Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

7 ways to support children and young people who are worried

Clinicians at the *Anna Freud Centre* have developed **seven ways** that we consider to be best practice in responding to children and young people's fears.

This document is informed by a Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) approach to managing anxiety. CBT is one of the therapeutic approaches which is most commonly used to treat anxiety and depression. It is recognised by the NHS NICE guidelines as a suitable evidence based treatment.

CBT is a talking therapy which can help people to manage their feelings or problems by changing the way that people think and behave. It offers a practical approach which aims to help people tackle problems that can feel overwhelming by breaking them down into smaller parts and by challenging negative thinking and/or behavioural patterns in order to improve the way that they feel.

This document is not intended as a substitute for therapy but to outline some of the principles that can be easily adopted to support children and young people.

1 Create a space for conversation

Demonstrate that you are available to talk but don't force the conversation at the wrong time as this may feel intrusive. Be open and consistently available, allowing conversation to flow when the young person is ready and willing to talk. Children and young people often find it easier to talk while doing another activity, such as drawing, going for a walk or baking.

2 Demonstrate calm

Try to model a calm and measured response. We know that children are good at noticing when others around them are anxious and will watch the behaviour of others to work out whether they too should feel anxious themselves. Even if you're feeling anxious on the inside, you can help the young person by remaining calm on the outside. This will help to reassure them that things might be difficult, but they are manageable.

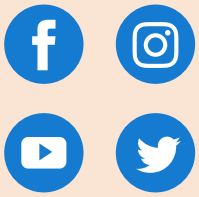
3 Empathise and validate

We often want to reassure children, and to help find solutions to make them feel better, but first, spend time listening to the young person, ask them questions, and show an interest in viewing things from their perspective. Be accepting of their worry, anger and sadness about how things are at present. Try to avoid early reassurance which can often sound like "everything's fine". Recognise that these kinds of feelings are common and understandable. Explain that, although the physical feelings we experience in our bodies when we are anxious can be unpleasant, they are normal.

4 Introduce alternative perspectives and ways of thinking

A worry is a thought, not necessarily a fact. Listen to the young person and try to understand exactly what they are concerned about. What exactly are they worried about, and are their worries likely to happen, if so, what would it mean if they did? Exploring alternative ways of looking at things might help to put worries into perspective and in turn result in less anxiety-provoking conclusions.

5 Reduce environmental stresses



Help the young person to consider and recognise what makes anxiety worse, for example constant exposure to stressful stimuli such as too much social media/news, and the withdrawal of daily activities which may have previously provided support. Try to keep to a routine, with activities throughout the day (e.g. schoolwork, exercise, relaxing, keeping in touch with friends and sleep). However, don't add pressure if they seem overwhelmed. Instead, emphasise the importance of self-care and being kind to themselves.

6 Problem solving and coping

Focus on emphasising confidence in the young person's ability to cope and engage them in helping to think about different strategies. For example;

(a) **Future and action orientation**: '...so what are we going to do about this? We can't do X... but we can do Y...'
(b) **Holding the hope**: that somehow this situation may make space for something different and better to happen.
(c) **Keeping up healthy habits** – school and domestic routines.

7 Check-in and monitor progress

A critical part of the process is to carefully observe the impact of any suggestions/changes in approach with the young person. This could be done using an Anxiety Thermometer which is based on the child's response; 0 being calm and content to 10 being extremely anxious, hopefully by taking these steps the young person's Anxiety Thermometer will reduce over time.