

Anxiety in Young Children



Feeling anxious or worried is a normal part of life and something everyone experiences. For young children, this might first show up when they are cared for by someone new, start nursery or school, or attend a busy social event like a birthday party or family gathering. Anxiety is a natural reaction to something unfamiliar or that feels challenging. However, it can become a concern when children experience very strong feelings of worry, or when those feelings happen frequently. Their anxiety might be linked to social situations, separating from a parent, or a combination of different worries.

What Can Anxiety Look Like in Young Children?

Children show anxiety in different ways, and sometimes it can be hard to spot. Some possible signs might include:

- Changes in eating, toileting, or sleep routines- eating less or more than usual, having accidents, or struggling to settle at night.
- Frequent complaints of feeling unwell, such as headaches or tummy aches, with no clear physical cause.
- Asking repetitive questions or showing 'checking' behaviours, like repeatedly making sure their belongings are in place or confirming what will happen next.
- Increased body-focused behaviours, such as nail biting, hair twirling, or skin picking.
- Appearing tense, on edge, or easily startled.
- Regression in skills, (e.g. dressing, feeding, or toileting).
- A change in mood or personality – becoming more tearful, grumpy, clingy, or withdrawn than usual.
- Avoidance behaviours, such as refusing to go to school or nursery, or avoiding certain activities or people.
- Controlling or defiant behaviour, which may be a way of trying to manage feelings of uncertainty or fear.
- Strong “fight, flight, or freeze” reactions, like lashing out, running away, hiding, or freezing when overwhelmed.
- Difficulty concentrating or engaging in play, often appearing distracted or “somewhere else.”
- Seeking constant reassurance from adults or peers.



How can we help children with anxiety?

- **Acknowledge and name their feelings** - for example, “I think you’re feeling worried. I notice you’re biting your nails a lot.”
- **Support emotion regulation** - use strategies from our Emotional Regulation guide to help children manage their feelings.
- **Plan responses together** - while we can’t always prevent what a child worries about, we can help them decide how to respond. For instance, if they’re worried another child will take their lunch, help them think through what they could do.
- **Give advance notice of changes** - prepare children for new routines or environments, such as a new school or park. This could include looking at pictures online or practising the route beforehand.
- **Practice calming techniques** - teach breathing exercises to help regulate the nervous system, such as 5-finger breathing, or using a feather/ glitter bottle to focus on slow breaths.
- **Create calming spaces** - provide quiet, calm areas at home, nursery, or school where children can go if they feel overwhelmed.
- **Provide alternative resources for body-focused behaviours** - for children who bite or pick at their nails, offer fidget rings, bracelets, or chewable necklaces to redirect the behaviour safely.
- **Tailor strategies to each child** - it’s important to recognise and validate feelings without dismissing them. Telling a child their anxiety is “silly” can make them less likely to express themselves.
- **Use gradual exposure** - help children face their worries in small, manageable steps rather than all at once. For example, if they’re anxious about joining a group activity, start by observing from a distance.
- **Seek professional support if needed** - if you are concerned about your child’s anxiety, contact your GP for advice.

