

Helpful tools  
for parents supporting  
their child with:-

## Separation Anxiety



## What is separation anxiety?

This aim of this booklet is to give parents an understanding of how to help their child navigate their way through some difficult feelings and situations.

During a child's development it is normal for them to attach strong bonds to their care giver/s. As they become more aware of the world around them they can show signs of distress if not with the person/people they have that safe bond with. This is normal between 8 months to 3 years.

Separation anxiety outside of the normal age range can be triggered by stress, trauma or change, such as new secondary school, death or experiencing divorce.

It will take parents, the child and often school working together to help the young person manage their anxiety.

It is important that the parent has a good understanding of anxiety management to help their child manage their difficult feelings.

As Dr. Ron Steingard, a psychiatrist at the Child Mind Institute, explains, *"At different stages of development it is normal to have problems around separation, because the world is not safe, and you haven't learned how to master being away from the people who take care of you. As you develop, and as you begin to master situations and develop skills, it should get easier."* from **Child Mind Institute**



- The goal is not to get rid of all anxiety but to learn how to manage it.
- When we can learn to tolerate anxious feelings we can function better in more varied situations.
- As we face our fears we can reduce the levels of anxiety and decrease the time that we experience the distress.
- These strategies work for everyone so please feel free to use them yourself. It is good for your child to see you modelling them.



## Your Child's Plan

### Early Warning Signs

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### Strategies

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## Anxiety: Fight-flight-freeze response

When we become anxious our body prepares itself for some form of physical action, often called the 'fight-flight-freeze' response. It's something that happens automatically in our bodies, and we have no control over it.

Like all animals, human beings have evolved ways to help us protect ourselves from danger. When we feel under threat our bodies react by releasing certain hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol.

These hormones make us feel more alert, so we can act faster and make our hearts beat faster, quickly sending blood to where it's needed most. After we feel the threat has passed, our bodies release other hormones to help our muscles relax.

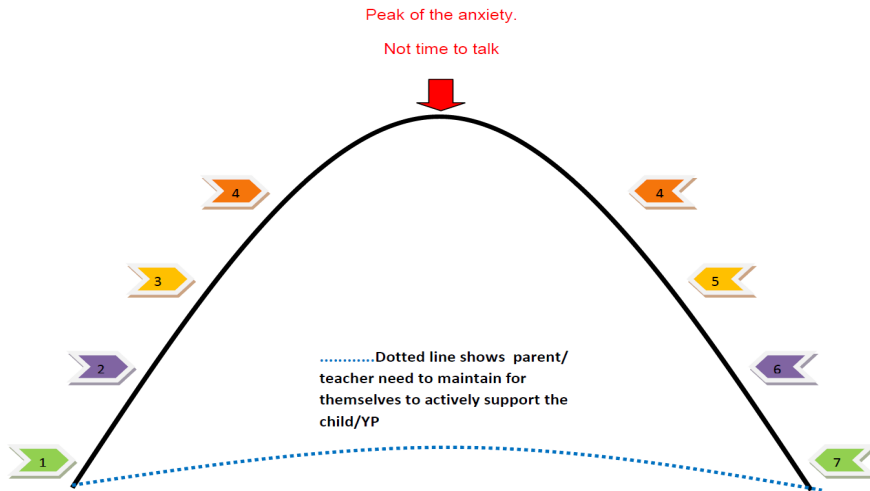


Throughout this booklet we will discuss possible signs of anxiety that your child may display and helpful guidance and strategies that they can use with your encouragement.

The goal is not to get rid of all anxiety but to learn how to manage it. When your child can learn to tolerate anxious feelings they can function better in more varied situations. As they face their fears we can reduce the levels of anxiety and decrease the time that they experience the distress.

## Anxiety Curve

The diagram below shows the different stages of anxiety and the appropriate points where the parent/carer can offer support and prompts. It also encourages the parent/carer to be aware of their level of anxiety at this time.



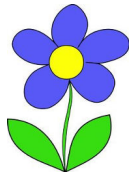
- 1** Child's mood is stable and they are able to learn the skills needed to manage emotions
- 2** Early warning signs can be seen. Time to refocus and distract.
- 3** May want to 'bail out' from tricky situation- try to stick with it.
- 4** Prompt the child to use their coping strategies. Role model.
- 5** Encourage the child to self-reassure. Don't discuss the trigger incident yet.
- 6** Prompt the child to notice physical sensations deteriorating. Use distraction.
- 7** Mood now stable and time to reflect on coping skills that were effective.

Spend some time talking to your child and discuss what they feel is helpful. They can write or draw ideas in the space below. e.g. having a hug, talking to someone, reading a book, meeting their friend. They may surprise you and already have some strategies in place.

## Breathing activities -

- Deep breaths in for 4 counts, hold for 4 and out for 4.
- Lay on floor/bed and rest a teddy on the chest and watch it rise and fall as deep breaths are taken.
- Imagine breathing in calm (give it a smell and colour) and blowing away the worries when breathing out.
- Use bubbles to take a deep breath in and blow the bubbles.

Imagine you are taking a deep breath and smelling a fragrant flower then hold for 1-2-3 and release your breath slowly to blow out a candle.



1 - 2 - 3



## Flashcards -



## What it may look like

- Increase in stomach ache, head aches and feeling sick. More health complaints.
- Not wanting to go to school
- Avoidance of new activities/going anywhere without parent or carer.
- Missing out on school trips/social events
- Persistent worry that something bad will happen to parent/carer
- Seeking constant reassurance i.e. Will you be ok? Am I ok? When will you be back?
- Worrying in advance about being separated
- Tantrums—linked to worrying about separation and also at the time of separation.
- Struggling to be alone/sleep alone
- Nightmares
- Requiring parent/carer to be with them so they can fall asleep
- Not developing independence as expected at their current age
- Constant need to text/phone parents for reassurance when not with them. (older children)

## Things that may help

**A basic understanding about the feelings/emotions involved** - all involved to have an awareness of what the child is experiencing.

**A consistent approach** - for all involved to be aware of the strategies being implemented by the child and not to get into negotiating.

**Transition object** - a toy, teddy, picture, stone, button etc that you give them and they look after whilst you are apart.

**Love heart exercise** - draw a small heart on your hand or wrist and theirs and explain that if they are worrying about you or in general they can press the heart and you will feel it.

**Make a transition plan** - a visual plan to show plans for the day/event/activity.

**Reframe worries** - decide on a mantra such as “everyone is ok” “I am ok”.

**Worry stopping** - decide on a word to use when worries are taking over e.g. “STOP” , say their own name or think of a silly word to diffuse it “BANANAS” this helps to diffuse the power of the worrying thoughts.

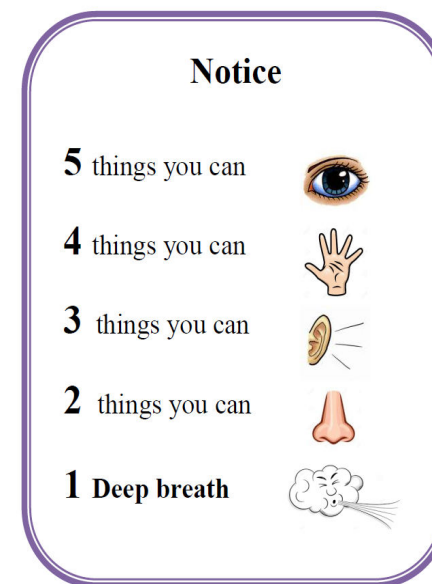
**Externalising the worry** - calling it a name or a “worry monster” and treating it like an unwanted guest.



## Things that may help

### Grounding Technique -

A child or young person may be in fight/flight mode due to overwhelming worries. This activity helps to bring them back to the present moment.



### Relaxation

Making a stress ball or squishy.

Smelling a nice relaxing scent (lavender)

Talking your child through a visualisation—imagine they are on a beach. What can they smell/feel/see/hear?.

### activities -