them a chance to talk about it. Take it gently and give them examples of what you mean, for example, ‘When you said you hated Molly, you looked really angry. What was making you so cross?’, or ‘When you can’t get to sleep, is there anything in your mind making you worried?’

With older children, they might not want to talk at first. Let them know you are concerned about them, and are there if they need you. Sending an email or a text can work better if this is the way your child likes to communicate.

If you can, talk to your child's other parent about your worries, when the child is not around. They might have a different take on what’s going on. Try and sort out how to deal with the behaviour together so you are using the same approach, and can back each other up. Children are quick to spot if parents disagree, and can try and use this to get their own way.

**A great calming and empathetic approach is to try some simple “Emotion Coaching” techniques. Visit <https://www.parentingcounts.org/parent-handouts/information-for-parents-emotion-coaching.pdf>**

### Looking After Yourself

If your child is having problems, don’t be too hard on yourself or blame yourself. Although it can be upsetting and worrying if your child is having a bad time, and it makes your relationship with them feel more stressful, you are not a bad parent. Children often take it out on those closest to them, so you might be feeling the effect of their very powerful emotions. If things are getting you down, it’s important to recognise this. Talk to someone you trust and see what they think. Many people go on struggling with very difficult situations because they feel they should be able to cope, and don’t deserve any help. **Talk to us! You can’t help your child if you are not being supported yourself. Some people worry their parenting will be judged if they admit they are struggling to cope. We are here to offer support and friendly advice.**