



Talking to children / young people about their worries – Advice for parents and carers

It is normal for children to get worried or feel anxious sometimes. This resource aims to support parents / carers to help their child or young person talk about their anxiety openly. Children often find that talking about their worries helps them to feel valued and gives them some control over that worry.

Adults can sometimes jump to conclusions about why children feel anxious or nervous in certain situations. This is completely normal and we might think we are helping the child by identifying or explaining their worries for them. However, there may be times when children are anxious for reasons that we have completely missed or could not have guessed. This is why when a child is worried it is important to talk to them about how they are feeling.

Anxious children are thought to have an overactive 'alarm system' in their brain, which is triggered when they perceive something as a threat or dangerous. By working out exactly what a child is anxious about, we can then help the child identify how they would cope with it if it happened.

Below are some tips that might help you talk with your anxious child or young person. These tips can also be useful if you might be struggling to get your child in to school.

Be curious and ask open questions

Open questions are 'what' and 'why' questions rather than closed questions that require a yes or no answer.

- 'What is it about being in school that is worrying you?'
- 'Why do you think you have a funny feeling in your stomach?'
- 'What do you think will happen today at school?'
- 'Why would that be bad?'

Asking these open questions gives your child or young person a voice to share their concerns.

Empathise

Simply saying "I can see you are really upset right now, that must be difficult" shows your child you recognise this is hard for them and validates their feelings.

By validating their feelings, children will notice that you are asking them about their worries because you want to understand them and help them.

Using 'what' rather than 'why' might be a good idea here. If you ask "Why (on earth) are you worried about that?" it might make your child feel silly or stupid for being worried, whereas "What are you worried about?" sounds more curious.

Normalise

Lots of children feel anxious about returning to school, especially after a long break. Normalising a child's worry goes a long way to reassuring them that they are not the only one feeling scared.

You could make statements like: "I know that your friend was nervous this morning coming into school" or "I know I was a little nervous about going back to work after a long break".

Children with anxiety might think they are different. Reassuring them that their worries are normal might help to calm them down and help them to realise everyone is in the same boat.

YOU'VE
BEEN
MISSED

How to help a child who finds it difficult to answer open questions

Some children might continuously answer “I don’t know” no matter how many open questions you ask them. Reassure them it’s ok not to know and try making suggestions.

Tie these suggestions in with a normalising technique to help your child to understand that it is OK to feel anxious and normal in some situations. You could try asking questions like: “I know some children were worried about not having seen their friends in a while, is that true for you?” or “I know when I was at school, I was worried about doing my homework correctly, does that worry you?”

Children often like the opportunity to correct you, so by making a suggestion that you know is incorrect might lead your child to open up and correct you, in turn telling you what really is a concern for them.

Check you have understood

Summarise your child’s worries and check you’ve heard them correctly, again giving them the option to correct you. This shows you’ve listened and that you care about what they have shared with you.

ADDITIONALLY:

- Try to make it fun and rewarding by doing something nice together after the conversation
- Try to talk to your child or young person when they are feeling calm and able to talk
- Ultimately the aim is allowing a child to tell you what is upsetting them rather than adults making assumptions which is what they may be used to. It can be interesting to hear exactly what is causing anxiety in a child. It could be something you can easily fix such as making it quieter or less busy

For more information check out bwc.nhs.uk/youve-been/missed

Please note: complaints of physical illness should always be taken seriously and medical advice sought. If a medical examination reveals no abnormalities, the problems persist and you suspect anxiety, please discuss this with your child’s GP.

References: Cathy Creswell & Lucy Willetts, (2019), Helping your Child with Fears and Worries, Robinson.