



Anxiety in young children

Feeling anxious or worried about something is very common and happens to everyone. For many young children, we might first notice this the day they are cared for by someone different for the first time when they start school or nursery or maybe at a social event like a birthday party or family gathering. Feeling anxious is a normal response to a potentially threatening or unknown situation.

However, anxiety can become an issue when children have very intense feelings of worry and are worried more often than not. Their anxiety might be related to socialising with others, separation from a parent or many things at once.

What can it look like?

Some potential indicators might include:

- Changes to eating, toileting and sleep habits.
- Complaining of head or tummy aches.
- Repetitive questions (directed towards one or multiple adults) or 'checking' behaviours (such as repeatedly checking where their belongings are).
- Development or increase of body-focused behaviours such as picking or biting their nails.
- Appearing to be 'on edge' or jumpy.
- Changes in usual disposition (for example, becoming quite grumpy or emotional).



For further information about a service level agreement with the Early Years and Key Stage 1 team or to find out more, please contact Emma Weaver via email: emma.weaver@adhdfoundation.org.uk



- School/nursery refusal.
- Defiance or controlling behaviour.
- Increase in fight or flight responses (eg lashing out, running away, hiding).
- Self-stimulating behaviour might increase or change - for example, a child who usually enjoys rocking and flapping their hands may start running from one side of the room to the other.

How can we help?

Strategies that will help depend on the individual child. It is important to acknowledge that the child feels anxious without validating their fears. If a child hears that it is 'silly' to be anxious about going to a party, it can make them more reluctant to express themselves.

- Acknowledge and label their feelings (“I think you are feeling worried, you are biting your lip”). Follow the process for emotion regulation using our guide from the Early Years Resources page on the website.
- While we can't guarantee that what the child is anxious about won't happen in many cases, we can help them to plan their responses. For example, if they are worried about another child taking food from their lunchbox, we can help the child to choose what they will do in that situation.
- Give advance notice of changes to routines or share information about new things (such as a new school, park or play centre – this might include looking at pictures of the place online or practising the route ahead of time).
- Practice different breathing strategies and techniques. This helps to calm the nervous system, which is the part of the 'downstairs' brain causing the physical reactions to anxiety. Young children might like 5 finger breathing, square breathing or breathing while holding a big feather (to see it move) or a glitter bottle.
- Create spaces at home, nursery or school where children can go when they begin to feel overwhelmed. These spaces should ideally be neutral, quiet spaces with comfortable seating/flooring so the child can take some time to calm down, with adult support if required.
- Provide resources to redirect body-focused behaviours (for example, children who pick or bite their nails might like a small fidget ring or bracelet to fidget with, or a necklace or bangle to chew).

Please seek support from your GP if you are concerned about your child.