



families are at the heart of us ●



Anxiety, Worries and Wellbeing

Parent / Carer Edition

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Introduction

WELCOME!

This resource has been prepared by CFF to support you – parents / carers of the young people accessing our session – with your approach to supporting their anxiety, worries and wellbeing. It is important to first read through and discuss the resource your child received from our session with them; this will give an overview of anxiety and introduce some exercises they can try (and you can support) to help manage their anxiety. To get the most out of this resource, which introduces some techniques to parent an anxious child, read and understand all the sections first before making small changes.



If you are reading this guide on a computer, tablet, or phone, look out for this icon. Clicking on it takes you to our website where you can download and print additional materials / resources.



If you ever get lost, just click on this icon in the corner of each page and you will be brought back to the contents page.

If you feel your child may need more specialist support, please feel free to reach out to us, your child's school or GP who may be able to offer more specific guidance and advice.



You can download the young persons' anxiety resource from our website.

Who are CFF?



CFF (Centre for Fun and Families Ltd) is a leading registered charity delivering specialist parent and family support through the delivery of group work programmes based on Social Learning Theory.

We are a local, grassroots organisation that has developed its products through the voice of the families we work with. CFF group work programmes are evidence-based, which means that independent research has been carried out and clearly demonstrates that parents who attend a group will experience change as opposed to parents who do not receive the service.

CFF has a 30-year track record of working collaboratively with families and partner agencies. Over these 30 years, our core mission has remained unchanged:

Empowering Families by Building on their Strengths

Parents are empowered by gaining skills and knowledge and being actively involved in expressing their views and making decisions. This reinforces that parents are the experts and know their circumstances better than anyone else.

Feedback from young people and their families is consistently excellent across all programmes: reducing isolation, improving life chances, and putting the fun back into family life. We are a national training provider of parenting group work for professionals. Locally, our work with families is highly regarded by partners, local authorities, and the NHS.

We can be reached at:

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All the best,

The CFF Team



Our Values

OUR EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Families are at the heart of us.

OUR AMBITION

To help families build the best future and to put the fun back into family life.

OUR REASON FOR BEING

To help families make a positive change to the mental health and wellbeing of young people, parents and carers through evidence-based group work.

HOW WE WORK WITH EACH OTHER & YOU

Empowering | Inclusive | Collaborative.



Social Learning Theory



The basic assumption of Social Learning Theory is that many behaviours are learned and therefore can be changed by altering certain things in the environment before and / or after the behaviour has happened.

Social Learning Theory provides us with a greater choice and level of control over our affairs. It enables people to recognize the way other people influence them. Then, if they have some objection, the knowledge provides a way of countering such control. The theory is scientific and like the theory of gravity it applies universally without bias or prejudice regarding race, gender, disability, sexuality. Because it always sets behaviour in context, Social Learning Theory avoids labelling anybody as a 'problem'. It simply provides a means of identifying behaviours and the way they are maintained. It is for whoever uses these ideas to decide whether a given behaviour should be changed or not.

References

- Bandura, A. (1977) Social Learning Theory. Harlow. Pearson Education.
- Pavlov, I. P. (1927) Conditional reflexes. New York. Oxford University Press.



Anxious Behaviour

Anxiety has lots of symptoms, it can affect how you feel emotionally and physically, and how you behave. One of the most common difficulties you may face as a parent is drawing a line between your child's behaviour when it is caused by anxiety, as opposed to the times when they are just being poorly behaved. The behaviours may look similar, but it is important not to punish the poor behaviour caused by anxiety, instead supporting them to better manage their anxiety in the present and for the future.

Some key things to consider include:

- A common approach to managing anxiety is to avoid the threat causing the worry. So, take a step back and look at the situation to see if there is a reason they may be avoiding a situation. For example, if your child is consistently late to school, is there a situation causing them worry on the journey to school, at the school gates, or in form time e.g., a relationship with another student or bullying. In this case, it is possible that your child is avoiding the situation to manage their anxiety and they may need your support to deal with the threat. However, if there is no such worry and your child is just late then they may instead need some support with time management.
- Even if your child's behaviour is caused by anxiety, any form of verbal or physical aggression is not acceptable. To prepare your child for adulthood, aggression should not be tolerated or excused and needs clear and consistent consequences alongside support for the underlying worry.
- Some anxious children may prefer to get in trouble for poor behaviour than face the threat causing their anxiety. This is because the consequences of their poor behaviour are usually predictable and therefore reassuring and safe, compared to the uncertainty of their anxiety.



Top Tips



The following section gives some top tips on supporting your child's anxiety.

Do not enable avoidance

Anxiety is a normal and often healthy emotion because of its protective role when we are faced with a threat. We manage our anxiety by either dealing with the threat, acknowledging that there is nothing to worry about, or avoiding the threat. However, avoidance can maintain the anxiety and could cause it to snowball if your child is faced with the same threat in the future. Further, people who live with avoidance often deprive themselves of many experiences and connections that may instead bring them great joy. As a parent you may want to intervene and remove your child from whatever situation is causing them to worry. However, this enables avoidance and removes their opportunity to engage in 'trial and error' learning which leads to self-efficacy and their ability to better manage similar situations in the future.

Avoid excessive reassurance

As a parent you may find yourself giving excessive reassurance about a feared situation to your child. For example, "there's nothing to worry about" or "everything's going to be okay". Whilst these reassurances can be helpful to your child in the moment, they can trivialise their worries and prevent the personal growth that is required so they can effectively manage their anxieties by themselves in the future. For example, your child learns that a feared situation is okay because you say it is okay, not because the reality of the situation made it unlikely for their worry to occur.

It is okay for you to reassure them but do so in a way that reinforces their personal resources for managing their anxiety or dealing with a situation (e.g., their courage). Over time support them to better reassure themselves of the situation, this can be achieved by working through a Detective Thinking sheet (see later in the flipbook).

Be consistent

It is important that you are consistent in your support, and your approach to encouraging / discouraging behaviour. In practice, this means purposely choosing how you are going to engage with or respond to your child, and not varying with that choice over time (without a discussion and clear rationale). This will help your child what know to expect from you meaning they will be able to predict how you will react to specific situations and feel more secure in their choices and behaviours. In this way you can help shape your child to behave less anxiously. It is important that both all caregivers are consistent in their approach so a decision needs to be made on a joint strategy.

Top Tips

Keep your emotions in check

Having an anxious child can be very worrying and frustrating. However, you become far less effective as a coach / mentor when you are very emotional. Plan ahead for ways in which you can give yourself a time out from interactions with your child that provoke strong emotional responses in you. When you do this, explain to your child what you are doing and let them know that you will come back to them a little later and continue to support them.

Some parents can behave intrusively when their child displays negative emotions (e.g., fear) compared to when their child displays positive emotions (e.g., joy). This is because these parents may feel uncomfortable when their child expresses a negative emotion, causing them to assert their control to manage their own, and their child's, discomfort. Remember, manage your own emotions first before supporting your child with theirs.



Discouraging Behaviour



Certain behaviours, even if caused by anxiety, are inappropriate. Consequences (or punishments) can be used to discourage behaviours from reoccurring in the future. Consequences are more effective when they have been clearly established in advance, are applied immediately following the behaviour, and are consistently applied. The following section gives some suggestions of consequences. Please note, after using any of the following consequences, it is important you continue to support your child with the underlying cause of their behaviour.

Natural consequences

Sometimes your child's anxiety will cause them to behave in a way that has a natural consequence – something enforced by nature, society, or another person that happens without your involvement. Depending on the natural consequence, this can be a useful learning experience for your child that may deter their unwanted behaviour in the future. For example, if your child backs out of going to a party because of anxiety, they should be responsible for phoning the host and saying that they cannot attend.

Loss of privilege

Loss of privilege is useful when there is not a natural consequence to your child's unwanted behaviour. It involves taking something away from them that they enjoy – be sure to take away something they enjoy, not something they have a right to like food, water, and your love. Some practical tips to consider include:

- Make sure the privilege you are taking away is proportional to the unwanted behaviour and you can enforce it.
- Make sure the loss of privilege can be felt immediately following the unwanted behaviour.
- Be clear and specific about the length of the loss of privilege in advance of the unwanted behaviour.
- Be consistent in using loss of privilege across caregivers.

Discouraging Behaviour

Time out and tactical ignoring

Often used with younger children, time out is when the child is temporarily removed from the environment where an unwanted behaviour has occurred. The intention is to place them in a new environment where there is less happening and no attention. The terms of a time out need to be carefully discussed in advance e.g., why time out is necessary, what you want to use it for, how long it will last, and what you want to see at the end of the time out. You and your child should also agree what happens if they do not adhere to their side of the time out agreement, for example a loss of a privilege.

As your child grows and pushes back against your discipline, it can be hard to enforce a time out. In these instances, it may be more effective to use tactical ignoring, where you give no outward attention to the unwanted behaviour and remove yourself from the environment where the unwanted behaviour has occurred.



Encouraging Behaviour



Instead of responding to unwanted behaviours, you can also focus on the behaviours you would like to see in your child – in this instance courageous (or non-anxious) behaviour. The following section gives some suggestions on how to encourage or respond to these positive behaviours.

Modelling

Children learn how to behave by observing others. Their observations can be very subtle through what they see and hear. The single most important thing you can do for your child is to model positive behaviours in response to anxiety. As your child gets older, it is important that you visibly deal with your anxieties, sharing your process and the tools (or coping strategies) that you are using. This demonstrates to your child that there are good ways to manage anxiety and strengthens your relationship with them.

Research has consistently identified that parental anxiety is a risk factor for childhood anxiety, and that children of parents who have an anxiety disorder are five to seven times more likely to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder themselves compared to children of parents who do not have an anxiety disorder. If you feel you may need more specialist support for your anxiety, please feel free to reach out to us, your GP your local Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) provider who offer talking therapy on low to moderate anxiety disorders.

Growth

As a parent you may find it preferable or easier to step in and try to fix the situation that is worrying your child. However, it is important that children learn to become independent to overcome their anxiety. Your role is to support their personal growth by encouraging them to identify and action solutions that promotes their sense of control over their own lives, strengthening their capabilities in for the future.

Praise

Attention is the most powerful way to influence your child's behaviour. Paying attention to any behaviour (negative or positive) reinforces that behaviour and increases the chances of it recurring in the future. Attention can be in many forms including verbal (e.g., talking or shouting) and non-verbal (e.g., expressions, your own behaviour etc.)

Encouraging Behaviour

Praise is one way of giving positive attention to your child. Praise them for behaving well and responding positively to situations that raise their anxiety. Try to be specific and describe in detail what you were pleased with, and do not forget physical ways to praise too – use smiles, reassuring touches, hugs, kisses, as well as words. For example: DON'T SAY: "That was great! You a big effort today!" DO SAY: "You really tried hard today when you went to school on a crowded bus. I know you sometimes worry about being stuck in a crowd when you feel like you're going to faint, so I was really proud of the big effort you put into facing that worry."

Rewards

Rewards are another way of giving positive attention to your child. When planned ahead of time, rewards can offer a concrete and positive incentive for doing something good or behaving well. When given without notice, rewards can offer a surprise acknowledgement of the efforts they have made.

Careful balance needs to be maintained to encourage intrinsic motivation where your child is motivated to perform an activity for its own sake and personal rewards, over extrinsic motivation where your child is motivated to perform an activity to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Whilst extrinsic motivation is not fundamentally bad, relying too much on it can set a precedent through which your child will expect a reward for everything they do.

Rewards should not be expensive, or cost money, and should be proportional to the achievement of their behaviour change. This can include spending more time with your child doing an activity you both enjoy. However, do not tie your availability or love for your child into a reward system.



Detective Thinking



Work with your child to help solve some mysteries as an emotion detective. Support them to gather clues that help them become deeper thinkers about their feelings, and their thoughts behind their feelings.

In this scenario your role is Dr Watson to their Sherlock Holmes. You are there to encourage them and prompt their reflection, not to solve the mystery of their behalf. This involves asking questions instead of giving your opinions.

Tackle each clue in turn, ask them the questions and write down their responses.

Clue 1 / Identify the situation that is causing concern

- What is happening?
- What even are you thinking about?

"The situation is that I have to give a presentation at school."

Clue 2 / Identify the thought behind the feeling

- What exactly are you worried about?
- What is it about this situation that is concerning to you?
- What do you think will happen?
- How worried are you based on this thought?

"My thoughts are that I keep worrying that people will notice how embarrassed I am, and will then talk about me behind my back."

Clue 3 / Look for the realistic evidence

- How likely is this feared outcome?
- Have you faced this situation and how many times has it happened?
- Have you ever seen it happen to someone else before?
- How much does this happen to people generally?

"I've given talks before once and I got really embarrassed. Come to think of it, I've probably given 10 talks this year and I only got embarrassed once. I guess I've seen some other kids get embarrassed a

Detective Thinking

couple of times, so I'm not the only one who feels like this. Sometimes I've heard other people say that they gave really bad talks or felt really embarrassed about doing the talk, but I didn't notice that they did anything wrong, or looked embarrassed, I really didn't bother about it much and I didn't hold it against them."

Clue 4 / List the alternatives

- What else could happen? Try to come up with as many alternative outcomes to the feared outcome as possible.
- What would you think if the feared outcome happened to someone else?

"I might feel embarrassed, but people won't necessarily notice. Most people look a bit nervous or embarrassed when they are speaking in front of a crowd so I won't look different to most people. Even if people do notice that I look uncomfortable, that doesn't mean that they'll talk about me in a horrible way. I've given talks before and been embarrassed but no-one said anything much about it. I've seen other people give talks and look really embarrassed, but people actually said kind things to them."

Clue 5 / Identify a realistic thought

- What is a realistic thought that you could think in this situation?
- How worried would you be in this situation if you had this realistic thought in mind?
- If your emotional thought came true, how could you cope with it?

"I have given presentations before and it's going to be okay. Even if I do get embarrassed and people notice it does not matter and I have my friends and family to support me."



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