

## Let's Talk About Anxiety

The purpose of our 'Let's Talk About...' series is to support parents in understanding and having conversations about different aspects of emotional health, wellbeing and development.

The accompanying narrated PowerPoint goes into more detail, but this handout pulls together some of the salient points that may be beneficial for parents in understanding anxiety and knowing how to support their children when they are feeling anxious.

### What is anxiety?

- Anxiety is a manifestation or symptom of an emotion, most often fear or sadness. Anxiety might be what's visible, but other emotions are behind it.
- Anxiety can engage the 'fight, flight, freeze' response, which can be helpful in protecting us from harm or priming our bodies for action (for example, sports or music/drama performances)

### Causes of anxiety

There is no definitive list of causes of anxiety and children may be more or less resilient to potential stressors, depending on a number of factors. However, we know there are some things that can be risk factors for anxiety, including

- Significant changes or lots of small changes in a short period of time
- Loss of physical or emotional safety
- Responsibility beyond age and stage
- Modelling of high anxiety/low stress response threshold
- Situational difficulties or stressors (either at home, in school or in the community)

## Signs of anxiety

- Physical symptoms
  - Panic attacks; racing heart, sweating or shaking, rapid breathing
  - Feeling sick
  - Dry mouth
  - Tense muscles
  - Wobbly legs
  - IBS, diarrhoea or increased urination
  - Overheating
- Thoughts and feelings
  - Overwhelmed or out of control
  - Dread/impeding sense of doom
  - Alert to noises, smells or sights
  - Nervous, on edge, panicky
  - Preoccupied by negative or scary thoughts
  - Angry outbursts
- Visible coping behaviours
  - Withdrawal or isolation (avoiding everyday activities)
  - Repeating certain behaviours, actions or rituals
  - Eating more or less than usual
  - Sleeping more or less than usual
  - Self-harming

## Strategies that can help

### ➤ Worry vs Problem

Supporting children to understand the difference between worries and problems can be really helpful in reducing feelings of anxiety.

Problems are more concrete issues that require a solution or some action. They can be easier to deal with than worries because you can gain some control over them - your action (or lack of action) can have a consequence that will influence the problem. If your child has a problem, try to avoid giving them a solution or taking the action yourself. Children learn best through experience, so it's important they are given the chance to resolve problems independently. Guide them, offer advice, but allow them to be as independent as the situation allows. This also includes allowing your child to fail (if it is safe to do so).

Worries can be harder because they are often based on 'what if's. Normalise these worries but try to support your child in rationalising their thinking, to avoid catastrophising.

Questions that can help are;

- What would you tell your best friend if they were in this situation?
- what actually happened the last time you were in this situation? Is this worry based on facts - is there any evidence to support what you're thinking?
- Are you giving yourself a hard time? Is this really your fault? Are there other reasons why this happened?
- If you travelled in time 2 years ahead, how would you look at this situation? Would it still be important?
- Are you making assumptions about what other people are thinking? Are you thinking factually about the present or are you imagining the future or obsessing over the past?

When anxiety becomes problematic, some simple techniques can help your child to calm their 'fight, flight, freeze' response and remain grounded in the moment.

### 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

A simple method that your child can do anywhere, to reconnect with their senses and the environment around them which can help to stop anxiety spiralling. Ask them to name;

5 things I can see

4 things I can hear

3 things I can touch

2 things I can smell

Then take 1 deep breath

### Box breathing

Box breathing involves syncing your breath with imagining drawing out a box (sometimes it helps children if they use their finger in the air to 'draw' the box). Breathe in on the side, hold along the top, breathe out down the other side, hold along the bottom. The recommendation is to breathe through the nose.

Even if children don't perceive the value of this, physiologically it will have an impact, so scepticism is ok!

### Write and Rip

Encourage your child to write out the source or nature of the worry, then rip it up and discard it. The act of writing it down externalises the worry, which can be useful to mentally 'file away' the issue and begin to move forwards.