



Working with families and school staff to support primary school children with anxiety

<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/health-and-community/enewsletter/working-families-and-school-staff-support-primary-school-children>

A health and community professional's role in supporting families and school staff

Children get the best outcomes and support when health and community professionals, families and education staff work together in a coordinated approach.

Working together and collaborating to understand anxiety symptoms across the home and school settings is vital in understanding the whole picture and context in which the anxiety is presenting. When anxiety concerns may be present, the [KidsMatter BETLS tool](#) can help gather information and develop a shared understanding across home and school, clarify the aims of interventions and monitor changes over time. It can help everyone understand the frequency, duration and severity of anxiety, how much these symptoms interfere with the child's life and their relationships, and in what contexts the behaviour is occurring.

Intervention is often required on several levels within the context of the child's environment and relationships at home, in the community and at school. Health and community professionals can help families and education staff by providing support in assisting them with any anxieties of their own which the child might pick up on; build on children's strengths, confidence and support strategies that are already working; and help communicate a tailored plan between home and school that is consistent and addresses the child's needs, concerns and strengths.

How families can support children with anxiety

Some general helpful suggestions to assist health and community professionals working with families to support children with anxiety include:

- encouraging parents and carers to role model helpful coping, brave behaviour, trying new things and a view that making mistakes is ok. Family members who are overprotective or over-help can reinforce fears and worries and can communicate that the child cannot do anything without adult support. Modelling calm and self-regulated behaviour helps children manage their own anxiety themselves.
- assisting parents and carers to encourage their child to have a go, to be brave and face their fears. It can be helpful for parents to remind them of a time where the child was scared or worried but gave it a go anyway. This needs to be done in conjunction with strategies to manage feelings of anxiety, learning helpful thinking patterns and gradually building confidence.
- supporting families to help children recognise, understand and manage their anxiety, which can help them gain some control over it. Parents and carers also need assistance in limiting reassurance-seeking and avoidance behaviours.
- encouraging parents and carers to break larger goals into gradual small steps that are achievable.

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For example, if a child is anxious about speaking in front of groups, they could practise talking or giving a presentation to one family member, then as they feel more comfortable to multiple family members, then to a small group.

- supporting families to help children practise coping skills. Encouraging relaxation skills, teaching helpful self-talk (e.g. "everyone makes mistakes") and encouraging positive thinking helps children to cope when anxious feelings and thoughts occur, e.g. countering scary or worrying thoughts with facts and evidence or making plans about how to respond if things don't go as they like.
- supporting parents and carers to monitor possible distressing or anxiety-provoking media and help them pay attention to their own reactions and conversations in the presence of children that may contribute to children's anxiety (e.g. about disasters and tragic events).
- ensuring families are united with support and intervention strategies. For example, a child may be anxious about swimming and witnesses an argument between their parents, one of whom wants to support the child's desire to avoid the water and the other who wants to throw them straight in. These are two opposing perspectives that are unhelpful to the child; a better approach would be to have agreement between the parents as to the best approach and provide the child with co-ordinated support.

How education staff can support children with anxiety

Like families, school staff may already have in place some successful strategies. It is important to be mindful of and build on these, in addition to offering helpful solutions such as:

- helping education staff understand and look for symptoms of anxiety in children.
- assisting education staff to teach coping skills. Regular social and emotional learning (SEL), particularly programs focusing on internalising difficulties that help children with severe anxiety, assists in developing coping skills. It can also help if children and staff problem solve together, rather than focusing on 'right' or 'wrong' answers.
- encouraging education staff to set structures and routines, which helps children to know what to expect and reduce worry. Plan ahead for school excursions or camps and let children know in advance of upcoming events, changes in usual teachers, etc.
- encouraging school staff to break classroom tasks down into smaller chunks, and modify or monitor stressful classroom activities. Testing situations can be particularly anxiety-provoking and may need to be modified (e.g. providing breaks, breaking the class into small groups) and more challenging requirements can be provided once confidence increases.
- assisting education staff to consider the classroom environment to support children with anxiety. For example, creating a safe person or place for when students are overwhelmed and anxious, or considering how individual presentations can be given or seating arrangements changed.
- supporting education staff in discouraging avoidance and encouraging students to have a go. Where necessary, tasks or situations can be modified to provide more manageable steps and when students have a go or initiate, encouragement and positive feedback is important.
- encouraging school staff to set realistic expectations for tasks to reduce pressure for perfectionist tendencies. Providing opportunities for children with anxiety to take on responsibilities that support a view of themselves as capable also helps them develop confidence and independence.
- encouraging education staff to work with parents and carers as a team. For example, if a child is struggling with separation anxiety, it may be helpful to develop a plan together for drop off arrangements, how the parents will say goodbye and strategies to assist calming the child.

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Resources:

[Anxiety: Suggestions for families](#)

[Anxiety: Suggestions for school staff](#)

[Dealing with anxiety: Tips for parents](#)

[10 strategies for parents to support anxious children](#)

[Partnerships helping children](#)

[Health and community services supporting KidsMatter early Childhood](#)

[Health and community services supporting KidsMatter Primary](#)

McCurry, C. (2015). [Working with parents of anxious children: Therapeutic strategies for encouraging communication, coping & change](#). New York: W.W. Norton & Company

