

# A PARENTS GUIDE TO SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S ANXIETY

## Introduction

Approximately 1 in 10 children and young people will meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder over the course of their childhood. Worries in children are common and are a normal part of child development. As children develop and their capacity to understand the world develops, their worries and fears tends to shift from more concrete worries to more abstract.

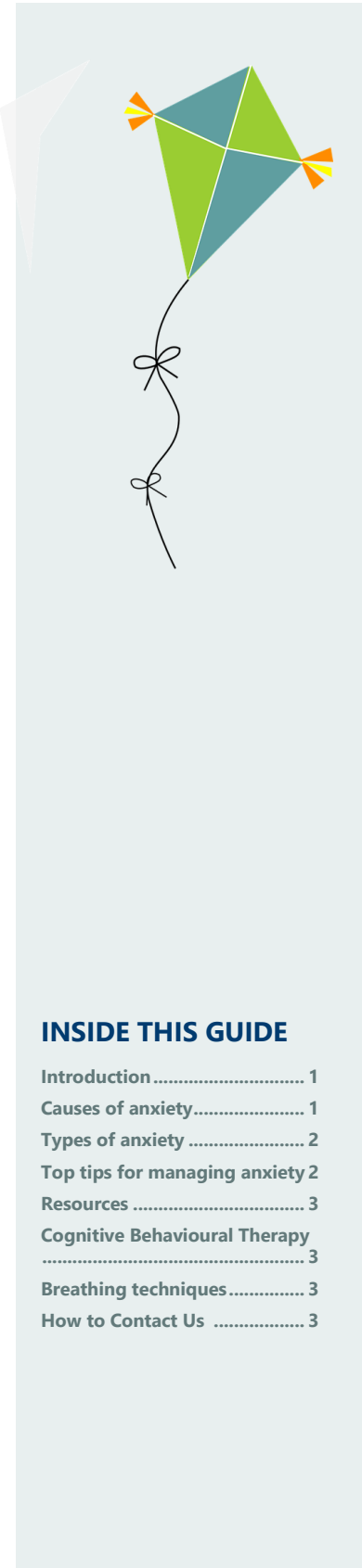
## Causes of anxiety

There are many reasons children develop worries and fear. Genetic influences and individual factors could increase children's likelihood of developing anxiety. Young peoples environment also influences the development of anxiety, for example learning experiences, peer relationships and cognitive factors could influence the development of anxiety.

## Fight or flight response

Human beings have historically survived by needing to fight or escape from predators such as tigers or other mammals. In order to survive we needed to prepare our body for action. Although in modern times we do not need to fight or run from animals, we continue to have this instinct when we perceive something to be threatening or dangerous. How you perceive different situations can determine whether this instinct is activated. This is why we may experience symptoms such as:

- Rapid heart rate and breathing
- Flushed skin
- Trembling
- Tense muscles
- Dilated pupils
- Light headedness



## Managing your child's anxiety

In order to reduce anxiety in the long-term, children need to learn that a situation is not as threatening or dangerous as they expect and they can only learn this by being gradually exposed to the anxiety-provoking situation/s. Encouraging independence and discouraging avoidance can contribute to this learning process. Facing fears can reduce the anxiety whilst avoidance only reinforces it. 'Helping your child with fears and worries' explains this in more depth (see 'Books' on p. 3).

## Types of anxiety

### Separation anxiety

It is normal for young children to be fearful of strangers and separated from their caregivers to whom they are attached. Separation anxiety can develop in young children as they become increasingly aware of how dependent they are on those around them. As they become more aware of their surroundings, some children may feel unsafe when they are separated from you. Separation anxiety is characterised by excessive worry about their caregivers being harmed which would result in them being separated from you. Children may be reluctant to sleep on their own or go to school.

### Social anxiety

Social anxiety typically starts in adolescence. Significant and excessive fears of being negatively evaluated by others is one of the main features of social anxiety. Children may fear they will act in an embarrassing way or make a fool of themselves which in turn creates significant symptoms of anxiety. This could result in children avoiding situations where they may become anxious such as withdrawing from social events.

### Panic attacks

Panic attacks is a symptom of acute anxiety that occurs unexpectedly. They are not necessarily specific to particular events and therefore it can be difficult to identify a cause. Although panic attacks are often short lived, they can be followed by thoughts of dying, losing control or going mad. This may result in the avoidance of situations that may have triggered the panic attack.

### Generalised anxiety

Generalised anxiety is characterized by excessive and uncontrollable worries across a range of event both future and past which creates physical symptoms of anxiety. Symptoms of anxiety can occur most days and last for a number of weeks at a time. Children may worry about terror events, illnesses, or practical issues such as school work or upcoming events.

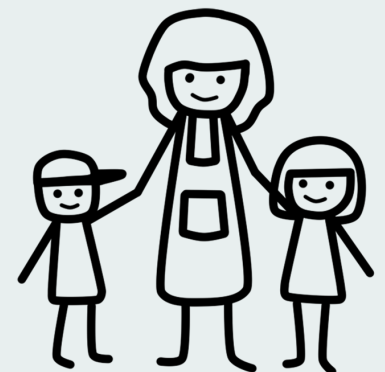


**'Just when the caterpillar thought the world was ending it became a butterfly'**  
**- Chuang Tzu**

## TREATMENTS TO MANAGE ANXIETY

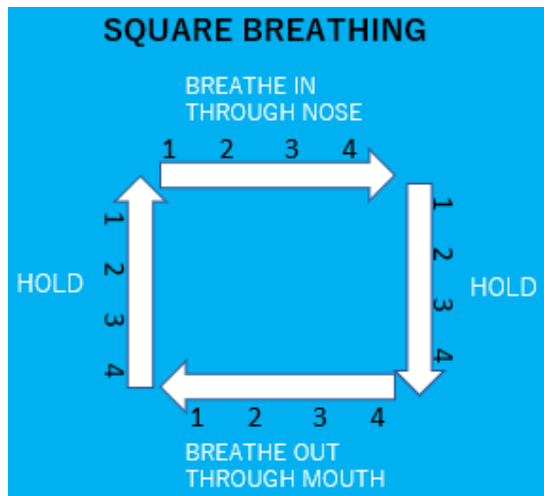
### **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy**

Many forms of mental health support adopt the CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) model in reducing anxiety. The evidence-based model shows how our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are connected with each other. How we think influences how we feel and how we feel influences how we behave and a small change in one of these areas can affect the other areas.



## Breathing techniques to help manage anxiety

**Box (or square) breathing** is a technique that can help to manage anxiety. If performed correctly it can reverse the physical symptoms of anxiety and help you to feel more in control. It works through balancing and slowing your breathing, the opposite of hyperventilating which is commonly associated with panic attacks and severe anxiety.



Slow down...

1. **Breathe** in for the count of 4.
2. **Hold** it for the count of 4.
3. **Breathe** out for the count of 4.
4. **Hold** it for the count of 4.
5. **Repeat** 4 times.

**Rebreathing** is a breathing technique featured on the Stress & Anxiety Companion app. Similarly with box breathing, it involves slower and controlled breathing but rebreathing involves breathing out for longer than breathing in.

This can be more challenging to do and involves breathing in through the nose for four seconds, out of the mouth for eight seconds and then resting for 8 seconds.

**Grounding** is a common distraction technique that helps by bringing the attention back to the present and away from anxious thoughts and stimuli.

It is called grounding because it grounds the focus back to the world around you. Grounding is practiced by engaging the five senses.

Typically people practise grounding by noticing and naming (to themselves) five things they can **see**, four things they can **touch**, three things they can **hear**, two things they can **smell** and one thing they can **taste**.



## RESOURCES:

### Websites:

- <https://youngminds.org.uk>
- <https://actionforchildren.org.uk>
- <https://childline.org.uk>
- <https://oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs>

### Apps:

- Stress & Anxiety Companion
- Calm
- Headspace
- Stop, Breathe and Think
- ThinkNinja

### Books:

- Helping Your Child With Fears and Worries; Cathy Creswell , Lucy Willetts
- What To Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety; Dawn Huebner



## BUCKS MHST

The team consists of Education Mental Health Practitioners, Youth Workers and Family Workers. We offer individual support to children over 12 years old and support parents of younger children. We accept referrals for children and young people with mild to moderate mental health difficulties including anxiety and low mood. If you would like to make a referral for your child, please contact your child's school who can make a referral to us. All sessions with the exception of family work take place in schools.

## CONTACT US

If you would like to find out more about the Bucks MHST please contact us on: **01865 901566** or email on **BucksMHST@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk**

## TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING ANXIETY



- **Do what works best for your child:** some children like to talk to an adult about how they feel, others may prefer hugs or a favourite toy.
- **Be empathic and understanding:** your child may believe no one knows how they feel, listen to what your child is worried about and remind them they are not alone.
- **Do not encourage children to avoid situations where they feel anxious:** It may be tempting to help your child avoid situations where they feel anxious however this can maintain the anxiety as your child never has the opportunity to overcome their fear.
- **Use relaxation techniques:** One of the symptoms of anxiety is rapid breathing and an increased heart rate. On page 3 of this guide you will find the box breathing technique which helps to slow breathing down. This technique is something you can both do together.
- **Distraction:** Focusing attention away from the anxiety can help stop worries from going over and over your child's mind. You may want to play a game or have a box of toys or games ready to help distract your child.
- **Rewards:** It is important your child knows they can overcome their anxiety. Positive reinforcement can help your child learn they can overcome it. Documenting progress and success can help motivate children to put themselves in a situation where they may feel anxious.
- **Model healthy ways of managing anxiety:** Children look up to their caregivers and can recreate what they see you do. If your children can see you manage your own worries they are more likely to do this themselves.
- **Safe place:** Some children and adults benefit from imagery techniques. You could talk to your child about finding a safe place in their mind. It may be somewhere you have been on holiday, a friends house or a favourite park. Encourage your child to use their different senses and tell you what they can see, smell, touch, hear and taste.
- **Worry box/jar:** You can make a worry box or jar with your child, you could decorate the box or jar and spend time each day or week discussing what worries are in-