

Why is My Child Anxious?

Helping Children with an Intellectual Disability and Autism Manage their Anxiety

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

It is normal for a child to feel anxious sometimes. Autistic children and those with an intellectual disability tend to be more anxious.

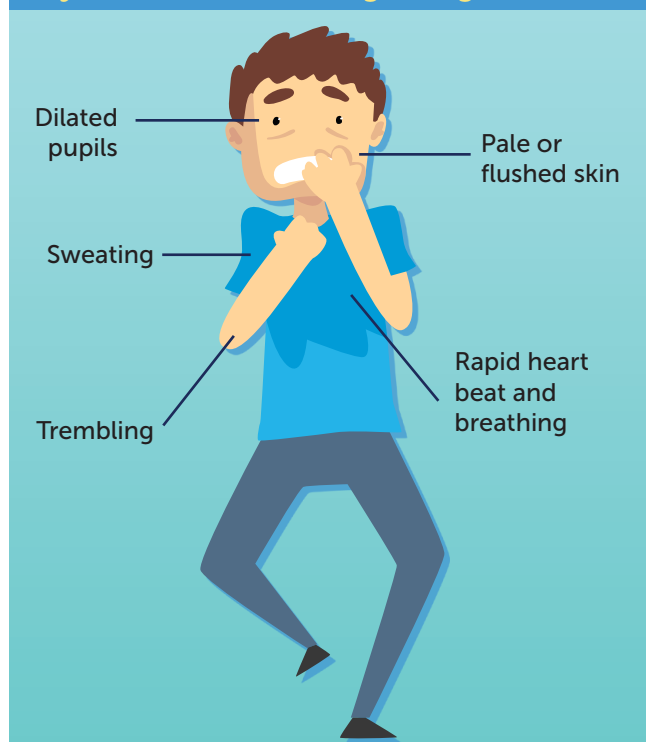
Anxiety is our body's natural response to stress. Anxiety can protect us from harm or threat (real or imagined) by preparing our body to respond to danger - fight, flight or freeze.

Anxiety can trigger feelings such as fear, nervousness, anger and hopelessness. When a child is anxious, they often worry about what *might* happen.

Mostly, reassurance and support from family and school is enough to help a child cope with a new or stressful situation. However, when worry is excessive or lasts for a long time, it can be a problem. Excessive worry makes it difficult for a child to be involved in daily tasks, enjoy their usual activities and try new experiences. Anxiety can reduce a child's confidence in their ability to cope.

Learning to manage new and stressful situations, and influence fear and worry, are important life skills.

Physical Indications of Fight, Flight or Freeze



WHAT DOES ANXIETY LOOK LIKE?

Anxiety for most children is experienced as changes in the body, as well as changes in thinking and feelings.

Physical signs of anxiety include:

- *heart beating faster*
- *breathing more quickly*
- *feeling dizzy*
- *a tight or sick stomach*
- *headaches*
- *sweating*
- *going to the toilet a lot*
- *having trouble getting to sleep and staying asleep*
- *feeling tired or shaky*
- *sore or tight muscles*
- *feeling restless.*

Some children might experience one or two of these symptoms, while others will experience several. Some children will also find it difficult to identify and tell others about what they are feeling.

Parents and teachers are also likely to notice that when a child is anxious, their mood and behaviour changes.

These changes can include:

- *insistence on routine and sameness*
- *hypervigilance and checking*
- *avoidance / withdrawal from social situations*
- *irritability and being easily upset by small things*
- *tantrums in younger children*
- *being angry, aggressive or disruptive*
- *increased preoccupation with their special interests*
- *increased repetitive or obsessive behaviours*
- *avoidance of school, or school work*
- *self-injury, such as scratching their skin or hitting their head.*

WHY IS MY CHILD ANXIOUS?

Considering why your child might be anxious will help you choose the best way to respond.

Common causes of anxiety and stress include:

- unexpected changes, e.g. to routine, to staff, to rules; an anticipated event being cancelled
- misinterpretation of social communication with peers, teachers or family friends
- feeling overwhelmed by sensory input
- unstructured time such as lunchtime at school, where the task of socialising with peers is unclear
- a task being too hard, unfamiliar, or unclear.

Lots of small worries and stress can accumulate and make a child anxious. Stress is like water dripping into a bucket. Everyone has a stress bucket, including your child.

There are many challenges in a child's day. They all add water to the child's stress bucket. We need to help the child empty water from the bucket regularly. If we don't, the water overflows, often as emotional and behavioural difficulties.

What fills up your stress bucket?



What helps you let it out?

HOW CAN I HELP?

Letting water out of the stress bucket

Your support is very important in helping your child through new or stressful situations. Children generally respond best to consistent support across environments. This means everyone supports the child in the same way, and responds to difficulties in the same way.

Parents, teachers and other support staff need to talk together regularly so that they have an agreed understanding of the child. This will create opportunities to test strategies for letting water out of their stress bucket, and see how they work.

Strategies to test:

Deep breathing: taking slow, deep breaths will connect a child to their body and draw their focus away from the worries in their mind. Breathing calms the mind and settles the body.

Provide routine, certainty and predictability: predictability provides comfort. Assist your child to organise their day and encourage them to ask questions when they are confused or unsure.

Share news about any changes coming up: provide information about what will happen instead. Allow your child time to process the information and adjust to the change.

Use fewer words: it's harder to process verbal language when you are worried.

Use pictures and gestures, together with your words: body language and facial expressions will also help your child understand what you are saying.

Offer choices where possible: choices provide the child with control. This offers reassurance, develops independence, and fosters confidence.

Encourage healthy eating and exercise habits: promote good sleep with an evening routine that includes restful activities and a regular bedtime.

Encourage your child to be physically active: e.g. movement breaks, tasks and activities involving pushing, pulling or lifting. Activities that involve rhythmic, patterned and repetitive movement will be most soothing.

Anticipate sensory challenges and help your child manage them, e.g. taking noise-cancelling headphones if going somewhere loud.

Identify strategies that sooth and comfort your child: this might include creating a 'happy bag' or 'calm kit' that the child can carry with them, or offering more access to their special interest.

Create opportunities to connect with your child: spend time together regularly to further develop your parent-child relationship.

Manage your own worry and stress – think about how much is in your stress bucket. Knowing you are coping will help reduce your child’s anxiety.



Go slow; be patient

Be supportive and understanding. Prepare your child for new situations and unfamiliar people. Use pictures to help with this. Allow them time to warm up to new situations, or to start an unfamiliar activity. Don't rush things.

Encourage, support and praise

Encourage your child to attempt things that need to be done. Sometimes, the longer a child avoids a situation or task, the bigger the fear becomes and the harder it will be to overcome that fear. Praise even small steps to have a go.

Accept

Let your child know you understand how real the fear is for them, and that together you can reduce the feeling of anxiety. Telling them to "stop worrying" won't help. Reassure them that it's ok to be worried, and make some useful suggestions about what they could try to make themselves feel better.

CAN MEDICATION BE HELPFUL?

Every child is different. For some, medication can assist in relieving the severe symptoms of anxiety. Some medications can reduce the feeling of fear and nervousness in a child's body. Reducing a child's physical response to fear can create space to teach them useful ways of managing their anxiety. Tolerance and coping skills are critical life skills.

Speak to your GP, Paediatrician or Paediatric Psychiatrist about whether medication might help your child.

WHEN & WHERE TO GET MORE HELP:

Feeling worried, irritable or angry are normal emotions for children and young people. When there are changes to a child's mood or behaviour that are new or out of character, or last for several weeks, more help might be needed.

Be alert to the signs above, and if you are concerned, seek help and advice.

In an emergency, call 000.

If you have any feedback on this tip sheet please fill in our [feedback form](#). You can find readings, resources and links related to this topic on our [webpage](#).

If you are still concerned, contact your GP or Paediatrician about services that might be helpful.

